Question and Answer

The questions this month collected a number of tips about how to use Thunderbird and Firefox, together with some more general comments on other matters.

Thunderbird

Manipulating the address book contents

Thunderbird's address book is not as flexible as one might expect. The Personal Address Book and the Collected Addresses are not deletable. It is advisable to flush out the contents of the collected addresses occasionally before it gets too many to handle easily.

To move an entry from one place to another, you first display the book containing the entry. Then select it, followed by dragging it the left pane and dropping it on the new book. You can do this for any number of selected entries simultaneously. To select more than one, use CTL and click to add a single entry to the selection. Use SHIFT and click to select everything from where the cursor is to the previously selected entry, and use CTL-a to select all the entries.

A web search has not found good answers to how to rename or delete unwanted books, nor how to create new books so you could divide the contacts easily. It is possible to create new lists containing the relevant addresses, and that is perhaps the expected alternative to new books.

When you receive a message, how can you tell where it really came from, and where a reply will go to?

This question arose when looking at a possible spam or scam message apparently from an acquaintance.

You cannot find out the true origin of an e-mail, but you can see what the e-mail says about it by looking at the source text. On Thunderbird, this is done either by View → Message Source, or by using CTL-U, when the message is displayed.

The first line of the source text will begin with the five characters: "From " (i.e. a capital letter F, small r-o-m and a blank). That is how e-mail readers synchronise to the start of a message and the reasoning goes back to the early days of e-mail when things were not so clean and reliable as they are now. The next lines will consist of a keyword followed by a colon and then some values for that keyword parameter. The one you need to find is **From:** and that should show what Thunderbird has extracted to display to you as the sender.

This is not necessarily the same as where a reply will go to when you hit the reply button. There are several good reasons why someone may wish to have replies go to a different account than the one he sent from, so the fact they are different is nothing remarkable. The reply will be sent to the address found at the line **Reply-To:**.

If the message is on a mailing list, then this address might be for the list, and not the sender – it depends on how the list is set up. Thunderbird may also be able to detect that the message is from a mailing list and also show Reply and Reply-List buttons for you, so you can decide whether to reply on list or directly to the sender alone.

Can I affect the junk settings?

To a limited degree. By going to View → Preferences → Local Folders → Junk Settings. Here you have some control over how junk is determined. You can ask Thunderbird not to consider mail from any of you contact addresses to be junk, or that an external filter's recommendations can be followed, etc.

Can I control the flashy effects of some messages?

Yes. There are three levels of interpretation of HTML in messages. The menu is at View → Message Body As. The options are:

1. Original HTML. This will interpret the HTML fully and display anything that is contained in the message. Thunderbird will not by default automatically go and fetch anything else from external web sources without allowing you the option of saying do so.
2. Simple HTML. This will suppress some of the more annoying effects, but will allow you to see what is the message to a large degree.
3. Plain text. If a message has a plain text part (and is not wholly and only HTML), then the plain text part will be displayed. In some cases, when a message contains no plain text, the message will appear to be blank. In such a case, you will have to turn on at least limited HTML interpretation to see what intends.

Firefox

Navigation tips

When looking at a web page, you can drag a link onto a tab header to fetch the page linked to, and put it in that tab. If you drag onto the + sign at the right hand end of the tabs (or anywhere to its right), then it will open in a new tab.

This technique will even work when the text is not marked as a link if you select the text first.

It appears to work by dragging a link from Thunderbird, but not from all applications.

Where is that server located?

The IP address of the server can be identified using the ShowIP add-on, which puts the IP address in the status bar at the bottom. There are others, too, but I've not tried them. ShowIP

If you prefer a more pictorial indication with geographic relevance, the FlagFox add-on places a flag of the country in the URL bar at the top. Note that the domain name may be registered in one country, but the host for it might easily be in another. A .uk suffix does not necessarily mean that the data is under UK law. If you own a site, it would be as well to check occasionally to endure your data is being held where you expect it to be.

Virus entry

The main vector of malware onto a machine, these, days is thought to be through compromised websites. These can affect any system (Windows, Apple and Linux) because the principal method is

using Java where a number of vulnerabilities have been found recently. Adobe reader is another route if you accept PDFs either from a site, or via e-mail.

To prevent unexpected effects, you should stop scripts running unless you really want them to. For instance, use the NoScript add-on in Firefox. It will be some time before you have trained it to be sensible with all the sites you regularly visit but is worth it, if it stops you getting infected from a bad site you have been referred to.

Note that Java and Javascript are very different things. They have no connection to one another apart from the unfortunate similarity of names. When you hear of an alert, make sure you know which it refers to.

Clam _AV

On Linux, Clam AV is a free virus checker that can scan all your files for known Windows viruses, so you can see whether you are harbouring anything nasty. However, it cannot stop you suffering from a rogue Java application. Always be careful.