FIRST STEPS LINUX BEGINNERS SERIES

Online chat How to use Skype, IRC and Google Talk via Gaim

The launch of *Google Talk* and eBay's purchase of Skype have pitched Voice over IP back and instant messaging back into the headlines. High time for Andy Channelle to introduce you to online chat, then.

In the internet's infancy, Yahoo, AOL and Microsoft all launched their own versions of instant messaging (IM) software. These packages – which were free to download – could be used to conduct typed conversations over the net. As the applications matured, new features were added such as the ability to send voice messages, files and emoticons – the little smiley (or otherwise) faces used to express emotions.
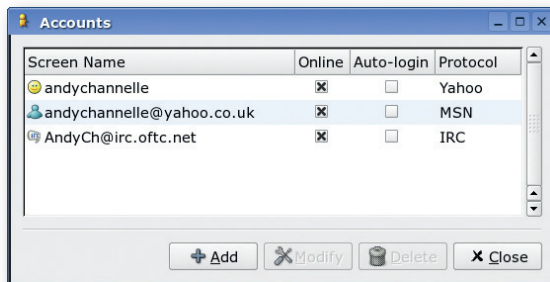
However, despite rumours of a compromise, these three companies refused to allow customers of other services to talk to their customers. Each client used its own protocol, so *AOL Instant Messenger* users could talk to other AOL users, but not people chatting on *Yahoo Messenger* or *MSN*. Imagine if BT refused to let its users phone Telewest customers! Fortunately,

inventive hackers on various platforms created applications that could work with the various protocols. The *Jabber* project made an early attempt at providing an open protocol for IM, but while this has been a success in some circles, the big players were still determined to retain control of their networks.

In August Google stepped in with a (sadly) Windows-only IM and VoIP client built on *Jabber* called *Google Talk*. Fortunately, as it uses *Jabber*, Linux users are not prevented from chatting with their Google buddies since some of the 'standard' Linux IM clients are capable of connecting to *Jabber* networks.

And this is what we'll look at first, before we go through a brief *Skype* tutorial and set up with IRC. By the end you'll have a range of options for chatting online from your Linux box.

PART 1 – CONNECTING TO GOOGLE TALK WITH GAIM

Being a multi-protocol IM client, *Gaim* can communicate over a number of different networks.
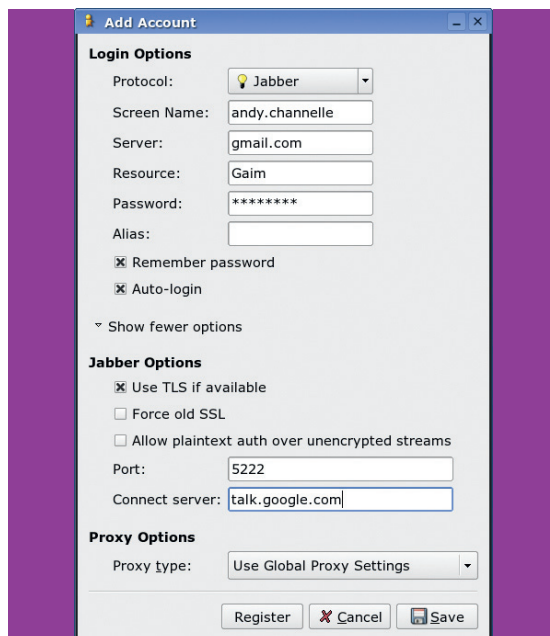
Gaim **is an open source, multi-protocol instant messaging** client. It was one of the big winners in Google's Summer of Code competition, which sponsored students' work on open source projects, so it's not surprising that if you're using *Gaim* you'll be able to connect to *Google Talk* with little bother.

From *Gaim*'s Buddy List window, select Tools > Accounts or do Ctrl+A. This will open up the Accounts window, which should display every active account you have. Click on the Add button to open the New Account dialog box. Ensure that Show More Options is selected. Choose the *Jabber* protocol from the drop–down list, then add the following:

Screen Name: <Gmail user name>
Server: gmail.com

The Gmail username should be entered without the trailing '@gmail.com' element.

These details should translate to other IM clients.

You can put your Gmail password into the password field for automatic logins, but this isn't a very secure way of working. It's probably safer to have the application request a password on launch: that way no one can go online and insult people in your name! Leave the Alias field blank, then choose whether to have the password stored in *Gaim*. Choosing the auto–login option will cause *Gaim* to connect to *Google Talk* every time you launch it.
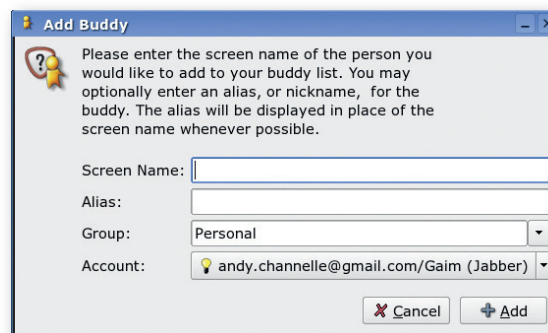
In the lower section of the dialog box, make sure that Use TLS If Available is selected and that Force Old SSL is deselected. The port should be set to 5222 and the Connect

server to talk.google.com (Google's servers run on port 5222). Hit the Save button to go back to the Accounts window. The new account should be added to the list, and you'll now be able to connect by hitting the Online radio button.

Adding contacts

Adding a new contact follows the same process as with most other instant messaging accounts. In *Gaim*'s Buddy List window, select Buddies > Add Buddy or hit Ctrl+B to open the Add Buddy dialog. The Screen Name is the first part of your contact's Gmail address, while the Alias is the name you want displayed on your side of the chat. You might, for example, want a contact with the Gmail address 'bob.torvalds' to be displayed as Uncle Bob. The Group option can be used to keep work and leisure contacts apart (you can create new contact groups under the Buddies menu), and the Account option should be set to the newly created *Google Talk* account.

Once created, you can select a Buddy from the list and, if they're online, hit the IM button to open the Chat window. You're ready to begin talking.

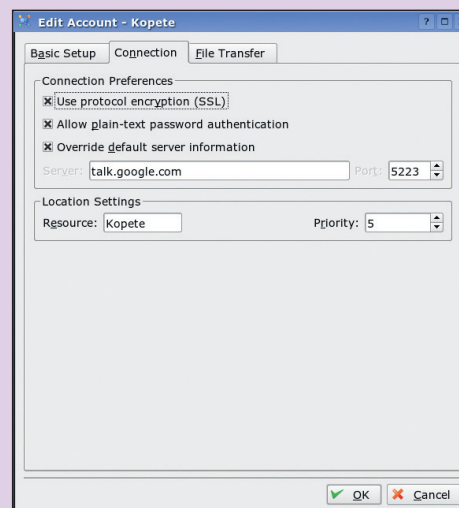**Add Google buddies to your Contact book.**

GOOGLE TALK ON KOPETE

Kopete **is a full-featured alternative to** *Gaim,* **coming (you won't be suprised to read) from the K-tastic KDE stable. Setting up** *Kopete* **involves using the same information in a different way. For example, the** *Jabber* **ID and server, separate in** *Gaim,* **should be input into the Jabber ID field in** *Kopete*'**s Basic Setup tab. Under the Connection tab, make sure that Use Protocol Encryption (SSL) is selected and that the app is set to Override Default Server Information with the talk.google.com server.** *Kopete* **should then connect without difficulty.**

In *Kopete,* **new buddies can be added by naming them <username>@talk.google.com.**

Although Google doesn't list it as supported, it's also quite simple to set up a *Google Talk* account with KDE's *Kopete*.

PART 2 – VOIP CALLS WITH SKYPE

« *Google Talk* **is the latest in a line of Google apps that are** only available for Windows. However, the world of free internet calls is not walled off from Linux users: there are two applications available to us that will do the job.

The most successful application of its kind, and the most widely available, is *Skype*, while a new app called *Gizmo* – funded by Linspire's Michael Robertson – is attempting to muscle in on the same territory. Both of these are available for Linux, though the latter is limited to Debian binaries.

The latest version of the *Skype* software is 1.2.0.11, and is available free of charge in formats including RPMs, Debs and static binaries from **www.skype.com**. Getting it on to your machine should just be a case of downloading the required package and installing it either through your package manager or from the command line.

If in doubt, download the static binary with the .tar.gz file extension and decompress it. You should now be able to open a file manager, navigate to the directory you unpacked into and double-click on the *Skype* icon to launch the application. In case you're not sure how to create desktop links, right-click anywhere on the desktop and select Create New > Link To Application... in KDE (in Gnome you would select Create Launcher), and enter the path to the *Skype* executable (where you unpacked the .tar.gz file earlier). This is likely to be something like **/home/username/skype-1.2.0.11/skype**.

Alternatively, you can simply open the directory and drag the icon labelled **skype.desktop** on to the desktop. Double-click on it to launch the application.
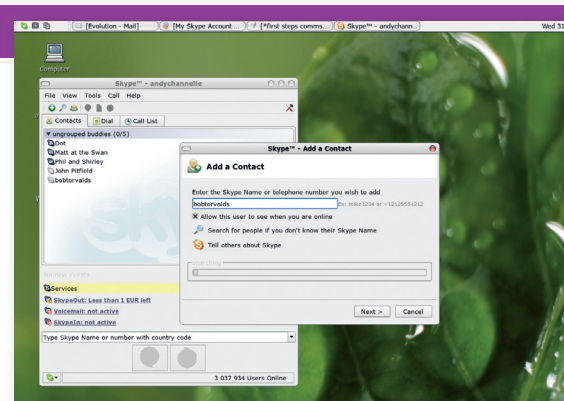
Do you expect me to talk?

We'll assume now that you have a working installation, have created an account and that your PC is equipped with working microphone and speakers. It's important when setting the microphone and speaker volume (do this using the *KMix* application or Gnome's *Volume Control*) to ensure the speaker volume is not too sensitive, as this could cause feedback when it comes to making a call. It also makes sense to ensure that both mic and speakers are facing you, and that the mic is close enough to capture a clear signal from wherever you're sitting.

There are three ways to use this application: for *Skype* to *Skype* calls (which are free); to call a normal land line through the SkypeOut service; or as an instant messaging client to chat to other *Skype* users. The cheapest way to use the application is to encourage your friends to download and install the software too. That way you can add them as contacts and phone them for free whenever they are online and logged in.

"IF YOU'RE HOUSE-SITTING FOR UNCLE BOB, YOU COULD USE YOUR SKYPE ACCOUNT FROM HIS PC."

It's best to think of *Skype* in terms of an instant messaging client rather than a phone service, as computer-to-computer calls are made on the basis of usernames rather than numbers. The great thing about this is that usernames are portable and not tied to a single location. If you were house-sitting for Uncle Bob, for example, you could log into your account on his PC and not have to miss any vital calls.

Adding contacts when you know their username is extremely easy. Do Tools > Add A Contact and type the name into the text
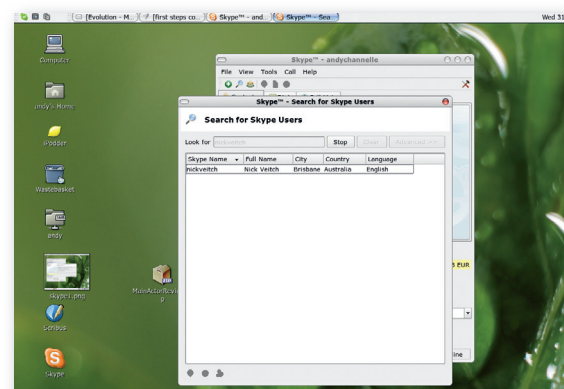

Skype **is closer to an IM client than a telephone.**

area. Click the Next button to move on to the invite screen – one of the ways in which VoIP systems trump their phone network rivals. When you add a contact to your system, a message is sent to the person requesting their permission for you to see when they are logged in and available for calls. You, in turn, give them permission to see when you're online. A contact that is available will then be highlighted in the application's Contacts tab. If it's greyed out, it's not available.

There's a handy Search For Skype Users option (also under the Tools menu), which provides facilities for searching for names through the entire *Skype* username database. Searches can be made by username, real name, location and a host of other details, though you'll need to hit the Advanced button to access these options.

Once you have all your contacts added and sorted (you can create new groups by right-clicking on a contact name and selecting Groups > Create New) you can start a call by right-

Hmmm. Right name, wrong location!

clicking on a name and selecting Call This Contact. By default, double-clicking on contact name will launch an IM session (see below), but you can change this to make a call in the Preferences section of the Tools > Options dialog box. You can also use the right-click Service menu to send files to contacts or block calls from particular users.

You don't have to restrict your calls to individuals. *Skype* allows users to make conference calls, and these can include both *Skype* contacts and regular land line users. The quality of conference calls will vary depending on the speed of your internet connection.

To start a conference call, select Tools > Create Conference to launch the appropriate dialog box. You can now select Contacts from the list on the left of the window and click the Add button – conferences can consist of four contacts plus the host. Once the list is complete, hit the Start button to begin. As people answer their phones (*Skype* or regular) they will be

added to the conference. Remember that you will be paying for any landline participants (see below) in the conference.

It's also possible to add a new participant to an ongoing conference call by right-clicking on their name and selecting Invite To Conference. The conference host is the only person who can do this.

Calling land lines

While calling other Skype users is all well and good, not everyone has the required hardware or a decent internet connection. Fortunately, it's possible to use the *Skype* application to call regular phone numbers. To add a number you follow the same procedure, inputting the number where before you put the Skype username. When putting in a number,

you are also given the option of adding a label, which makes the contact list more legible.

One thing to remember is that phone numbers have to be prefixed with the international dialling code. The other thing to remember is that calls of this nature have to be paid for – you buy call time through the website's account screen. Calls to UK landlines fall into the company's most popular tariff of just over a penny a minute – as do calls to most other European countries, the US, Canada, Australia and China.

Finally, you can also use *Skype* to send instant messages to other *Skype* users, in the same way as you do with *Gaim* or *Kopete*. Right-clicking on a contact and selecting Check The Text will launch a new messaging window where you can input text. Hit the Enter key to make it appear on your friend's screen.

PART 3 – USING IRC

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is the dowdy underdog of the IM world. It's been around since August 1988 and yet hasn't achieved the user base of any of the three main IM clients, nor the press attention of *Jabber*. But don't let this put you off: one of the chief benefits of IRC is that you don't need to belong to any sort of Yahoo, *MSN* or *Google Talk*-like club in order to use it. All you need is some client software, an internet connection and a little bit of information. Both of the main Linux IM clients – *Gaim* and *Kopete* – are perfectly happy with IRC chats.
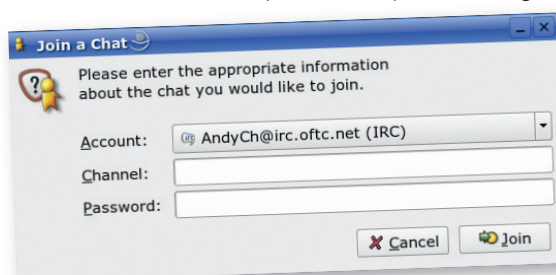
Open up the Accounts window in *Gaim* and, in the Protocol drop-down, select the IRC entry. Your screen name can be anything you choose and can change every time you log in, but it can't contain any spaces. *Gaim* automatically sets the server to irc.freenode.net and the port to 6667. These are standard options, but often you may be attempting to contact a group of people on a different network – IRC networks have sprung up to cater to different interests and locations. If this is the case, simply change these options. Again, set whether you want the system to automatically log you in, and hit the OK button.

On each network is a series of channels (which are often called chat rooms). Joining one of these channels means you will be able to chat with other people in the 'room', but remember that these are public and every member of the channel can see all conversations.

Under *Gaim*'s Buddies menu is an entry called Join A Chat, which you can also access by hitting Ctrl+C. This launches a dialog box. In the drop-down list, select the IRC account configured earlier (it will be named with the format **username@irc-server**), then add the channel name in the second text box.

Find a channel

Many people come across IRC for the first time in relation to a particular piece of software or interest – someone on a forum may casually type, "If you need more I'm on #linuxformat most nights", assuming that this is enough information. In this case, we could deduce from the **#** prefix that this person is talking
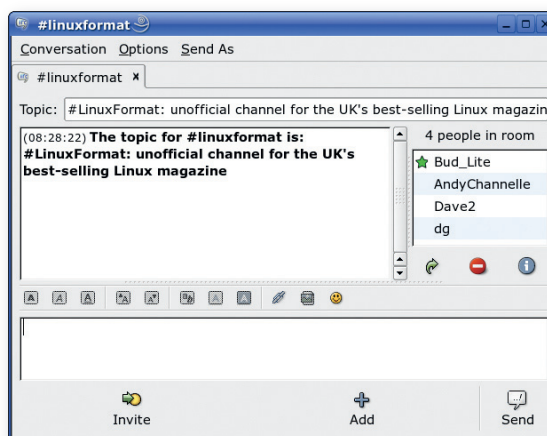
IRC MANNERS

Some IRC channels are very newbie-unfriendly. A question that, to an expert, might seem trivial may receive a harsh "Read The Friendly Manual" (**RTFM**) response.

IRC has a well-evolved and often strongly enforced etiquette, and reaction to inexperienced users asking 'stooped questions' can sometimes be off-putting. So, before you ask something, try to read up on a subject and use the other avenues available such as Google searches and *LXF* forums. Once you're confident that you're in the right place, don't ask if you can ask a question; just ask. If you're asking the wrong

people, you'll find out soon enough.

The operators are the people you really don't want to annoy: they have the power to kick you out of a channel and ban you from returning. Habitual *IRC* users will also complain about users overusing capital letters and text formats such as bold, italic and blink (which should never be used), and clothing their messages in a rainbow of colours. Not everyone, though, is so militant. To gauge the atmosphere of a room, go in and monitoring the flow of conversation for a little while. Always be sure to introduce yourself and say "Hi", though: nobody likes a lurker.

IRC running in *Gaim*. Type into the bottom part of the window and your conversation appears like magic in the top!

about an IRC channel dedicated to *LXF*. So in the channel section of the Join A Chat we would just add '#linuxformat' and hit the OK button to launch the standard IM window ready for scintillating conversation.

If you don't know a channel name, visit SearchIRC (**http://searchirc.com**) to comb through all the different channels. This tool enables you to search individual servers or the entire IRC community using names or keywords. Some of the more popular channels have been reviewed by fellow users, which makes sorting the wheat from the chaff a little easier.

So you've searched the servers and, frustratingly, there's no channel dedicated to 19th Century ergodic literature. Well, the only option is to start your own! But that's for another time... **LXF**

Add the channel name plus # prefix to the Channel box.

NEXT MONTH

The best ways to organise the stuff that's littered all over your hard disk. We'll take a look at search tools, too.