Friend in the machine

YOU'VE EXPERIMENTED with instant messaging and you're hungry to take the next step – chatting online. Guess what? It's dead easy, says David Peterson

In the previous instalment of Netsmarts we gave you a brief introduction to instant messaging with the MSN Messenger Client and alluded to the way in which its features can be enhanced through the use of other collaboration tools. This time, we'll be looking at how to get started with MSN Chat – which extends MSN Messenger with facilities for meeting up online with much larger groups of friends (or finding some new ones).

To get started, you can either click on the 'chat' link in MSN Messenger or point your web browser at **http://chat.msn.com** and sign in with your .NET Passport. If you don't already have one (you should if you've been using Hotmail) you will be given the opportunity to sign up for one.

You will then be asked to select a nickname to identify you while chatting. Download the MSN Chat software, then you are then ready to pick a room – 'Joys of Computing' is a good friendly place to start for technical tips and advice.

CONVERSATION IN PROGRESS

If you want to discuss a topic that isn't listed, or to create a private chat room to meet with friends or colleagues, you can also create a new room of your own.

Once you join a room you will see a list of names of the people chatting and a scrolling window of text showing a conversation in progress. To send a message that everyone can see, simply type in the box at the bottom of the chat screen and click the Send button.

It is also possible to represent the non-verbal communication that often takes place during a face-to-face conversation with the action/emotion button (the exclamation mark) next to the send button.

If you have a private message that you only want to send to one person,

rather than the entire room, click on the person's name then click the whisper button. This opens up a new window that you can use to communicate directly with that user without the rest of the room viewing the conversation.

If someone in the room is particularly annoying it is simply a matter of selecting their name on the room list and clicking the ignore button to ensure that you never hear from them again. If enough people do this then they quickly get bored with talking to themselves and leave. More persistent offenders can be forcibly banished from the room by the chatroom hosts (the names with a gavel icon next to them).

KEEPING TRACK

If you're going to be away from your keyboard for a few minutes, or be otherwise occupied, it's a good idea to let people know by clicking on the coffee cup icon next to your name on the room list. This lets other users in the room now know not to

You need never be alone again. Just click on the 'Find a Friend' button

expect an immediate response if they ask you a question. When you return, click it again to flag that you are available.

To find out more about someone you're chatting to, click on their name in the room list and then the profile button to view the information that they have chosen to publish about themselves. You can update your own information with the Member Settings on the blue bar at the top of the chat screen.

In a particularly busy room it can be easy to lose the thread of a conversation that you may be involved in. To make life a little less confusing, you can highlight chat from selected users when it appears by clicking on their name in the room list and then clicking on the tag button.

If you are trying to track down a friend in chat, you can locate them using the Find a Friend button in the blue bar at the top of the chat screen. If they are online you can chose to join them in their chat room or invite them to join yours, or you can enter a private conversation.

This should be enough to get you started, but for additional tips on how to use chat and some guidelines on good chat etiquette be sure to check the MSN Chat online help and Code of Conduct.

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