Video chat with Yahoo

PICTURE PERFECT

Kopete and Gyachi bring Yahoo videochat services to Linux. **BY MARCEL HILZINGER**

Chat has become a favorite pastime for Internet users, and the tools of chat are growing ever-more sophisticated. Emoticons provide hints of moods and emotions, but a picture says a thousand words. Videochat (without telephony) is a routine feature for many MSN and Yahoo users, and Linux has a number of usable clients. This article looks at a pair of Yahoo-ready chat programs.

Kopete

KDE users don't need to look far for a tool to get them chatting with their Yahoo buddies: The KDE chat program Kopete introduced a convenient Y! Yahoo client a couple of versions back, and it even supports a webcam export feature. To use the feature, launch Kopete, select *Settings | Configure Kopete | Accounts | New* and select the Yahoo entry right down at the bottom of the list (Figure 1).

To enter your credentials, click *Next*, and select *Register new account* if you do not have a Yahoo account. Then click *Next | Finish* to complete the setup. Kopete will now list contacts below *Top level* in the main window. The KDE program colors active buddies blue; gray heads indicate that the buddy is away. Make sure that your Kopete client is not offline. Check the Kopete icon in the bar at the bottom of the window to discover the current status. Again, gray means offline, but a colored icon means you are online. By right-clicking the Kopete icon and selecting *Set status*, you can change the status.

If you want to share your webcam with a chat buddy, select *Settings | Configure Kopete | Devices*. Kopete will then show your webcam image, and you can adjust the color settings, brightness, and contrast. If this does not work with your webcam, you can try updating to the latest version of Kopete 0.12.4 (KDE 3.5.6), which includes a couple of improvements in this area.

After setting up the webcam, the Kopete chat window will show you two webcam icons: a green one for exporting your own camera and a blue one for sending a request to a buddy. Clicking the green icon tells your Yahoo buddy that you would like to view their web-
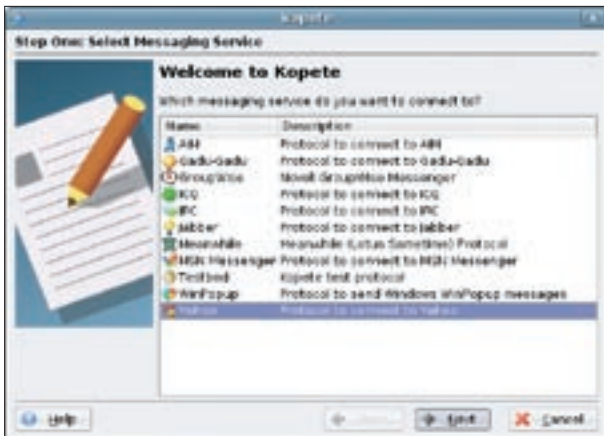
Figure 1: Kopete supports several IM services. Yahoo is right down at the bottom of the list.

cam. If your buddy accepts your request, you will be able to see your chat partner next to your own webcam image.

Older versions of Kopete enable webcam support in the chat window via the *Chat | Webcam request* menu item. If you see a Jasper error message instead of an accepted request (and this is typical of SUSE Linux), you will need to install the *libjasper* package and restart Kopete. If you still see the error message, your best option is to update Kopete/ KDE.

Gyach or Bust?

Recent Windows converts love the Gyache Improved [1] and Gyach Enhanced [2] Yahoo clients. These programs are forks of Gyach [3], a Linux client customized for Yahoo support that was abandoned by its maintainer. Gyache Enhanced is the actual fork; the binary is even called *gyach*. Gyache Improved forked from Gyach Enhanced and the binary is called *gyachi*.

The "Enhanced" and "Improved" epithets refer to the features of these programs that go beyond the chat function, such as webcam and voice chat support. Which of these programs you choose to use is a matter of personal taste. The current versions are Gyache Improved 1.0.5 and Gyach Enhanced 1.0.7. The interfaces are identical, but I discovered that sound support was broken in Gyach Enhanced.

Gyache Improved generally creates a better impression: the homepage is tidier, the code is easy to compile via the standard *./configure* and *make* steps, and the project still seems to be active. The Gyach Enhanced homepage is con-

fusing, and I was unable to access the CVS repository for the duration of my test. That is why this article is restricted to Gyache Improved version 1.0.5.

Gyache Improved

The Gyache Improved project download page [4] has packages for several distributions. The software is easy enough to install on a recent machine. If you intend to build the chat program from the source code, you will need to resolve the typical Gnome/Gtk dependencies. The tool additionally needs the *libmcrypt* developer packages to support encryption, so you will need to install *libmcrypt-devel* for this on most distributions.

After launching the program by pressing Alt + F2 and giving the *gyachi* command, you should see the login dialog, with the main Gyache Improved window in the background (Figure 2). At this point, enter your Yahoo credentials and select a server. By default, the client will attempt to log in to the *Linux, FreeBSD, Solaris:1* chat room. To avoid this, you need to select the *No chat room* option. Clicking *Login* logs you on to Yahoo.

Your contacts will be displayed in the *Buddies* tab. Double-clicking an entry opens a chat session. To directly access various Yahoo services, such as email, photos, or the weather service, you use the *My*

Yahoo! tab. To access a service, just select it in the list and then click *View*. *Contacts* takes you to an address book – at least in theory. This feature was unreliable in our test version. Although I managed to add contacts, the tool failed to display them afterwards. Linux users will need to manage their contacts in their browsers via the web front-end.

Setting up Your Webcam

Gyache Improved will work with more or less any webcam that supports Linux. For a quick test, select *Actions | Start My Webcam*. In the dialog box that then appears, you should see the image from your camera (Figure 3). If you do not see an image, or if the quality is poor, select *Connection | Camera Properties*; you can then tinker with the slide controls until you are satisfied with the results. Two cameras in our lab had the brightness and contrast values set to *255*; all the webcam displays in this case is a bright,
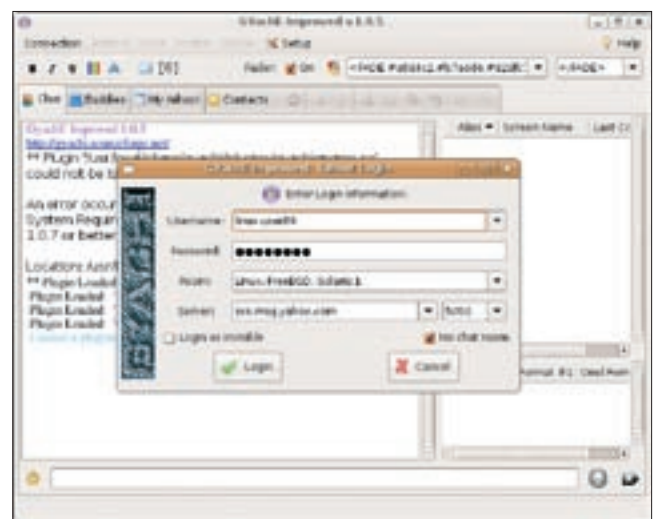

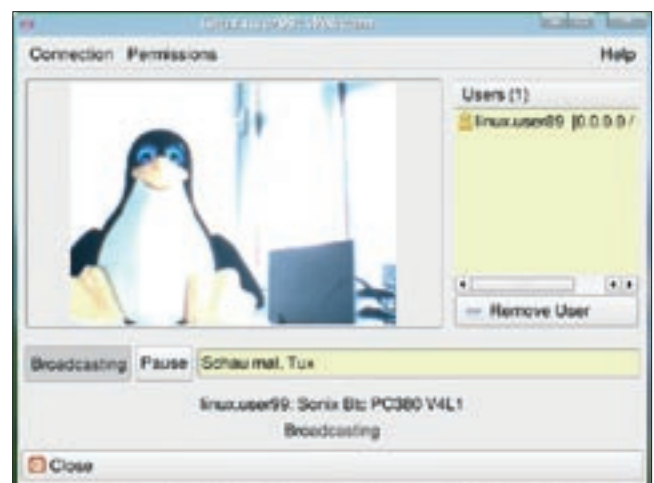**Figure 2: The Login dialog and the main Gyache Improved window.**

Figure 3: Here's looking at you: eye-to-eye with your chat buddy.

white image. To use your changes, click *Apply*. If you have several video devices attached to your computer, you might need to change the video device setting in *Setup | General* in the Gyache Improved main window. Clicking *Broadcasting* switches the camera to online status.

Permissions lets you specify who will be able to view images from your webcam. By default, all users need permission. I tried to give friends direct access to the webcam in our lab, but I was always prompted before the program released the camera. To find out who is watching you, switch to the webcam window, which gives you a list of virtual visitors to Gyache Improved on the right.

To view the image from a remote webcam, select a buddy in the list below *Buddies* and then click on the magnifying glass icon. In the dialog box that then appears, select *Connection | Connect*. Depending on the permissions your buddy has set for you, you might see the image immediately, or you might have to wait for clearance. If Gyache outputs an error message to the effect that your buddy's webcam is not online on connecting, you can retry by pressing *Connect* again. It is also possible that your chat partner might not have clicked *Broadcasting* yet.

No Sound

Theoretically, both Gyache Improved and Gyach Enhanced offer voice support. The Yahoo protocol supports voice chat sessions, but only in chat rooms with voice support. To start a voice chat session, you first need to create a new chat room.

Figure 4: Neat, but not very practical: Tuxvironments lets users modify their chat window's appearance.

Because the *Rooms | Create Room* function did not work in the versions I tested, your best approach is to use a conference: *Rooms | Start a Conference*. The Yahoo server will then automatically set up a new chat room, and enable voice chat for the room. To launch the chat program, you then select *Rooms | Launch Y! Voice Chat* or type *gyachivoice* at the command line.

As previously mentioned, this is all theoretical, or it least it was in our lab: neither of these methods actually worked, and I had to do without voice chat.

Tuxvironments

Chat environments are a special feature of Yahoo clients. They give you the ability to select a theme for your chat client. Gyachi and Gyache both support chat environments. To modify the theme, click the penguin icon in a chat room and then select an entry from the *TUXvironment* list. This should modify the chat window's appearance (Figure 4). If you are chatting with Windows friends, your best bet is to choose one of the two *JUST-FOR-LINUX* themes.

A very special TUXvironment is *photos*. The *photos* feature launches a shared image viewer, which you can use to collaboratively view Yahoo albums. To do this, you first need to set up an album on *http://photos.yahoo.com*. Unfortunately, this feature no longer works: although Gyachi will fetch the thumbnails and display a selection of albums for you to choose from, you see an error message rather than your selected album: Gyachi attempts to contact a non-existent server.

Figure 5: With the Yahoo protocol, you can send pre-configured audible messages.

Audibles are also a nice gadget. An audible consists of an emoticon and a voice message. To send an audible, click on the icon to the right of the smiley face in the chat window, and then select an icon for the message (Figure 5). The spoken text is shown when your mouse hovers over the icon.

Conclusions

Although Linux clients tend to lag behind the state of development at companies like Yahoo, the basic functions, and a couple of special features, are definitely usable. Don't expect a full-fledged replacement of the comparable Windows client, although Gyache Improved does come fairly close. Messenger users will appreciate that the tool uses the same sound themes.

Because Yahoo is continually expanding and shifting its service portfolio, not all the current Yahoo features are actually usable – time for a new Gyach release. ■
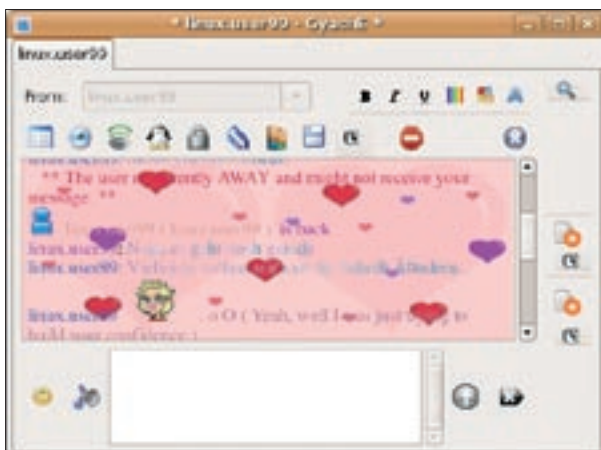
INFO

[1] Gyache Improved: *http://gyachi.sourceforge.net*

[2] Gyach Enhanced: *http://www.phrozensmoke.com/projects/pyvoicechat/*

[3] Original Gyach: *http://gyach.bc2va.org/*

[4] Gyachi download: *http://gyachi.sourceforge.net/download.shtml*