hatting over the Internet touches on the primal desire for intraspecies communication. You should try it at least once, if only to gather enough fuel to sustain lengthy diatribes against the decay of the offline self into an online fraud. Then again, maybe this is exactly what you've been looking for. This month's Shareware Roundup gives you five ways to see what everyone's talking about.

ownload Size: 2.5 MB
Requirements: System 7.1 or later, an Internet connection
Web: <http://www.aol.com/aim/>
Shareware Fee: free

When America Online first released its Instant Messenger chat client, nonsubscribers suddenly had an easy way to get in touch with the AOL community on a one-to-one dialogue basis. With the addition of several new razzle-dazzle features, though, what used to be a single-purpose application is now a mini-portal for AOL's services.

side from telling you when friends and colleagues who use AOL or Instant Messenger are online, the program offers a separate News Ticker window. Clicking on any of the headlines as they scroll by directs your Web browser to the appropriate page on AOL.com's newswire service. At the bottom of the Instant Messenger window, meanwhile, there's room to type in Web-search queries that take you to AOL's Netfinder search engine.

ut this isn't about news headlines or Web searches, it's about chat. Instant Messenger now lets you talk with groups of people in "rooms," a vast improvement over the 1.x version that may have been packaged with your last Netscape download. You can chat with your existing "buddies," or, in true AOL style, a room of strangers desperate to know your age, gender, and location. Message composition is largely unchanged—you still have the same basic text formatting options like italics, underlining, and clickable hyperlinks.

Instant Messenger's best improvement since 1.x may be its ability to transmit files. If you or the people you interact with are mystified by e-mail attachments, this is a convenient solution. The ability to send entire folders in addition to single files is one new feature of version 2.01.664; others include the ability to hide incoming messages when you switch to "I'm Away" mode, and the option to keep a running list of the who, what, and when of those messages.

If you don't mind dealing with AOL's constant corporate presence, Instant Messenger is an easy way to keep track of friends and start chatting with new people. It may not give total access to the realm of AOL chat, and the news ticker and Websearch features may be little more than frills-of-the-minute, but Instant Messenger's ease of use and extensive safety options still make it a good choice. As a word of caution, beware the beta—glitches may still be lurking here and there.

ICQ has many of the same features as Instant Messenger, but presents them in a cleaner fashion. You won't see ad banners or corporate cajoling here . At the same time, ICQ's interface does take a bit of getting used to.

The main window is your buddy list of who's online. You can't categorize your friends into collapsible folders here, as in Instant Messenger, but each name listed comes with a popup menu of options: send a message, send a file, request a chat, etc. Like Instant Messenger, adding and finding buddies' names is done in a search-query fashion.

he other part of ICQ's interface is the Floater, a tiny window that remains front-most no matter what application is currently active and blinks whenever another ICQ user tries to contact you. Even though it takes up a smidgen of space on your desktop, having the Floater is better than relying on an extension for these kind of notification services. It's also more noticeable than a flashing icon in the menu bar.

When you first launch ICQ, it prompts you to register for an ICQ number. This pseudo-address becomes the main way for someone else to find you when you're online and start

chatting up a storm (they can also find you by searching for your e-mail address or name, but the ICQ number is ultimately what makes you an individual).

Chat can be conducted in one of two ways. By far the most popular in any chat venue is IRC mode, where the messages you send back and forth appear all at once in their entirety. This is the opposite of Split Screen mode, which divides the screen in half and transmits each keystroke individually. Suffice to say this is not the best option for two-fingered typists, although it was once the cutting edge of chat technology and known simply as the "talk" protocol. Up to five people can communicate in split screen mode, a cacophony of simultaneous communication.

Recent postings on ICQ's message boards have been reporting a few glitches with this current beta, so you may want to downgrade to a more stable version until the dust settles.

equirements: Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer,
versions 3.x and up.
Web: <http://chat.yahoo.com/>
Sharware Fee: free

Instant Messenger and ICQ can be great for your home or office computer, but the cost of downloading either one is mobility. A Java-based chat on the Web can be the ideal solution for people who connect to the Internet from more than one location and don't feel like installing the same piece of software ad nauseam.

Java-based chat rooms can be found all over the Web, but your favorite search engine is a good place to start. Yahoo! is the strongest contender, offering its own version of Instant Messenger and ICQ in the form of Yahoo! Pager plus the usual slew of topic-based chat rooms.

The biggest flaw in this kind of chat environment is the temperamental beast that is Java. Once you've registered with Yahoo!, entering a chat room will prompt your Web browser to begin loading its Java component. Depending on the speed of your Mac and the version of your browser, this can be as quick as the pinprick of a flu shot or as slow as trying to recover from having the wind knocked out of you.

A well-behaved session of Yahoo! Chat

The dark side of Java

Once you're in, it's the standard array of chat options. You can view profiles for chatters who have them, ignore anyone who bothers you, create private rooms that are invitation-only, or format and colorize your messages with the click of a button. Yahoo! Pager, meanwhile, allows you to keep buddy lists that notify you whenever a friend logs on. A unique feature of both Pager and the general chat rooms is their ability to notify you of new mail on your Yahoo! free-mail account. Even so, you'll still get better mileage and more dependable service from Instant Messenger or ICQ.

Accommodating the needs of the Mac community, however, isn't high on Yahoo!'s priority list. Whereas the Windows crowd gets a downloadable application, Mac users must content themselves with the Java version. Even though a new version of Pager offering voice chat and conferencing is now in beta, it's Windows only.

Go on, say it with me now: Hmm.

ownload Size: 1.1 MB
Requirements: System 7
Web: <http://www.snak.com>
Shareware Fee: $20

This next one goes out to all the hard-line chat fanatics out there.

A fundamental problem with an AOL or Yahoo! chat room is their relatively narrow scope. Both services specifically require users to register before entering, and even after you get in most of the rooms can be populated predominantly by Americans. With Internet Relay Chat (IRC), meanwhile, you expand your chat horizons to global proportions. Chatting with someone at almost any corner of the globe is entirely possible, but that's only one perk. With thousands upon thousands of users logged on at any given time, there's a much greater potential for conversations to rise above idle babble.

RC is a fairly old way of chatting online, one that goes back to the days of entering abstruse commands at a command-line prompt. Fortunately, programs like Snak and Ircle were developed to shake off some of this complexity by enhancing it with a more sophisticated, menu-based interface. Almost all the features available on other chat venues can be found on IRC. You can be notified when friends come online, you can have private messages with another person, and you can create private chat rooms or "channels."

Ircle has long been a popular Macintosh IRC client, but that doesn't mean it's the easiest to use. Snak's interface is slightly more intuitive. Although both programs rely on three or four windows to tell you where you are, what kind of company you're in, and where you can go, only Snak places the input line at the bottom of the main window. Ircle uses a separate window for its input line, and also places the list of people in the current channel in its own window. It may seem like a petty detail, but when you're brand new to IRC these subtleties can leave you stymied and frustrated.

If you have the patience to learn its intricacies, IRC could be a rewarding chat experience. It isn't for the faint of heart. Snak and Ircle have a long way to go before they can match the ease of use you'll find with a client like Instant Messenger, but then again IRC is a big place juggling a lot of people.

ownload Size: 866 K
Requirements: System 7.5 or later, Power PC
Web: <http://www.abbottsys.com/atchat.html>
Shareware Fee: free

If you'd rather not jump through registration hoops, and the complexity of IRC leaves a sinking feeling in your gut, fear not! There's one last chat option on the horizon. Although it isn't the place to meet new people, AbbottChat does allow you to save and load various "buddy" lists and do many of the same things you can do with ICQ or Instant Messenger. All it takes is an e-mail or IP address.

AbbottChat lacks most of the text-formatting bells and whistles you'll find in other chat clients, although it can transmit files and sounds. The ability to set up a group chat puts it a notch above Combadge, a chat program that also relies on a user's e-mail address but only operates between two people.

If you can convince the people you want to chat with to use AbbottChat, it will undoubtedly serve you well. It won't do you much good with the AOL crowd or get you into IRC, but this client could fit nicely inside a corporate Intranet since AbbottChat doesn't have to keep track of registered users and their nicknames in some far off behemoth database. At the very least, it allows you talk to someone any hour of the day, any day of the week. That special someone is Robbie, the automated chatbot: