workshop

It's good to talk

What's quicker and more feature-rich than email, let's you correspond and transfer files in real-time with several friends or colleagues at once and is provided for free by many big-name service providers? Instant messaging services, that's what. Paul Rincon chats with some buddies and shows you how to set up, customise and file share

In the decade since it exploded into the mainstream, email has overtaken traditional forms of correspondence such as letters and telephone calls. But the next stage in the evolution of electronic communication is already upon us. Instant messaging is being tipped by the experts to take the world by storm.

IT research analyst Gartner claims 200 million people worldwide currently use free instant messaging programs. The firm predicts that by 2005, instant messaging will have surpassed email as the principal form of electronic communication.

The reasons for this aren't hard to fathom: instant messaging has a range of advantages over email. First, instant messages are sent directly to another PC in a peer-to-peer fashion. Unlike email messages, they don't have to pass through a server that stores and then forwards them. This allows messages to appear on the recipient's screen almost as soon as they've been sent, hence the term instant messaging.

But the technology doesn't just have speed on its side; it has a host of useful features lacking in email. For instance, with instant messaging, you can tell if a person is online before you send a message.

The most popular free instant messaging services on the web are AIM

Master the basics

To sign up for AIM (AOL Instant Messenger), you must fill out an online registration form at www.aol.co.uk. You'll be asked to choose a nickname. AOL allows combinations of numbers and letters, which will help you choose a unique name. You will also need to choose a password. Once you have registered successfully, download AIM to your hard drive. If you load the cover disc all you'll need to do is register and choose a name.
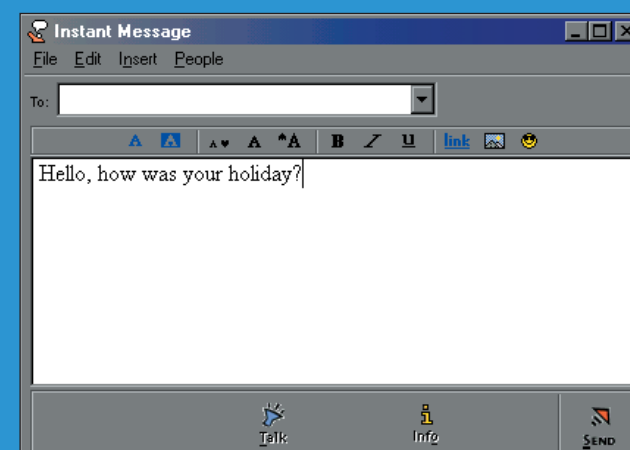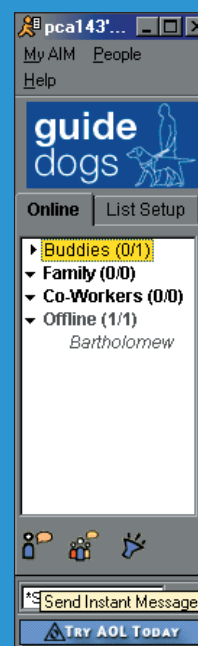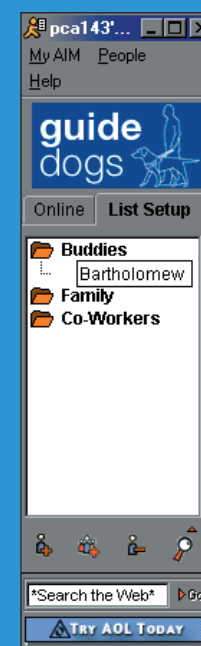
AOL offers four different versions of AIM: one for Windows 95/98 and NT, one for Windows CE users, one for Apple users and another for Pocket PC users. After AIM has downloaded to your PC, double-click on the ukaim43.exe file in your My Download Files folder. This will open the Install Shield Wizard – follow the instructions and AIM will be installed on your PC in no time at all.
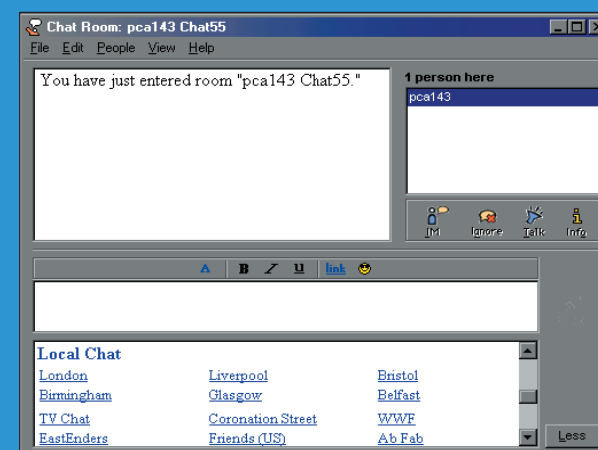
1 Once AIM has accepted your screen name and password, a new box will appear on your screen called a Buddy List Window. This is the main interface with your AIM account and contains the names of all your AIM buddies so that you can send a message in a couple of clicks

2 When you log in for the first time, your Buddy List window will be empty. Add names of other friends with AIM accounts by selecting the List Setup tab in your Buddy List window. Click on the Add a Buddy button, type in the screen name of your buddy and they will be added to your list

3 Sending instant messages to your friends is simple. First, double-click on a person's name or select Send Instant Message from the taskbar at the bottom of your Buddy List window. This opens a new window in to which you can type messages that both of you can see

4 When you have typed your message, either click the Send button or press Enter. This will send your message instantly to your buddy. A dialog box pops up on your buddy's screen, in which they can type a reply. When other buddies send you instant messages, they appear in different windows on your desktop

5 AIM lets you chat with several people at the same time. To invite your buddies to a chatroom, click on the Send Buddy Chat Invitation button on the menu bar. This will open up a new window entitled Chat Room. You can also enter any of AIM's dedicated chatrooms

(AOL Instant Messenger), Yahoo Messenger and MSN Messenger, however there are many others such as Tiscali Instant Messenger and Jabb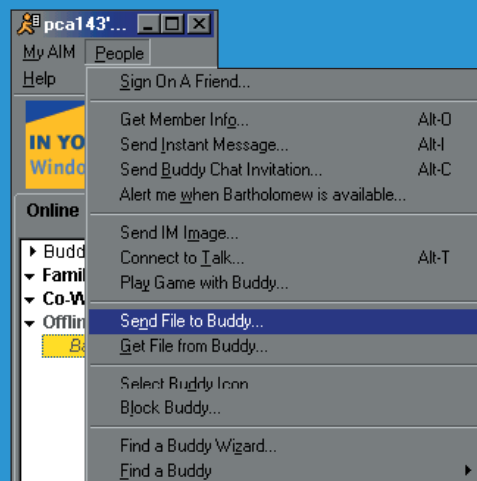er. In this article, we have used AIM 4.3 as an example to guide you through the wonders of this technology. A copy of the software can be found on this month's cover disc, together with MIRC, MSN, Tiscali, Vypress, Odigo, Yahoo and Jabber.

Like other forms of communication, instant messaging has its own set of rules and etiquette. Most of this is designed to compensate for the body language that we take for granted when we speak to
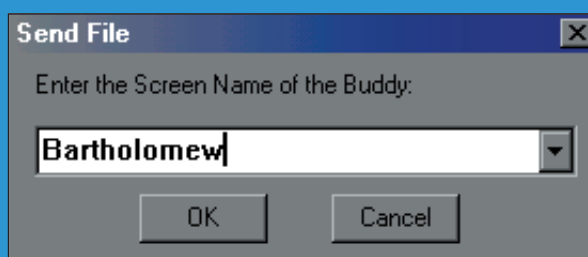
Share files with your buddies

Once you've mastered the basic steps, conversing with your chat buddies on AIM will become second nature. But it's important to reme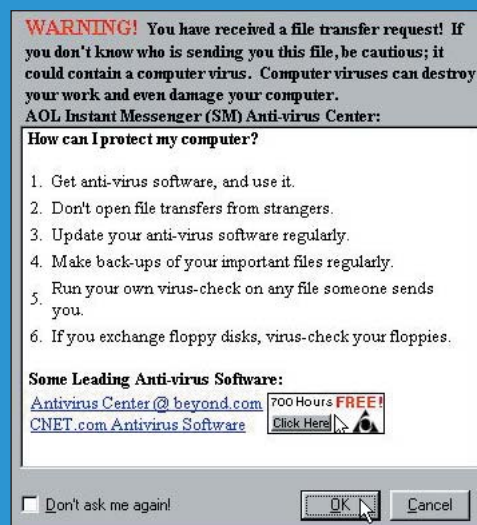mber that instant messaging offers a whole lot more than the simple ability to send text-based messages. The technology's roaring success has as much to do with its capacity for sharing files as words.
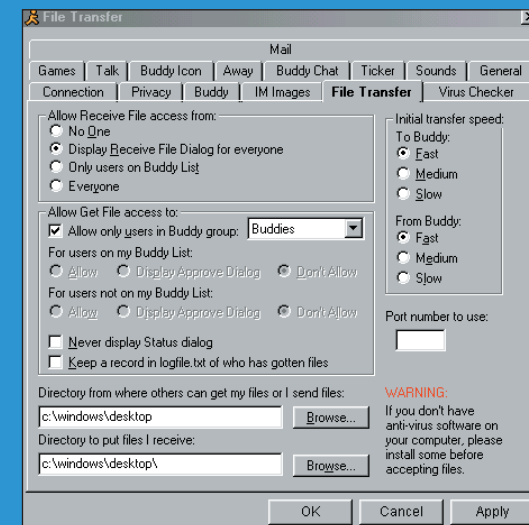
1 To send files to a buddy, go to People, select Send File to Buddy and type in the screen name of the buddy you want to share files with. Your computer will then attempt to establish a direct connection between your PC and that of your AIM buddy

2 Once your PCs are directly connected, you can freely share files by dragging them from your desktop and dropping them into your discussion window. File transfer times on AIM also tend to be quicker than with file-swapping programs such as KaZaA and Morpheus

3 Another way to share files is for AIM buddies to provide each other with access to files stored on their computer. This is why users receive a warning to make sure that they trust their AIM buddy before a direct connection is established between PCs

4 To set up a folder that holds files you want to share, select My AIM, Edit Options, Edit Preferences. Click on File Transfer and browse to the folder containing files you want to share. Under the heading 'Allow Get File access to:' check the box that says 'Allow only users in Buddy group' and click ok

Customise your AIM interface

1 As you become more confident, you can customise your interface. For example, you can add an image as a signature or Buddy Icon. To choose an image, go to People on the menu and click on Select Buddy Icon

2 You can either opt for an image from AOL's own selection library, or browse your computer for a picture of your own

3 Add a news ticker to your AIM window by going to My AIM, Edit Options, Edit Preferences. Click on News Ticker and check 'Display Ticker at Sign On'. Close down AIM and reopen it – the news ticker will appear across your screen, displaying the latest headlines

Security on AIM

1 Most AIM programs contain a facility to warn other users who are acting in an offensive way. If a user receives enough warnings from people to raise their warning level to 100 percent, their AIM account can be shut down by AOL

2 If you want to block buddies from sending messages, right-click on the name and select Block Buddy. Unblock them by right-clicking on their name and selecting Unblock Buddy. If you want to permanently remove someone from your list, select the person's screen name, then Delete Item from the List Setup box
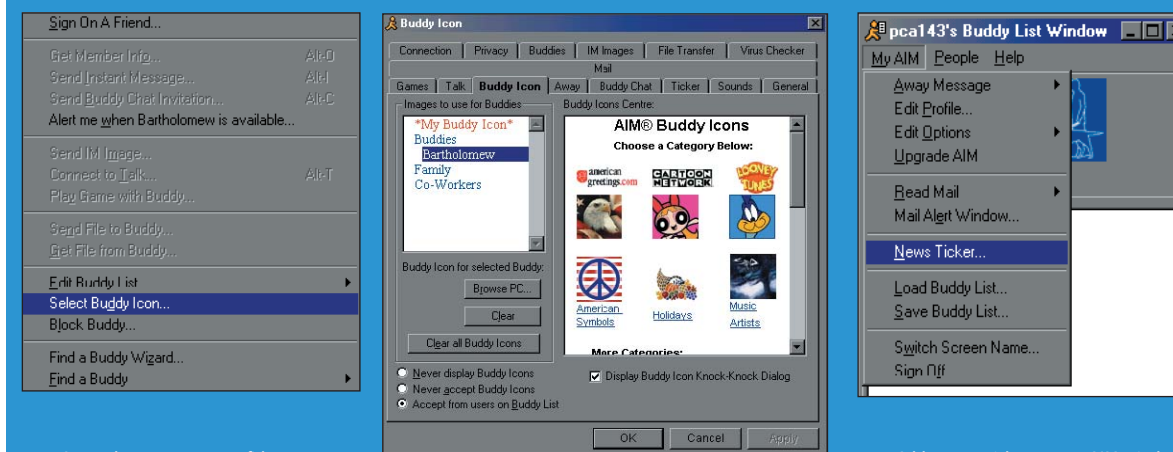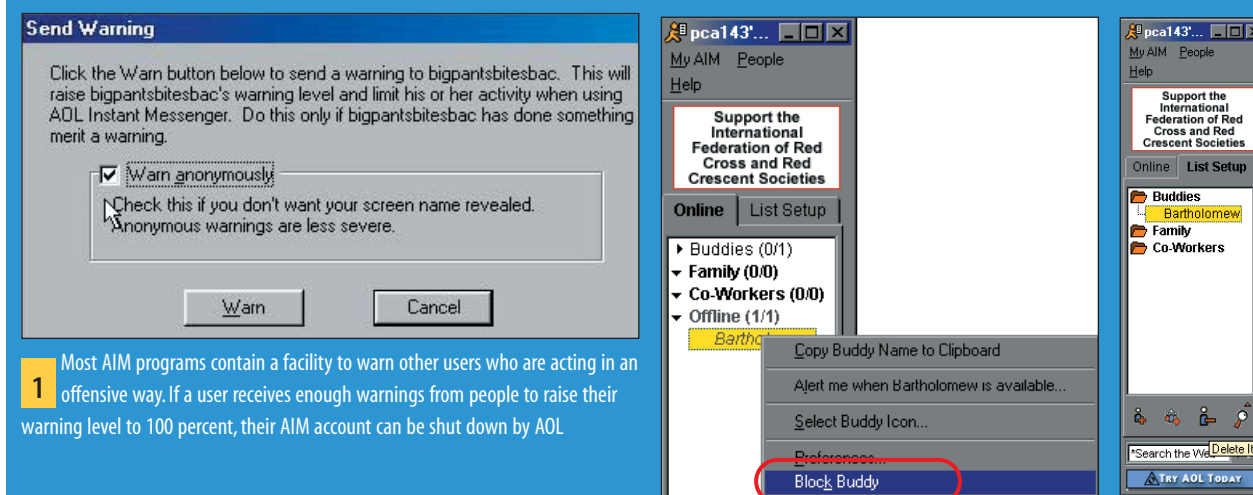
someone in the flesh. In instant messaging (and email), the context of a statement can easily be misinterpreted because these visual cues are not present. That's why a series of signs or emoticons has been developed to denote the mood of the person. Common

emoticons include :) for smiley face, :(for sad face, :)) for laughing and :((for crying. There are also a number of common abbreviations, including BRB for be right back and LOL for laughs out loud.

Most of the free instant messaging programs on the web work along the same

lines, but they have subtle differences and unique features. For instance, both Yahoo Messenger and AOL Instant Messenger integrate instant messaging with the web, by letting you check the latest share prices, weather and travel information at the click of a button.

MSN Messenger, meanwhile, has a useful facility that allows you to see when a buddy is in the middle of typing to someone, so you can choose a convenient time to send an instant message.

Before choosing an instant message account, try downloading a few of the free

services. Whichever service you decide to go with, instant messaging can take you to a whole new level of online communication. Of course, this brings with it a new set of problems. If you prefer not to let people know whether you're in or out, then instant messaging probably isn't

for you. However, for voracious online adventurers, instant messaging is already becoming a way of life. ■

See this month's cover disc to trial some instant messaging programs