Chat lines

Chatting on the net? Nik Rawlinson explains instant messaging, a practical way to communicate.

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is great for chatting to friends and keeping in touch with people who have common interests; but outside of these fairly constrained bounds, it has little in the way of practical use. It has no search facility to allow you to contact specific users, unless you have previously met them online and added their nickname to your notify list. When you log off, you are effectively cut off from the whole IRC community until next time you log on. It will not keep messages for you, nor forward them to your mailbox — you are, to all intents and purposes, non-existent.

A more suitable alternative, therefore, would be something that maintained a virtual presence even when your connection is not active. It could also take care of any messages that other users want to send you when you're not logged on, simultaneously offering a powerful search engine that would enable you to contact users with whom you share a common interest. Impossible? Not at all. Expensive? Certainly not, and there are a number of options available.

ICQ

We'll start with the most complex option, but before firing up your net connection, a quick hunt around in your Windows\System directory can save you some time. Search for a file called MFC42.DLL. If it's there, you've just saved yourself a 0.5Mb download. If not, you can get it at the same time you download your new software.

1 Connect to the net and point your browser at www.mirabilis.com/download/.
Here you will be presented with eight different flavours of the ICQ (*I-seek-you*) software. Select the most appropriate version for your operating system.

2 On the following page, click the link to download the software. If you already have MFC42.DLL in your
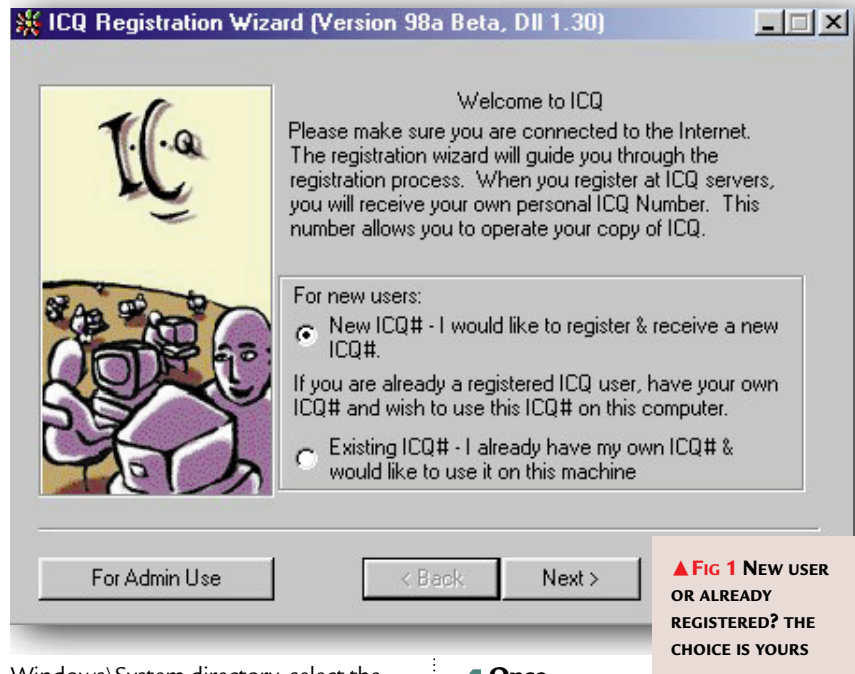

▲FIG 1 NEW USER OR ALREADY REGISTERED? THE CHOICE IS YOURS

Windows\System directory, select the second option. This will download a 1.1Mb file (as opposed to the first 1.6Mb option). Don't try to cheat the system by downloading the smaller file if you haven't got MFC42.DLL: although it will download, the software will not work and you'll have to start again.

3 Once the download is complete, resist the temptation to close your net connection, because the installation process involves a certain amount of to-ing and fro-ing of data between your PC and the Mirabilis servers. Double-click the icon for the file you have just downloaded and follow the usual procedure for installing it into your chosen directory.

☞ **You will also be offered** the opportunity to include ICQ on your Start menu. While this is helpful, it is not essential as the latter stages of the installation will drop ICQ's Net Detect Agent into your system tray. This will keep an eye on your internet connection and, when it detects that you have gone online, fire-up ICQ and let your contacts know that you have connected, informing you which of your contacts are online.

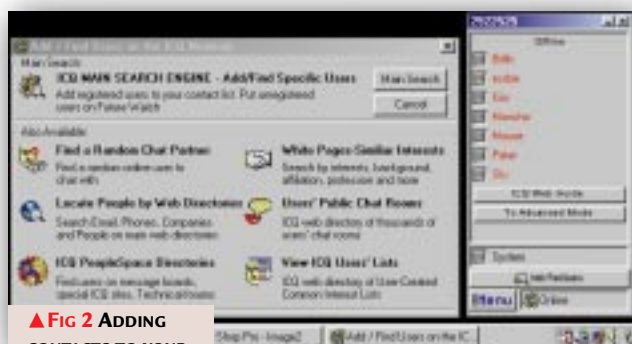*Impossible? Not at all. Expensive? Certainly not*

4 Once installation is complete, you will find yourself faced with the ICQ registration wizard. This is the equivalent of registering your mobile phone with the network. By the end of it, you will have your own unique ICQ number through which other users can contact you.

5 If you are a new user, click "next" or select "Existing ICQ#", and supply the details you entered the previous time you installed [Fig1].

6 We will assume that you are running ICQ through a standard dialup connection. If you are lucky enough to enjoy a permanent leased line or connect over a network, you will have to ask your system administrator for the address of your firewall and/or SOCKS server, and enter the details .

7 On the screen that follows, enter your email address, your first and last names, and a nickname. Because a string of numbers is not very memorable (take CompuServe email addresses, for example) this is how you will be identified in the main ICQ window of other users. Your nickname can be your real name or something completely random, but many users choose to base it on their location or interests. Now click "next".

▲ **FIG 2** ADDING CONTACTS TO YOUR CONTACT LIST USING ICQ. NOTE THE OPEN ICQ WINDOW TO THE RIGHT SHOWING THOSE USERS ALREADY ON MY LIST. MY ICQ NUMBER IS SHOWN IN THE TITLE BAR, FOR QUICK REFERENCE

8 **The next screen** is entirely optional but completing it will help other users to make contact with you. Fill in the boxes to include your location, age and interests. These will be added to the Mirabilis database, making you visible to other users while you are offline.

9 **Click "next"** and you will be presented with Mirabilis' two-question survey about your occupation and how you plan to use ICQ. Completing it is optional. If you do not wish to be included, select the option to be excluded and click "next".

10 **Choose a password** to protect your ICQ number. The clever thing here is that by checking the "Auto Save Password" box it is not necessary for you to remember it. Neither will you need to enter it each time you connect to the ICQ network. The option box below this allows you to put restrictions on who can contact you while you are online. Leaving it on the default setting means that any and all other ICQ users can contact you, add themselves to your contact list and effectively send messages that will flash in your system tray while you are online.

11 **Click "next"** for your unique ICQ number. Click "next" again.

AOL's IM will work in the UK with no problems

12 **If you want** others to be able to use their ICQ interfaces to send mail direct to your regular email inbox, enter the address of your SMTP server (if you don't know what it is, your ISP will be able to tell you). Click "next" again.

13 **The Contact List Wizard** will appear. This allows you to search the ICQ database to add contacts to your list. However, it is easier to click "cancel" here and then "Add/Find Users" on the ICQ window that will now be active on your desktop. This gives you the option of searching on more meaningful parameters than just ICQ numbers or email addresses, and instead locate users by interest or location [Fig 2].

AOL Instant Messenger

AOL members have been using the service's Instant Messenger (IM) option for years, but now it is open to the internet community at large without the need to pay a subscription to the company itself. Unlike the Yahoo and ICQ services it is currently not possible to search for members' profiles unless you are a paying AOL member and, instead of using this internet-based service, actually log on to your account.

1 **AOL's UK site** is quite adamant that this service is "coming soon", so why not pop over to the US service at www.aol.com/aim/ and download it from there? It will work in the UK with no problems.

2 **Non-AOL members** must select a screen name of between three and ten letters. The great thing here, however, is that unlike many online services, your screen name can be made of not only letters and numbers but also spaces [Fig 3].
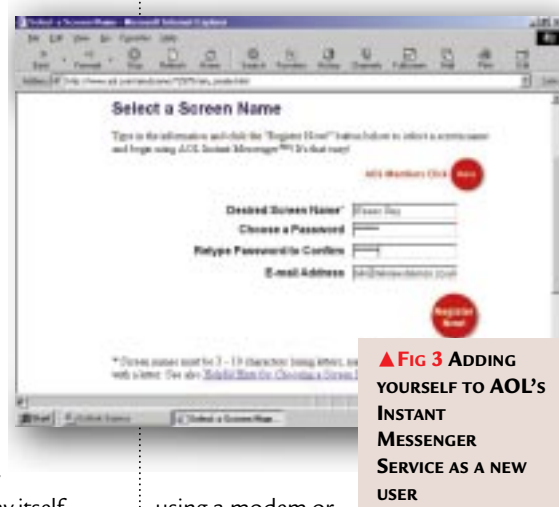
3 **If you already** have an account with AOL, click the AOL member icon and enter your screen name and the postcode you used to register with the service.

4 **Select the appropriate** version of the software from the four operating systems listed, and the installation software will be downloaded to your PC. Again, once the download is complete, maintain an open connection to your ISP.

5 **Execute the downloaded file** and it will run you through the usual Windows software installation routine. It is advisable to choose the option to launch AIM (AOL Instant Messenger) when Windows starts, as this will perform a similar function to ICQ's Net Detect Agent in starting up the software each time you connect. Tell the system whether you are connecting to the net
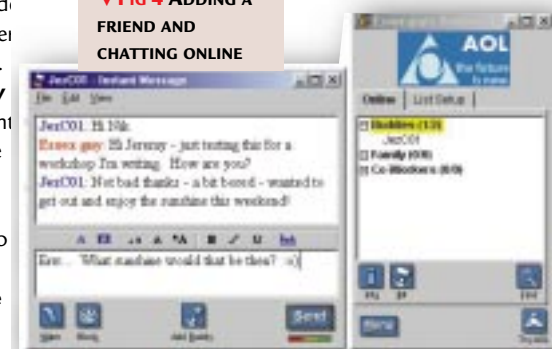

▲ **FIG 3** ADDING YOURSELF TO **AOL's** INSTANT MESSENGER SERVICE AS A NEW USER

using a modem or a LAN and click "next" to expand the files on to your hard drive.

6 **Once installation** is complete, you will need to register with the service. If you are an existing AOL member, click "Use AOL Screen Name", otherwise opt for "Register new screen name".

7 **Enter your screen name** and password in the new window that appears, and check the "Save password" and "Auto Login" boxes. This enables the system to connect to the network each time you connect to your ISP, without you having to do anything. Click "Sign On".

▼ **FIG 4** ADDING A FRIEND AND CHATTING ONLINE

8 **Once you get connected**, to add users to your list of contacts you merely click the "List setup" tab followed by "Add Buddy" and enter the AOL screen name [Fig 4]. The disadvantage here, of course, is that you have to know your contact's screen name before you can add them to your list instead of being able to search online.

Yahoo! Pager

At just a 436Kb download, Yahoo Pager could be thought of as the economy option. But its feature-packed service would indicate otherwise.

1 **Follow the link** from http://pager.yahoo.com/ to download the software and install by double-clicking the icon of the file you have downloaded to your hard drive. Click "next" to progress through each installation screen. When you come to the options dealing with running the pager when you start your computer (and allowing other users to connect directly with your pager), leave them both unchecked and click "next" to complete the installation. This will allow other Pager users to chat with you, and save you from having to activate the program yourself.

2 **Once the installation** has been completed, you will be presented with the login screen. Making sure that your internet connection is active, click "Get a Yahoo! ID" and complete the empty boxes on the web page that it will load into your browser. The "Password Question" option is simply requesting a question that the system can ask you should you forget your password. If you supply the correct answer, as specified in the box that

follows, it will reveal your password. When it asks for your Zip code, click the button marked "this form" to be transported to the international sign-up screen into which the answers you have already supplied will be transferred.

☞ **Don't forget** to check the appropriate box for receiving further information (or not) and submit your answers to generate your free pager account.

3 **Return** to the pager log-in screen and enter your new user name and password. Remember to check the box to save your password (so that you do not have to type it in each time you use the pager) and then click OK.

4 **To add contacts,** click "Find New Friends" [Fig 5]. This presents one of the most comprehensive search engines of all, enabling you to narrow your search by interest, location and name. For example, enter "cat" in the "interest" box to list users with an interest in cats, and click on the user names of the pager owners which match your search, to view their profiles. To add your chosen user to your user list, click the link at the bottom left of their profile.

5 **Creating your own profile** will let others find you. Click "profile" on the Yahoo! Pager toolbar, followed by "Create/Edit my Profiles". From the web

page that this button loads, click "Edit" and fill in the appropriate boxes. What you include on this page is optional, but it should be remembered that anything you say will be accessible to anyone with an internet connection [Fig 6].

Hello, goodbye

While Yahoo! Pager and AOL's Instant Messenger may offer little over and above what is available to regular IRC users, the fact that they run in the background means that they can be permanently active without consuming excessive resources. ICQ, on the other hand, could, at a push, when combined with the various free email services on the net, do away with the need for a separate mail package and leave all of your communication tools just a double-click of the system tray away. Download them, install, and next time you see me online, be sure to say hello.

◄**Fig 6** A Yahoo! Pager profile screen

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