Home front

Home users could run their own web server but software reliability is lacking says Nigel Whitfield.

By the time you read this, the BT trials of ADSL will be winding down. There's even a slim chance that cable companies will have decided to launch some form of high-speed net access. So, when people at home can have a permanent connection what's to stop them running a web server on their home PC? You can stuff it with the images that will not fit in the 10Mb of free space from your provider or add extra goodies to spice up pages, such as having your own scripts running on your own computer.

There are many possibilities, as long as the small print permits. It is also most likely that if you try to do much with a typical Windows- or Mac-based system of today, you'll very likely find that it's not up to it. You'll crash, your other work will go slowly and you'll be plagued by security problems.

I am at it again with doom and gloom. But it's a fair point. The time's not long off when it's going to be easier than ever for people to experiment creatively with the power of the internet. But for that to happen, we need reliable tools.

Given a permanent connection, what's to stop people running a web server on their home PC?

You could, of course, always turn to Chris Bidmead's column on p245 and find out about running Linux on the end of your net connection. But that's going a bit far for some people.

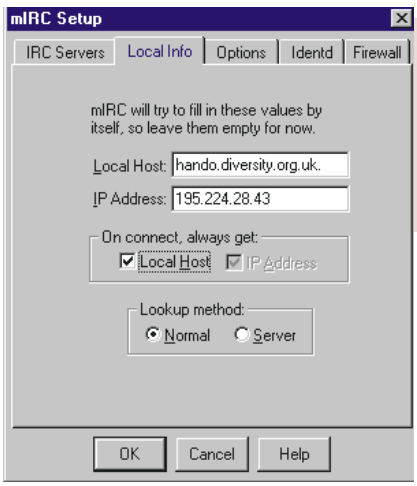
It is not much to ask, but how long can you manage to leave your computer running without having to reboot it, or sort out a program that has crashed? For many people, rebooting is a way of life. You might be able to cope with that when you are just playing games or doing odd bits of work but if you want to leave your system connected to the net all the time?... Give us a break!

There are many reasons why we deserve more reliable personal computer software than we have now. Cheap, permanent internet connections will provide us with one more. Hopefully, the popularity of the net will at last provide the software companies with an incentive to deliver.

Questions & answers

Q I use mIRC to chat to people on the internet but I'm having problems sending pictures and other files to people. It worked the first time but now everyone says their system can't open a connection to me. I can still receive files without problems, though.

A ***This is a common problem which is straightforward to fix. It happens because mIRC has the wrong internet address for your computer, and this address is used when it sends a message to another user to try and deliver a file. The first time you connected, mIRC will have worked out the address but with many internet providers you're allocated a different address each time you sign on. As a result, you no longer have the correct one in the mIRC settings and so DCC file sends don't work. To fix the problem, go to the File menu and choose Setup. When the setup box appears click on the tab labelled 'Local info'. You'll see two boxes: one for 'Local host' and another for 'IP address'. These contain incorrect information that you need to delete so just click in each box and delete whatever has been entered. Below that, in the section marked 'On connect always get', make sure both boxes are ticked; the IP address box should be checked automatically when you tick 'Local Host' [Fig 1]. You will need to disconnect from IRC and then reconnect. Everything should then work fine.***



◀FIG 1 IF THE LOCAL SETTINGS ARE WRONG, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO SEND FILES ON IRC

Q *PCW* has recently been featuring ISPs but one critical point is never mentioned in your column, or elsewhere. Some of us are still running plain DOS! Which of the Internet Providers can offer a full web service via a DOS connection? Until retirement I had a perfectly good DOS connection though a university Unix system running the Lynx browser. Now, in the hard commercial world, this is not so easy. Demon has a useful DOS dialup service (KA9Q) but it does not effectively provide web access. Former public Lynx servers no longer allow access. Surely there is some ISP prepared to offer a simple DOS dialup service providing text-only access to the web?

A ***You're right that the net shouldn't be limited to people with Windows or Macintosh systems — and it's***

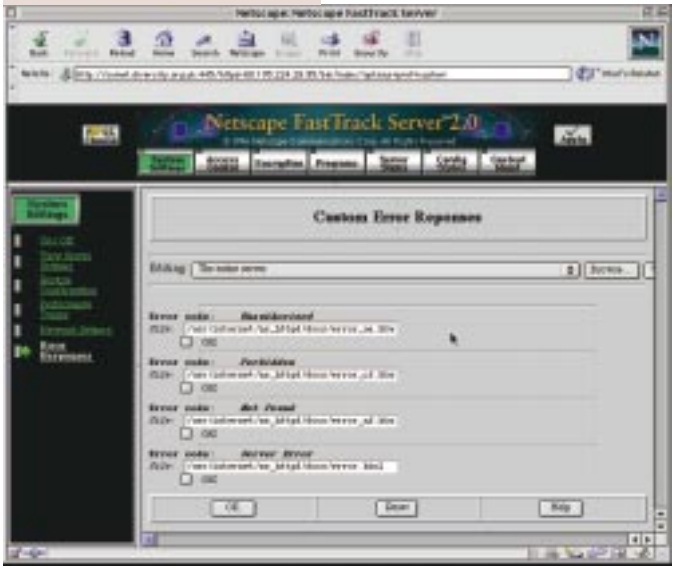
Questions & answers

still not. But you can gain access. There is a DOS version of Lynx which should work with the Demon Internet software but a better solution is called Arachne. It's a fairly full-featured web browser from the Czech Republic which includes ftp and email clients, and also a PPP dialler. As long as you have the appropriate login information you should be able to make it work with most Internet Service Providers. Best of all, just because it runs under DOS or a compatible operating system, you don't have to be restricted to text. Arachne is a graphical browser which supports a subset of HTML 4.0 including tables, frames, forms and imagemaps, and there are also plug-ins for playing sounds and some types of video file. You can find out more about Arachne or download a copy from www.arachne.cz.

Q I was wondering if you could tell me whether it's possible to get a 'personalised' Error 404 page. For example, if you go to yahoo.com/randomword.htm it will come up with a yahoo page saying 'Not found, click here to search...' Is there any way to get a page like this for my web site which can return people to the home page (using meta refresh, etc) or does this require a load of additions to the server?

a You cannot configure your own options for this if you are sharing space on an ISP's server. Typically, the error pages that are returned are set on a global basis for each web server. On some servers they may simply be generated on-the-fly. Other servers, though, will allow you to specify your own error pages and this is what Yahoo and other sites do. You can even specify a program to be run when an error occurs which could, for instance, tailor the error page to whatever the user was trying to do, or to the type of browser they were using. Depending on the type of server on which your pages are hosted, you might be able to set something up but you'll need the assistance of the server administrator who will have to change appropriate options. For example [Fig 2] shows the Netscape FastTrack server which allows special pages to be specified for different errors. You can also have a different group of pages for a sub area on the server, such as a single user's home page. If you want this sort of facility, though, the chances are that you are going to have to pay commercial rates for web space.

▼Fig 2 Modern web servers such as Netscape and Apache allow you to specify custom error pages either for the whole server or just part of it



Q I have a 56Kbps V90 modem. When I download files from the internet they download at around 3.1Kbps and not at 56Kbps. I know you mentioned this in the October '98 column but I do not understand the technical details. When I bought my modem, I was expecting much faster download rates than I am getting.

a There are many reasons for this. The most important is that the speed quoted for any modem is only a theoretical maximum. If there is any noise, even things you can't hear, on the phone line you will have problems. Check the speed of the connection between your modem and the PC. This should be as fast as possible — ideally 115,200 bps, or more if you have a serial card which can handle it. When people report that their communications software tells them a connection has been made at, for example, 57,600bps it is often only the speed of the serial link to the modem that is given. To find the true speed of the modem connection you need to interrogate the modem, usually with the ATI command although options vary from one manufacturer to another. The other big problem is the speed of the rest of the internet.

As I have stated here before, the cost of a permanent connection for hosting a web server is very expensive in the UK. You will find a lot of web servers that are sitting on the end of relatively slow links — or slow links between you and a fast server. You may well have a fast connection to your ISP's modem but if there are bottlenecks elsewhere, that is going to slow everything down. You can sometimes see whether this is the case by trying to download something from elsewhere. If you can run a download at, say, 2Kbps as well as the one at 3.1Kbps, then you are probably making good use of the modem and the bottlenecks exist elsewhere.

It is an unfortunate fact that until the permanent links which people need for service web pages become cheaper, one of the biggest things you will receive from those with fast modems, ADSL, or cable internet at home is not speed but unfulfilled expectations of it.

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