



An even better FTP

Last month's LWPFTP taster has whetted many readers' appetites, so Chris Bidmead goes into more detail here. Plus, Ray Noorda's Caldera, and the trials and tribulations of Lasermoon.

A couple of months ago I told you of my delight at discovering NCFTP, the vastly improved version of plain old FTP that comes from NCEMRSOFT. Several OS/2-inclined readers have got back to me to tell me about LWPFTP (Lynn's WorkPlace FTP) and I managed to sneak a screenshot of this into last month's column, although I didn't have time or space to tell you anything about it, except that you can get it from ftp.tach.net/pub/os2. One reader, Chumble@glassnet.com, writes: "This is probably the most powerful and integrated ftp util available especially for OS/2.... you will be truly impressed."

Well, yes I am, Clive. LWPFTP is a fully WPS-integrated FTP client that associates a folder on your desktop with a remote FTP site. You can set up multiple different folders for different sites, and then forget all about the complexities of conventional FTP because opening a folder automatically connects you to the remote site and populates the folder with the contents of the site. Actually, it does no more than create a bunch of named icon objects that correspond to what it finds in the remote directory it's pointing at. Directory icons and file icons are distinguished, and each has a pop-up menu that allows you to manipulate them like ordinary desktop objects. There's also a Settings option on the menu that lets you inspect the FTP information; this is the actual address and directory location of the remote file, the date it was first "discovered" when you originally connected to the site, the reported size of the file, and whether the file has been acquired — that is to say, FTP'd over to your local directory.



OS/2's WebBrowser reads the Linux HTML documentation across the office network

So these icons are sort of placeholders, rather than working representatives in the way the ordinary WPS objects are. This has the advantage that you can do marshalling operations on them after you've disconnected from the remote site where you discovered them, and without having had actually to download them all.

Typically you might use LWPFTP to connect once to collect the placeholders for a remote directory, and then come off line while you decide what you want to do next. When you've settled on which files or directories you want to download, you reconnect and then pop up their right mouse button menus and select Transfer. Or just double-click on them.

I can't do full justice to LWPFTP here, and you really do have to see it to believe it. But to cut to the bottom line, I'm not actually using it any more. As I told

Chumble, LWPFTP is a fascinating exercise, but I'm not convinced that you want to have everything integrated that closely into the WPS. At least, not on my ageing 50MHz 486 CompuAdd. Personally, I've gone back to NCFTP. But I'd certainly welcome any of your comments on this.

Caldera and Linux-FT

I also teased you last month with a picture of the Caldera desktop, and suggested you look at the Web page at <http://www.caldera.com> for further details. Cramming the information into the caption of a screenshot may have left you with the impression that this is just yet another Linux distribution, so let me set the record straight here. IMHO, this Novell spin-off is one of the most important developments that has happened to Linux since its inception. Important and controversial.

Ray Noorda, the industry father-figure

who recently retired as CEO of Novell, was far from happy about Microsoft's success in dominating the PC desktop. Under his guidance Novell bought Unix from its originators, AT&T, with the idea of nurturing it into an alternative standard desktop operating system. But the effort foundered, not least because historical licence agreements attached to Unix made it too expensive to compete against Windows.

That Novell initiative is now done with. The new CEO, Bob Frankenberg, seems to have reached an accommodation with Microsoft, and Noorda has retired from Novell. But towards the end of his regime, Noorda encouraged a skunkworks project, at one time called Exposé. This was apparently intended to continue the desktop war with Microsoft prices by substituting Linux for Unix as the core operating system.

Exposé seemed to evaporate with Noorda's departure from Novell, and was hardly missed as it had been little more than a rumour. So I was astonished when I heard about Caldera a couple of months ago. Noorda has set the whole thing up as a separate company, migrated some Novell employees involved in the original scheme, and is going all out to launch Caldera by the end of this year.

Caldera will be based on the Red Hat distribution of Linux, with a wrapping of proprietary products to turn it into a ready-to-run, Internet-capable, guaranteed commercial quality X Window-based desktop

operating system. It's this mixture of free-ware and commerce that's stirring up such passion among the Linux community, and a lot of this passion seems to be singularly ill-informed. The whole thrust of the GNU effort, of which Linux is a part, is the distribution of software *freely*. As Richard Stallman, the progenitor of GNU, is forever pointing out to us, "freely" doesn't necessarily mean "free of charge". I'm personally in favour of the right of individuals to travel freely across national boundaries. But I'll pay my air fare.

Having said that, I'm ready to share some of the cynicism about Caldera. Stallman's so-called "copyleft" licence is skillfully designed to allow freeware and commercial add-ons to co-exist and grow together. In theory, Caldera will be feeding back some of its own development effort into Linux, and the company cites the NetWare client software as an example. But the NetWare clients for other operating systems like Windows and OS/2 are freely distributable already, for the very good reason that they help promote the sales of NetWare servers.

Well, Caldera says it will shortly be sending me the "Preview" version of Caldera, so I'll let you know more when I get it. You can order it yourself from orders@caldera.com for \$29 a copy, but I should warn you that this somehow climbs to \$69 once Caldera has accounted for postage, packing and the exhausting task of mailing to a country that has the nerve to lie outside US borders.

Lasermoon woes

I've mentioned the UK-based Linux distribution and support company Lasermoon more than once in this column, but not perhaps as many times as I might. From several phone and email conversations I've had with its proprietors, Ian Nandhra and his wife, Lyn, Lasermoon seems to me (Sir John Harvey-Jones mode on) to be a well-intentioned, talented, over-stretched and fundamentally disorganised, typical British small company. Yes, I know this is pretty rich, coming from an ex-hippy who has to be chased every month by this magazine's production people to send in his invoices. But it's not meant primarily as a criticism; more an explanation to the readers who have emailed me saying they're having a hard time getting any response from Lasermoon. Bottom line: in my view, the company's doing an excellent job for Linux, but don't expect more than it can give.

This afternoon I had a very long phone conversation with Ian and Lyn about just

this. As I write, Lasermoon is putting the finishing touches to a distribution it calls Linux-FT, a product that is already going out of the door in temporary packaging because the demand is so great. "I have to say that the response has been overwhelming," says Lyn, whose job it is to fulfil the orders. "We've never had this number of people ringing up. It's taken us totally by surprise." Overwhelming. Not a marketing phase. Lyn means this literally.

Anticipating Caldera, Linux-FT is an Internet-ready bundling of Linux 1.2 which comes in a number of editions, depending on what you want to pay and what you need in the way of development tools and general extras. The version that arrived at my door comprises three main CDs containing the runtime, the source code and World Wide Web stuff, and another three CDs that hold snapshots of the three main Linux FTP sites. Oh, and another pair of CDs containing different developer versions of Motif.

That's eight CDs, and until the final printed packaging is ready, somebody at Lasermoon has to stuff each of those CDs into its case and parcel it all up so it doesn't get wrecked in transit. Meanwhile, somebody else (or, more probably, the same person, Lyn) has to respond to irate phone calls from people who placed orders ten days ago and wonder why nothing has arrived yet. ("We discovered we were dealing with a totally duff courier company, whose name I won't mention," says Lyn.)

At the same time, somebody else (Ian) is getting hassled by punters whose parcels have arrived but who are having trouble with the installation. That's when Ian isn't dealing with more advanced customers who've installed Linux-FT successfully and then wrecked it all by succumbing to the temptation to grab the very latest Linux kernel off the Net and inexpertly try to rebuild the package around it.

Some of these customers, says Ian, are very rude indeed. They can't see the dividing line between the kind of minimal support you might decently expect from a low-cost package, and full-scale consultancy for which £40 an hour would be considered cheap in most Unix circles. I know that none of my readers are going to fall into this trap, but to head off any possible trouble, here's a checklist that applies whatever Linux distribution you're buying:

- Are you expecting the kind of commercial support offered (but in my experience, rarely delivered) with products like Windows or OS/2? If so, Linux probably isn't for you — go and get Windows or OS/2.



Or take the whole thing seriously and pay real money for commercial Linux support.

- Did you email your credit card number three days ago and are now getting very cross indeed that nothing has arrived? Cool down. Emailing CC numbers isn't particularly smart, and in any case email isn't a guaranteed delivery method. The vendor should be checking that your delivery address is the same as your credit card address, and will be emailing a confirmation before you receive any goods.

- Having problems installing? Have you read the documentation? Really? All of it? Nothing drives Linux support people madder than customers who ring up and say: "No, of course I haven't read the manual. I'm far too busy... I want you to talk me through it..."

- Had a perfectly good working installation and then tried to "improve" it by downloading the very latest (and probably buggy) version of the kernel? Nothing wrong with that if you know what you're doing. Nothing particularly wrong if you don't, as long as you're prepared to mess around in your own time and have your first installation properly backed up. But Tech Support are not going to be particularly interested in sharing your woes.

You get the picture? This column doesn't endorse companies, but my personal tip, if you're at all interested in Linux-FT (and it's pretty good — get the full spec from <http://www.lasermoon.co.uk>) would be to grab it before Ian and Lyn get *really* fed up and go and join the Moonies.

New Windows API extensions for OS/2 Warp

I was out in New Orleans at IBM's Technical Interchange when the new API extensions to OS/2 were announced, so I had the opportunity to talk to developers and collect their reactions. The announcement caused an emotional stir, and the feedback I gathered was flavoured with more than the usual helping of politico-religious fervour. Broadly, attitudes polarised into two camps. "A betrayal by IBM," said some of them. "We've dedicated our efforts to the OS/2 API, and left the mass market and low markup to the Windows guys. Now IBM's lowered the drawbridge and is letting anybody in."

Less naive developers, realising perhaps that this attitude smacked of un-American restraint of trade, purported to embrace the new move warmly. Making it easy to port existing Windows packages to



Linux-FT comes bundled with a whole raft of useful software, including ImageMagick picture manipulation

OS/2 would rapidly expand the applications base and therefore raise the general profile of OS/2. A more sophisticated line of argument said that the ability to manage a common code base between OS/2 and Windows naturally cut both ways, also allowing OS/2 developers to broaden their horizons to take in the Windows market. And if you really did believe that OS/2 was the superior 32-bit operating system, a corpus of apps common to Windows and OS/2 would surely be the best way of demonstrating it to the public at large.

An entirely excellent and politically correct attitude. "We write great code for OS/2," said one of these optimists. "And it will look even better beside whatever the Windows guys have to throw at us." But I couldn't help feeling a sneaking sympathy for the painful honesty of the pessimists. Does IBM really know where it's going with all this?

Warp Connect

Well, we did it. I got back from New Orleans to find that Marcus, my (unfortunately) only occasional personal technician (only available to me when he's not hired out at a vast daily rate I would blush to mention in this modest column), had installed Linux-FT and hooked it into my network. It comes with TCP/IP all ready to go, so Marcus didn't feel able to take much credit for the fact that it was already chatting merrily to my OS/2 Warp Connect machine at the other end of the wire. I'd installed the beta copy of OS/2 Warp Connect the week before, and had made much to Marcus of the fact that I'd managed to get a convincing TCP/IP packet stream out of it, although the truth is that it too comes with TCP/IP all ready to go. There's a handy TCP/IP configuration package in Warp Connect that writes

addresses into the hosts file, so registering the new Linux box as "intel_ip" was a breeze.

When you're testing TCP/IP, the first thing you do is ping yourself. If you've never done it, it's not painful. Ping is a simple TCP/IP utility that sends out test data packets to an address you supply as a parameter, and it then reports if it receives acknowledgement of their arrival. So from the Warp Connect box I pinged myself and then pinged intel_ip. Everything pinged merrily, so the network was up.

The next thing you do is telnet across the network. Telnet is a serial terminal style of connection that allows you to log on to the remote machine through a character-based interface. Telnetting from an OS/2 command line window worked fine, and I was even able to run the Linux-FT script called Documentation that powers up Lynx, a character-based Web browser, through which you view the hundreds of pages of HTML documentation on the Linux CD-ROM.

So there was the Linux documentation on tap from my OS/2 desktop. Then I started to have crazy ambitions. OS/2 comes with its own graphical HTML browser, WebExplorer. What would it take, I wondered, to somehow feed the telnetted documentation output into Web Explorer, and view the remote HTML pages in living colour? Some weird and wonderful Rexx script involving pipes? I put the question to Marcus when I phoned him later that night, and I'm chuffed to say he didn't know the answer.

I'm chuffed because I'd already worked it out. You hardened TCP/IP hackers won't be impressed, but my goodness, I impressed myself. It's incredibly simple. Forget telnet; forget pipes. WebExplorer is a TCP/IP aware application. It talks down TCP/IP sockets to the Internet. And it can talk through those same sockets across my office network. Power up WebExplorer and write in "http://intel_ip" as the universal resource locator. True to its name, this finds the Linux machine and grabs the home page there. Thereafter you hop through the hyperlinked documentation just as if it were out there on the Internet.

Mmmn, I think I'm beginning to get the hang of all this...

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