

Taking play seriously:

ONLINE GAMING

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Before the advent of the console and the home computer, gaming was usually a social occasion, involving two or more people. With the Internet gamers are once more locked in combat with each other, rather than pitted solo against the rudimentary AI running on their PC.

On this month's cover CD you will find a copy of the Linux beta of *Creatures*. New games releases can be seen as part of the Linux advance on the desktop. However online gaming on Unix and its predecessors can be traced back over 30 years.

MUD Slingsing

Of course the stereotype of a Unix sysadmin involves science fiction and Dungeons & Dragons as much as beards and sandals. It is no surprise to find Multi User Dungeons (MUDs) have long been a popular pastime in the Unix community

The first MUD to appear on the internet was MUD1, in 1979, created at Essex University by Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw. It was written in MACRO-10 - the machine code for DECsystem-10, with the first external players logging in across ArpaNet, from the USA, early the following year.

MUDs quickly became popular pastimes amongst those with the connectivity (usually research students and systems administrators). Although everything in the games could be effected by *telnet* access, many more advanced client programs were written during

the 1980s. This has continued in recent years as Linux and the internet has brought a whole new generation to the pleasures of pretending to be lost in some dark dungeon, surrounded by powerful adversaries.

Mud on the desktop

Those running KDE may want to try *Kmud* (see figure 1), which integrates into the desktop as well as offering all the usual features such as intelligent browsing of input history and an automapper. *Papya* is a more traditional client for Gtk. Again it has a strong feature list and benefits from a simple Plugin system if you wish to add your own modules, as well as being fairly configurable. For a development upon traditional clients, *mcl - MUD Client for Unix* runs under a virtual console on the Linux desktop. It is fast, supports embedded Python (and Perl) and makes life easier with features such as automatic login, aliases and Macro keys, as well as some support for peer-to-peer chat protocols.

Graphic detail

Bioware have taken a different approach to the traditional MUD game by implementing the *Dungeons & Dragons* 3rd edition ruleset in a realtime 3D roleplaying game, using the latest rendering and graphics techniques. Of course it needs a more powerful PC than any MUD client, but there is some time to save as the simultaneous PC / Macintosh / Linux release is still a long time in coming. It is refreshing to find a company which is taking its time to get a product right rather than rushing it out the door.

[left]
Figure 1: Follow the
yellow brick road...

[right]
Figure 2:
Strange fruit

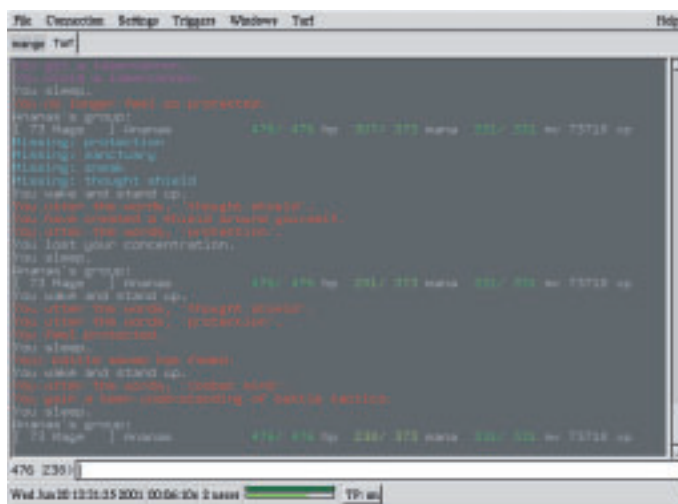
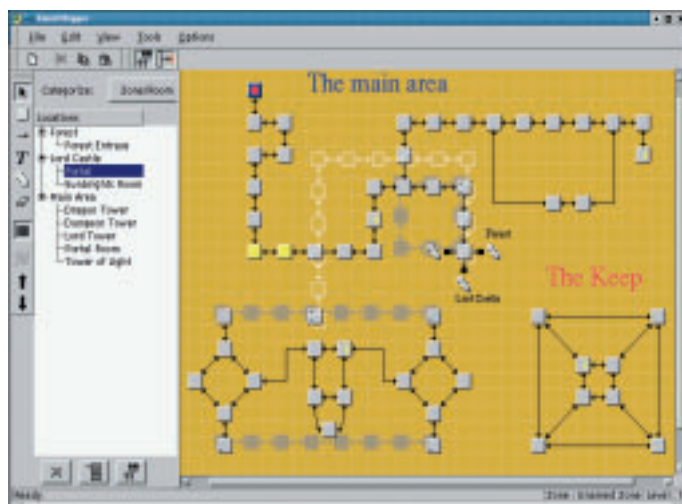




Figure 3.
Too cute by half

Creature feature

Also soon to be released is the Linux version of *Creatures Docking Station*. The creatures in question are cute artificial life forms, à la Tamagochi, known as Norns. They can feed themselves, communicate and be taught what is right and wrong. With the launch of *Docking Station* populations of Creatures can now interact, and be swapped. Digital DNA means a better Norn can be bred - you can get to play eugenics without the moral outcry. Docking Station is a hybrid of a game client and a web site. Users can send Norns directly between each other, and then track where they are on the web. You can also receive a Norn from a random other user, and then start a chat session with them to tell them how it is getting on.

The installation should delight many a Linux newbie, or indeed anyone who has previously suffered RPM hell, or hunted high and low for the right versions of libraries needed. After downloading and untarring the *beta* version from the site, just enter the directory and run the install script:

```
./dstation-install
```

It will grab the latest updates for you. So far it has been tested successfully on Debian, Mandrake, Redhat, Slackware and SuSE. On the cover CD you will find the application untarred and ready to install. If you need to be root to install anything, you will be prompted for the password. Of course there are security implications to all of this, but then you are safe behind a hardened firewall, aren't you?

On the Board

Chess has brought people together for deep and studied confrontation for centuries. It has proved a relatively simple challenge for AI developers with chess programs now available to play at



Info

Links to MUD clients: <http://www.kyndig.com/links/Clients>

You will find some of them on the cover CD.

mcl - MUD Client for Unix: <http://www.andreasen.org/mcl/index.shtml>

Mud server: <http://www.circlemud.org/>

Creatures docking station: <http://ds.creatures.net/linux/beta.pl>

Never Winter Nights: <http://www.neverwinternights.com/>

ICS: <http://www.chessclub.com/>

FICS: <http://www.freechess.org/>

A good source of info: <http://www.tim-mann.org/chess.html>

The code to DeepThought can be downloaded from http://www.tim-mann.org/DT_eval_tune.tar.gz

Go servers - NNGS: <http://nngs.cosmic.org/>

IGS The Internet Go Server: <http://igs.joyjoy.net/>

kiseido Go server: <http://www.kiseido.com/>

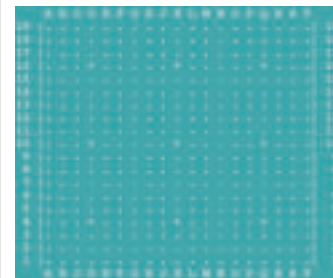
international master standard. Nevertheless part of the satisfaction that many gain from games of skill arises from pitting themselves against the cunning of another human player, probing for weaknesses and laying traps. The popularity of the game has led to a thriving online community with many servers

On an Internet Chess Server (ICS) one can play online with players across the world, or against machine opponents, watch beginners or grandmasters or just hang out and chat. The Free Internet Chess Server (FICS) is justly popular with the Internet Chess Club a good alternative.

The *XBoard* interface provide front ends to most of the chess servers on the web, and very many chess "engines" - programs that play chess. GNU *Chess* and *Crafty* will be found on most distribution disks, and play a fairly good game. Machine "intelligences" tend to be strong tactically, but weak strategically though.

Go?

The Japanese game of Go, based upon the Chinese *Wei Qi*, is better suited to an "intuitive" approach, rather than a computer's brute force problem-solving. It makes a good basis for AI research, but meanwhile load up one of the Linux Go clients, connect to one of the international Go servers and discover this ancient and fascinating game. We have included a number of clients and Go links on the cover CD as, for obvious reasons, it is very hard to do a web search for "Go".



simple



or graphical

[links]
Figure 4: Digital DNA gives rise to diversity

[rechts]
Figure 5: Travelling is easy with the Warp