

Automated Auctions

Ebay Monitoring



Readers interested in organizing or automating their Ebay activities on a Linux box can do so using JBidWatcher, a feature-rich, purely JAVA-based application that can help with multisniping. **BY VOLKER SCHMITT**

Ebay users will be familiar with the scenario: you noticed an interesting item yesterday and want to know what the final bidding price was. You may not have added the item to your list of buying reminders, or you may have forgotten to make a note of the item number. If this is so, you will find it difficult to discover the final selling price when it was sold.

Another thing that annoys me is the fact that items disappear off of lists, and that the data becomes inaccessible about 90 days after the close of the auction. This explains the crop of Ebay tools that has sprouted up, of which – unfortunately – virtually none run on Linux. *JBidWatcher*, a platform-independent Java-based tool is the exception to this rule.

No Install Required

The latest version of JBidWatcher is available at [1]. This was version 0.9.3 at the time of writing – but if you dis-

cover a more recent version, just change the version number in the commands that follow. If you want to jump right in – and you can do just that, as there is no need to install – simply download the *JBidWatch-0.9.3.jar* file and type

```
java -jar JBidWatch-0.9.3.jar
```

on the command line to run the applet. You will need at least the **JRE** or **JDK1.2.2** (type *java -version* to query the version). If you need a more recent version, surf to [2] to pick one up.

The easiest way to avoid all that typing each time you want to launch JBidWatcher is to create a launcher on your desktop. Enter the command you want to run; this could be *java -jar /usr/share/JBidWatch/JBidWatch-0.9.3pre2.jar* for example, depending on where the *jar* file is located. Note that you will need to enable the *Run in Terminal* option, as JBidWatcher outputs log files in a terminal window.

Initial Configuration

When you launch JBidWatcher for the first time, it creates a *.jbidwatcher/* directory below your home directory, where it stores configurations and lists. A window pops up prompting you to enter configuration details including your choice of Ebay portal, that is *ebay.co.uk* for the UK, or *ebay.com* for the US portal (see Figure 1). Then type your Ebay user name, and the appropriate password – don't worry, JBidWatcher will encrypt your password before storing it. The *General* tab gives you the option of accessing Ebay via an internal Web server. The port number is hidden away in *\$HOME/.jbidwatcher/JBidWatch.cfg*. The port number defaults to 9099, and you can change it by modifying the file. The configuration menu also

allows you to set up a proxy server or a firewall.

Searches and Overviews

Besides the menu bar, the main window has three tabs that divide the Ebay auctions into the categories *current*, *complete*, and *selling*. If you need an overview of current items, select *ebay / Import ebay Search* to launch the search manager, or click the binoculars icon.

This opens a window with a menu in the bottom margin. You can set a variety of search criteria here. For example, synchronizing the data stored in *My ebay*. The *Text* item will even perform a full text search against Ebay's offerings. Rather than just returning hits from item names, this gives you any item with the search key in its description or accompanying texts. If you do decide to perform a full-text search, pay attention to what you type, or be prepared to wade through thousands of hits.

To enter a search key for an item name, just as if you were searching from within the Ebay portal, you need to specify *URL* as the search type. However, there are a few browser settings you need to sort out first. When you are searching Ebay, you need to enter the portal and type a search key. If you type "Socrates" as your search key. This will return all kinds of junk, CDs or marble figurines – although you might simply be interested in a good book.

To restrict the search, you then click on the Ebay category for *Books* to display a list that reflects what you are looking for. After filtering the results in this way,

GLOSSARY

JRE: The Java Runtime Environment includes all the files you need to run Java programs.

JDK: The Java Development Kit has more components than the JRE, including additional tools for Java developers.



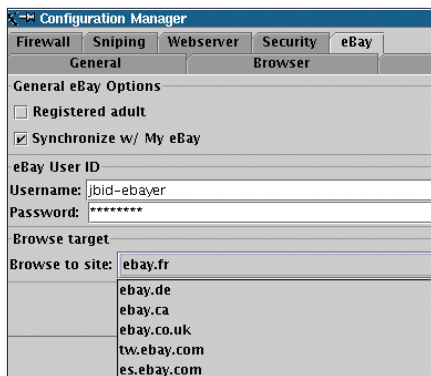


Figure 1: Use the “Configuration Manager” for your settings.

cut out the URL and paste it into the JBidWatcher search manager text box, specifying that the string is a URL type.

Click the *Add* button to add this search pattern to the list. Select an entry, and click on *Search* to tell JBidWatcher to display the results in a tabbed window. The list of results also shows the currency for the items (see Figure 2).

Color Coding

The articles in the list are color coded to reflect their auction status. Auctions

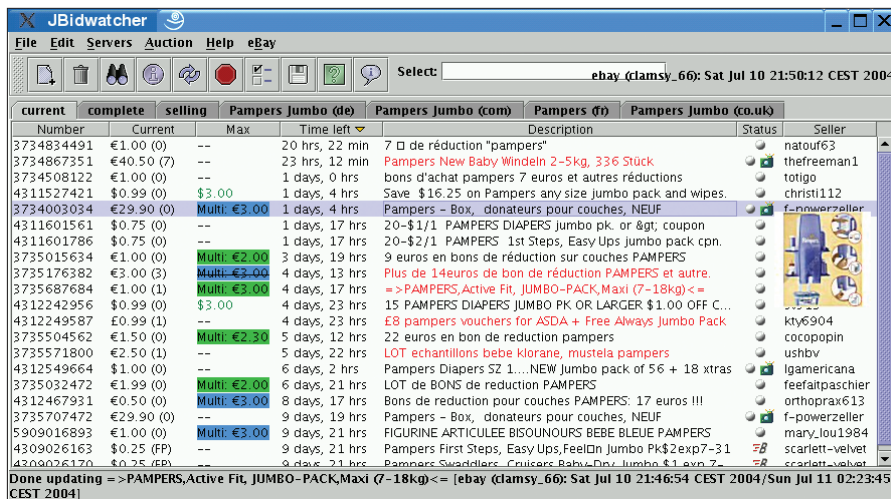


Figure 2: The main window of JBidWatcher displays the currency for each item in the list.

with no bids, or where the reserve has not yet been met, are displayed in black. The status column has the *B* symbol for auctions with a “Buy It Now!” option. Articles where you are the highest bidder are shown in blue. The color switches to red, if someone outbids you – assuming that the reserve price has been met.

Green indicates items that you have put up for sale, where a bid has been

made. Select an item and right click to pop up a context menu with a number of options, such as updating data, or viewing the results in your configured browser. If you want to load individual item numbers with JBidWatcher instead of search criteria, you can do so quite simply by clicking the icon that looks like an empty sheet of paper in the tool bar. Now enter the number – finished.



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Version 0.9.3pre2 or later display thumbnails of an item on mouse over. A photo icon means that a photo has been downloaded (see Figure 2).

Bidding and Buying

We have only downloaded information on the items up for auction so far. JBidWatcher makes bidding easy. Select the item, press the right mouse button, select the *Bid* command, enter the amount, and confirm.

Let's be honest; what most people do with bidding tools is to enter late or conditional bids for the items on sale. JBidWatcher can handle both. Late bidding is known as *sniping* in the Ebay Community, and it promises less competition, and correspondingly lower prices.

Ebay generally disapproves of automatic bidding tools – as they impact commission – and threatens to ban people caught using sniping tools. Of course, you do lose the thrill of getting up in the middle of the night to enter your last minute bid, while your *sniper* is fast asleep. On the other hand, it is quite difficult to prove that someone has used a sniping tool.

You can use the JBidWatcher configuration menu, *Sniping* tab, to set a *Sniping Time* in seconds. This is the interval before the end of the auction that JBidWatcher will start to bid. Be bold – the shorter the interval you set, the closer your bid will be to the end of the auction. This said, be aware that users of analog modems need a fair amount of time to dial up their provider, and log on. You may need to practice to get the timing right.

A Palette of Diapers?

What sets JBidWatcher apart from the crowd is its *Multisniping* capability. The

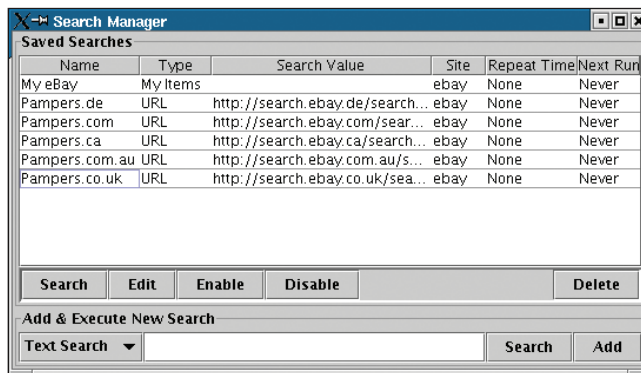


Figure 3: Use the search manager to display searches that you want to display in the main window.

background is simple: imagine you discover a number of auctions with the item you are interested. You will want to avoid becoming the happy owner of a whole palette of diapers over night; but you are interested in a bumper packet. In this case, you need to define a conditional bid. You want to bid for multiple items until you succeed in securing one of them, after which you won't mind other people snapping up the leftovers.

This is exactly what *Multisniping* does. How does it work? First of all, you need to select the items in a group, then right click, and select *Snipe*. JBidWatcher detects that you have selected multiple items, and enters *Multisniping* mode. You are then prompted to enter a price for the items. The next window prompts you to select a color from a color palette, allowing you to identify your *Multisniping* activities at a glance.

You can then individually change the price for each item (by selecting that item, and right clicking). The *Max* column tells you the *Sniping* price you set. Use the same approach to remove an item from the group, or add more items. To do so, first click an item in the group, and then right click the item, and select *Snipe* to add the item to the group. Assuming that JBidWatcher is running,

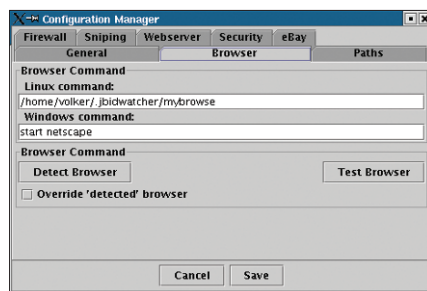


Figure 4: Off-line browsing configuration.

the tool will now handle bidding for you. If you put in the highest bid for one of the auctions, the other bids become obsolete and are automatically removed by JBidWatcher.

On the downside, you have to watch out for one thing when *Multisniping*. If two auctions end at more or less the same time, and the difference between the two is less than the *Sniping* interval you set, JBidWatcher will attempt to bid for both items. This is

because the tool has no way of knowing if it has succeeded in securing the previous item in the group, and should cancel the next sniper attack.

Off line

You can right click an item and select *Browse* to view that item in your browser; this tells JBidWatcher to launch Netscape or your favorite browser, and access the Ebay site to display the item. If you tend to work off-line for lack of a flat rate, or a DSL line, you might prefer to view the HTML page that JBidWatcher has already downloaded, and cached below `$HOME/.jbidwatcher/auctionsave`.

It is quite easy to do this, using a script (see Listing 1). The script extracts the item number from the call, changes this to the JBidWatcher filename, and then points the browser in the right direction. To allow this to happen, the script needs to be executable, stored in the JBidWatcher directory and configured as the *Linux command*, in the *Configuration Manager Browser* tab (see Figure 4).

Conclusion

JBidWatcher is a must for anyone who wants to keep an eye on the bidding for any number of Ebay items. The program is under constant development and the programmers react quickly, providing downloads of intermediary releases that reflect changes to individual Ebay portals.

Listing 1: mybrowse

```
01 ITEM=$(echo $1 | cut -f2 -d=')
02 AUCTION=/home/Your_username/.jbidwatcher/auctionsave/${ITEM}.html.gz
03 netscape $AUCTION
```

INFO

- [1] JBidWatcher homepage:
<http://www.jbidwatcher.com>
- [2] Look here for the current JRE:
<http://java.sun.com/getjava>