

## Instant Messaging with Pidgin

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This month we looked at Instant messaging as an alternative means of communicating with others. The preferred application to do the job is Pidgin which will run on Linux or Windows. The Apple equivalent is Adium.

All that is covered here is what we covered on the day. If you want to experiment, then please do, as there are a lot more features than given here.

### ***Basic mechanism***

The basic idea of instant messaging (IM) is that you can send and receive immediately messages between two or more people, much like a conversation. With e-mail, you do not normally expect an answer quickly, and is more suitable for thoughtful questions and responses. IM can be used to have a quick discussion to come to some conclusion. The conversation can be kept for later retrieval, and in some cases can be used to transfer files between the correspondents.

In the event of the meeting we did not cover many of the possibilities that several of these services offer, like supporting video, or encryption. We will consider only the most basic operation.

### ***Getting an account***

Since you have to know who you are trying to contact, you need an address by which others can contact you, and you will need to know their address. These look on the surface like e-mail addresses, and there are many free services around that you can use. We looked at those services supporting the XMPP communication method, which is also known as Jabber. You can find a list of available services at reference [1].

We created accounts at reference [2] for the purposes of demonstration, some using the .net and others .eu domain.

Some of the servers allow access to types of IM system other than XMPP through your XMPP account on that server, but you would have to check the details with the chosen server for your account.

An address that you are given is then of the form [username@domain](#).

### ***Pidgin and your account(s)***

Pidgin is an application that allows you to send and receive many different types of IM. It is part of the standard distro repositories for Linux, and there is a downloadable version for Windows from [3]. For Apple, Adium is a similar application, but is not described here.

Then you first start up Pidgin, it will ask you to define your account. This is the name by which others will find you when Pidgin is active. IM's can only be transmitted between the parties when both have their IM applications active. When you have told Pidgin about your account, when you

start the application it will connect with your server and from there others can tell whether you are online, i.e. available for a chat, or not.

Pidgin walks you through setting up your account the first time automatically. To add other accounts later go to Accounts → Manage accounts dialog in the Buddies window, and then hit the Add button.

In our case, we were using the XMPP protocol, so that is what was selected from the dropdown list under Protocol. The Username is just the username in your address before the @ symbol. The Domain is the name after the @ symbol, and the Password is the one you gave when you created the account. You can also give yourself a local nickname if you wish so you can separate your different personalities.

You can have as many different accounts for different purposes and on different IM protocols as you wish, for instance you may have separate accounts for Facebook, GoogleTalk and MSN; or you may wish to divide work from private life; or use different accounts for different languages.

### ***Defining who you can talk to (buddies)***

[All right pedants; Defining to whom you can talk.]

The people you can talk to are known as Buddies in Pidgin. Before you can contact someone you will need to define them as a buddy using the Buddies → Add buddy dialog. If you have more than one account, then you must select which one to be used for the communication and then fill in the full name (that is [username@domain](#)) as given by your correspondent. When the fields are filled in, hit Add.

### ***Starting a conversation***

To begin a conversation, go to Buddies → New Instant Message, and select the account you want to use, fill in name of the account you want to talk to. As you type, it will make suggestions from which you can select to save typing the whole thing.

When the new window appears, there is a pane at the bottom into which you type your message. Hitting the Enter key will transmit it to the other party. When it is received at the other side it will appear in their corresponding conversation window.

However, the first time you contact someone, you will be asked to authorise the interchange. This ensures that you are talking to someone you know and not to some random spammer. Henceforth, the authorisation will not be required.

As you start each new conversation with different accounts, a new tab will appear in the conversation window, one for each conversation. So make sure you are in the right tab when replying!

### ***More features***

It can check your spelling in some languages – look at the Spell-check menu. To add more dictionaries on Linux, then install the packages `myspell-XX` where XX represents the languages you wish to add. The restart Pidgin and the new languages will appear.

Many other plug-ins can be found from the package `pidgin-plugin-pack`, including OTR (off-the-record) which enables encryption of the conversation, but we did not attempt to try that.

Documentation on Pidgin is found at [4].

### ***Signing off***

You do not need to terminate a conversation, but if you want to, then just close the tab or window where it is.

### ***References***

[1] List of XMPP/Jabber servers at [http://www.jabberes.org/servers/servers\\_by\\_gateway\\_icq.html](http://www.jabberes.org/servers/servers_by_gateway_icq.html)

[2] Create account at hot-chilli here <https://jabber.hot-chilli.net/account/create>

[3] Pidgin for Windows is at <https://www.pidgin.im/download/windows/>

[4] Pidgin documentation at <https://developer.pidgin.im/wiki/Using%20Pidgin>