

The sys admin's daily grind: Terminator

Friend or Foe?

Friends are all about friendship – names and appearances typically don't play any role at all. Sys admin Charly's friend the Terminator is a convincing example. *By Charly Kühnast*

work with it almost daily, and we've even spent many nights together: the Terminator [1].

Of course, I don't mean the cyborg character from the movie of that name. The Terminator that I'm talking about is a useful tool for arranging terminals, and I've been using it for some time now as a stand-in for the Gnome shell.

Shell windows breed like rabbits on computer desktops. I have three windows for various logs (I can't use tabs, because I want to keep a permanent watch over the logs), three for htop messages on servers (I don't think they are very effective), one for mail, another for IRC, and yet another for a quick Bash script. If I enlarge one of these windows, I lose track of another.

Although Terminator can't reduce the number of SSH connections I need to keep open, it does help me keep track of them. I can press F11 to switch to full-screen mode, where I can split the terminal horizontally (Ctrl + Shift + O) or vertically (Ctrl + Shift + E) to suit my needs, and I can drag the borders of the window with the mouse until I have everything just so. I still don't know the maximum nesting depth that Terminator supports, but it's bigger than I can display on a 24-inch screen.

Figure 1 shows one of the working environments I use on a daily basis. Setting up a new arrangement is easy because you can drag and drop the shell windows to any position you want. You can also save layouts using the Preferences editor.

Ctrl + Tab lets me toggle through the shells. Or, I can navigate by pressing Ctrl + Shift + P (previous) or Ctrl + Shift + N (next). If I no longer need a

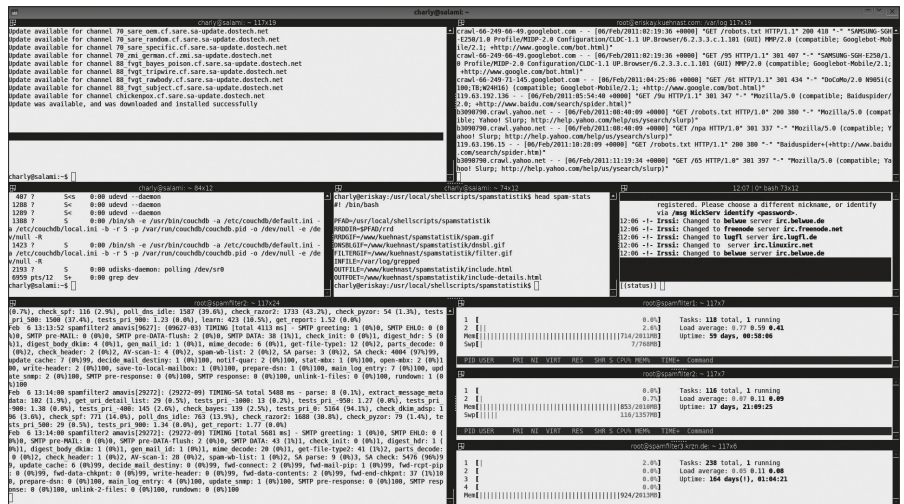


Figure 1: A typical Terminator work environment. From here, I can drag and drop the shell windows to my liking.

shell, I just terminate in the classical style by typing `exit`, or I can press Ctrl + Shift + W. In the case of complex layouts, an even easier approach uses the arrow keys: Pressing Alt + Up/Down/Left/Right takes me to the correct environment with just a few key presses.

Ctrl + Shift + X lets me expand the active shell if I need more space, for example, to read really long logfile lines. Pressing the same shortcut again reduces the shell to its original size. To apply the same commands to a number of shells at the same time, I can add shells to groups. To do this, I just need to click *new group* in a shell's window menu and type a name for the group. I can add more shells to the group later by clicking them in the window menu.

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Any commands I enter in a shell belonging to a group are applied to all the shells in that group. After I finish a task, I can disband the group and give the shells their independence back. I'm quite terrified by this function; if I forget to disband a group, I could become a Terminator myself, so I prefer Cluster SSH for that sort of thing. Despite this, to my friend the Terminator, I make the same old promise every evening: "I'll be back." ■■■



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[1] Terminator: <http://www.tenshu.net/terminator/>