



# Instant messaging

**Got broadband? Get *Gaim*, an open-source application for keeping in touch with your group of friends or colleagues.**



IN THE days before cheap broadband, the main thing holding instant messaging back from mass appeal was that you needed a constant connection to the internet to make it worthwhile. Now that broadband has become so affordable, instant messaging has taken on a new dimension. It's a little like text messaging from your mobile phone, but taken to the nth degree. You can immediately see who else is online, and you can chat with as many people at once as you like. It's also a great way of sharing images and sending files.

It's become the perfect way to stay in touch, even if it's just via a few words or emoticons, and Linux is one of the best operating systems from which to run a messenger. Messaging clients for other operating systems often plague the user with adverts, or email reminders, or can even cost money.

Not so with Linux, where there are a couple of fantastic clients that are able to compete with the very best that other operating systems have to offer. Perhaps the biggest difference between a typical

Linux messaging client and a proprietary client is that Linux can support more than one protocol. This means that you can use the same client for Microsoft Messenger, Yahoo, or any of the other popular protocols – at the same time, from the same advertisement-free application. The most highly regarded messaging client for Linux is called *Gaim*, and it supports all of the advanced features you'd expect.

If you've not used a messaging client before, you first need to set up an account with the messaging service provider. It's only when you've got login and password details that you can connect using *Gaim* or any other messaging client. As you might expect, Microsoft's MSN Messenger is the most widely used messaging client. The other main contender is AIM, (AOL Instant Messenger), which is also very popular. Which one you use depends mostly on which protocol your family and friends employ.

You can create an account for either MSN Messenger or AOL Messenger (or both!) by using the following links:

- **MSN** <http://registernet.passport.com>
- **AIM** <https://my.screenname.aol.com>

After the registration process is complete, you should have both a username and a password. These are the two details *Gaim* (or any other messenger) needs to let you connect to the network. When first started, *Gaim* is unhelpfully silent about which step to take first; but what you need to do is open the Accounts window by clicking on the aptly named Accounts button.

## ADDING AN ACCOUNT

Selecting Add from the Accounts window will open another window labelled Add Account. To add your

newly created messenger account, you first need to select the protocol you want to use from the drop-down menu, then add your screen name and your password. Your screen name is the username assigned to your account, and you can enter the name other people will see when you're logged on in the Alias field. Unless your name happens to be

**Skip *Gaim*'s login window by selecting the Auto-Login feature.**



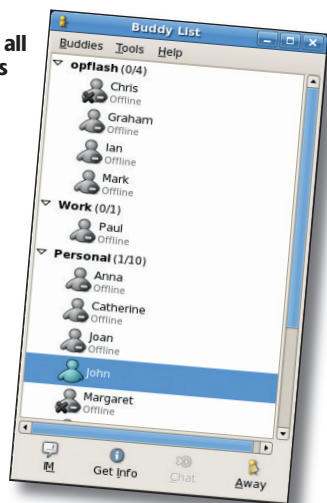
**Account information for each protocol is entered from the Account Management window.**

## THE IRC ALTERNATIVE

IRC is a special kind of protocol that doesn't work in quite the same way as other protocols. It's not really for messaging in the same way that MSN or AIM are. Rather than have a private conversation between one or more people in your contacts list, you join a chatroom that's generally already occupied by people discussing a common interest. It works a little like a real-time mailing list, and the conversation could be on anything: Britney Spears, Alcoholics Anonymous or *Gaim* itself. IRC chatrooms are often used as a quick and effective way of getting support for any Linux problems you may have.



You can see the status of all your contacts from the Buddy List window.



johnringo23745, you'll find that most of the meaningful usernames have already been taken, so taking an alias gives you the chance to use something more sensible. You still need to use your given username for logging on, but you're free to use any alias you wish.

Now that your account details have been configured, the next step is to make the connection

## “Choosing an image to go with your username is an excellent way to express something of your personality.”

using either the Accounts window or the Login window that *Gaim* defaults to at startup. From the Accounts window, you need to click on the Online click-box for each account you wish to connect. From the Login window, you need only click on the Sign On button. If you wish to connect automatically whenever you start *Gaim*, you need to select the Auto-Login option from the Accounts window. When *Gaim* attempts to make a connection, you should see a small sign-on status dialog before finally being presented with the Buddy List.

### JOIN ME

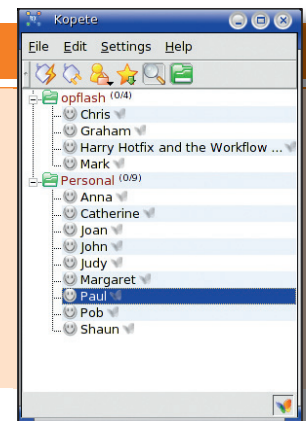
It's from the Buddy List window that you can chat with and message all your contacts (or buddies in *Gaim* speak). When you first start using a messenger service, your Buddy List will be completely empty. To start adding your own contacts, you need to select Add Buddy from the Buddies menu. The only information required is their Screen Name, which uniquely identifies your contact. You either have to ask your contact for their screen name, or ask your contact to add you to their own contact list.

When a user adds your Screen Name to their contact list, you get the option of allowing them to see your connection status – basically, whether you're online or not. They get a similar option when you add them to your buddy list. By default, *Gaim* only shows your added contacts when they're online, but you can view the contacts you have that are currently offline using the Buddies menu, by

### OR TRY: KOPETE

*Gaim*'s main competitor is *Kopete*, a messaging client that's part of KDE, as you may have guessed from the K starting its name. It's functionally almost identical to *Gaim*, in that it supports a very similar set of protocols, and the Contact List window works in almost the same way. The differences are centred on *Kopete* using a group of plugins to add functionality such as a message log or history. There's even one for automatically translating a conversation from one language to another.

The *Kopete* equivalent of *Gaim*'s Buddy List.



selecting Show Offline Buddies. Your contacts can be arranged into folders, such as work colleagues or family, using Add Group from *Gaim*'s Buddies menu. This becomes essential when you start making lots of contacts.

### GONE FISHING

While you are connected, your online status is available for all your contacts to see, in the same way that you can see theirs. But you can augment this simple online status with something a little more descriptive. For example, if you're away from your

services, such as MSN and AIM, also let you assign an image to your account. If your contacts have already done this, you'll see a small picture of the image they've chosen to represent themselves. You can set your own by editing your account information and choosing a Buddy Icon from the User Options. The image has to be small, as it needs to be sent to all your contacts, but it's an excellent way to express something of your personality.

### HOW IT WORKS

To start a conversation, or chat, on *Gaim*, double-click on the contact you wish to chat to, or click on IM from the Buddy List window. The Conversation window is split into two separate panels. The bottom half is where you type your message, while the top half is a scrolling list of your correspondence. You're free to change how your message looks by using icons that surround the editing area. This works in the same way as with a word processor, where you can change the font and style, or even the colour of the text. If you can't remember all the key combinations for any emoticons you may wish to add, you can select the most appropriate expression using the yellow smiley button on the right. *Gaim* automatically swaps the raw emoticon text such as ;) with a small and often animated icon.

You can also send files to your contact from the message window using the Send File button. This works the other way around too. If a contact wishes to send you a file, a window will open asking where you would like the file to be stored. By default, your conversation is logged locally so that you can go back through the text to remind yourself of what has been said – you can get to the message log from the View Log menu item.

To exclude someone on your contact list, click on the Block button. This makes you incommunicado, and your contact will be unable to initiate a conversation with you. You can always change a contact's block status by selecting Privacy from the Tools menu available in the Buddy List window.

Another feature that's particularly useful is called Buddy Pounce, available by selecting Tools > Buddy Pounce from Buddy List window. This allows you to define an action according to the changing state of a contact. You could, for example, send your contact a message automatically as soon as they log on, or play a sound when they return from being idle. Explore these and other features as you become used to communicating instant-messaging style. ●



The chat window. Type into the bottom box.