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Résumé de l'article

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Technical Evaluation Report

15. Chat and Instant Messaging Systems (synchronous): Report 3/ 3

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Abstract

[Previous reviews of chat and IM systems are presented in *Report 6* and *Report 14* in this series.]

A further set of four text-based instant messaging (IM) products was evaluated: *AT&T Anywhere, Parachat*, *Sonork*, and *Yahoo Messenger*, all available at no cost. *Yahoo Messenger* was judged to be the most effective of the three products for use by distance education (DE) teachers and students, being compatible with most common operating systems and accommodating up to 50 chat room participants. *Yahoo Messenger* also possesses integrated audio and video capabilities. *AT&T Anywhere* is an efficient product, which supports Windows-based operating systems only. *Parachat* (Basic version) is a basic, browser accessed chat board without instant messaging (IM) capabilities.

Evaluation Procedure

The three synchronous text-based products tested in this study offer the typical assortment of educationally useful tools, including: text-based chat communications; direct text messaging; private messaging; the ability to create chat rooms for multi-way conferencing; identification of participants; status indicators; alerts upon receiving new messages; an option to include or block users; automatic acknowledgement when users log on/ off; and cut and paste text methods. *AT&T Anywhere, Sonork*, and *Yahoo Messenger* each require a software download, and are installed as client software. The three products were each tested in repeated communications between two or more participants, running continuously on their computers for a period of five days. *Parachat* operates through a webpage, and one was designed specifically for this test, linking to a dedicated room on the product's public server. Evaluation criteria were consistent with those used in comparable evaluations earlier in this series. Every adjustable, synchronous text related feature of each of the three products was evaluated. The added audio and video features of *Yahoo Messenger* were not examined, and their availability was not allowed to influence the team's overall ratings of the three products' general IM capabilities.

Trials of Products and Services

1) *AT&T Anywhere* (version 3.0.0.0512) is an efficient synchronous text-based product. Download, installation, and configuration are user friendly, and clear Web-based tutorial and help guides are available. *AT&T Anywhere* loads in a small unobtrusive display window, and yields no

unwanted icons or pop-up displays. It organises and keeps track of contacts who use other text-based programs such as *Yahoo Messenger* and *ICQ* – a feature which, though useful, can create problems in the attempt to use both programs simultaneously, because *AT&T* prevents this. *AT&T* will not remain open for extended periods, and the user needs to log in again if the program has been idle for several hours. The product works on Windows platforms only.

2) **Parachat** (Basic version) is a no cost, Web-based text chat service for website designers. The software generates a single line of HTML code for embedding into a webpage, allowing users to launch a pop-up chat room either by a webpage link or an embedded java applet. The chat rooms are hosted on *ParaChat's* own servers. Each room permits public and private text-based chatting, plus the ability to ignore a user, and modify fonts. *Parachat* lacks many educationally useful features found in the other two products (e.g., start-up options; status indicators; user profiles; the option to accept/ ignore messages from users not on the user's contact list; and the monitoring of other chat rooms). The chat administrator's options for customising the chat area are primarily limited to modifying its colour schemes. The basic version's key benefit is the ease with which Web developers can add one or more basic chat rooms to their sites at no cost.

Commercial versions of *ParaChat* contain features additional to those of the basic version. The first level of commercial upgrade, *ParaChat AC* ($10 US per month), provides increased administrative and security features including Web tours (i.e., shared browsing), password protection, and the option to expel participants. The second upgrade level, *ParaChat Pro* (starting at $75 US per month), provides a comprehensive package of administrative and customisation features including language translation, database integration, and chat room transcription. *ParaChat Server* is the final level of upgrade, with a one-time purchase price of $600 US and optional maintenance contracts. This version provides the features of *ParaChat Pro* plus the ability to control and customise server installation and delivery procedures. No version of *ParaChat* provides instant messenger (IM) services.

3) **Sonork** is a messaging product that is evolving rapidly, for which reason it is one of the first in this series of evaluation studies to be reviewed a second time. *Sonork* is designed for IM communication within workgroups in private and secure Intranet networks, as well as across the Internet. *Sonork* contains valuable tools for website developers and network administrators, and was the most effective product encountered in a comprehensive search by one of the evaluation team (JB) for an IM system capable of operating between workstations in one location as well as across the Internet. The product provides varied chat features: login status options; the ability to track the use of multiple chat rooms; permanent hosting of chat rooms by the network or individual users; also a calendar and task reminders. *Sonork's* installation requires a firm grasp of network design and configurations, and is assisted by a useful installation application.

4) **Yahoo Messenger** is also a popular product that has been reviewed previously in this series. *Yahoo Messenger* is a good, synchronous text-based package, with user friendly download, installation and configuration procedures, and customisable privacy features including chat room password protection. Two types of private chat rooms are available: one accommodating up to 50 users, and a conference room for up to 10 invited guests. *Yahoo* also provides audio and video conferencing, and works on multiple operating systems including Windows, Macintosh, Linux, Palm, and Unix. Though powerful, *Yahoo Messenger* is a relatively obtrusive program designed for entertainment purposes rather than educational use. It places multiple icons on the user's screen, including a *Yahoo* toolbar in the Internet Explorer browser. In our tests, the "Filter offensive words" feature did not work.

[Note: The Audio section of the evaluation website accompanying these reviews refers to other messaging products, including *MediaRing* and *VoiceNet*.]

Conclusions

AT&T Anywhere and *Yahoo Messenger*, both available at no charge, are efficient synchronous text-based products providing both chat and IM services. The evaluation team considers *Yahoo Messenger* to be the most effective product of the three for use in DE conferencing, owing to its interoperability and advanced conferencing features. *Yahoo* has the added benefits of audio and video conferencing, though these features were not allowed to influence the evaluation team's ratings of the product's text based efficiency. Primary advantages of *AT&T Anywhere* are: 1) it is less obtrusive than *Yahoo Messenger*, which opens distracting pop up advertising windows during its use; and 2) the ease with which *AT&T* provides access to users' accounts with other major chat services, including *Yahoo*. *Parachat* (Basic) provides Web designers with basic chat room facilities containing limited features. It lacks the wide range of educationally useful features available in the other two products (though many of these are available in its commercial versions). *Sonork* offers further chat and IM tools for the network developer. Educators may wish to bear these comparisons in mind when selecting from the growing range of chat and IM systems currently available for specific purposes.

The next report in this series will examine a set of integrated collaborative tools.

N.B. Owing to the speed with which Web addresses are changed, the online references cited in this report may be outdated. They can be checked at the Athabasca University software evaluation site: http://cde.athabascau.ca/softeval/. Italicised product names in this report are assumed to be registered trademarks.

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