Rich pickings

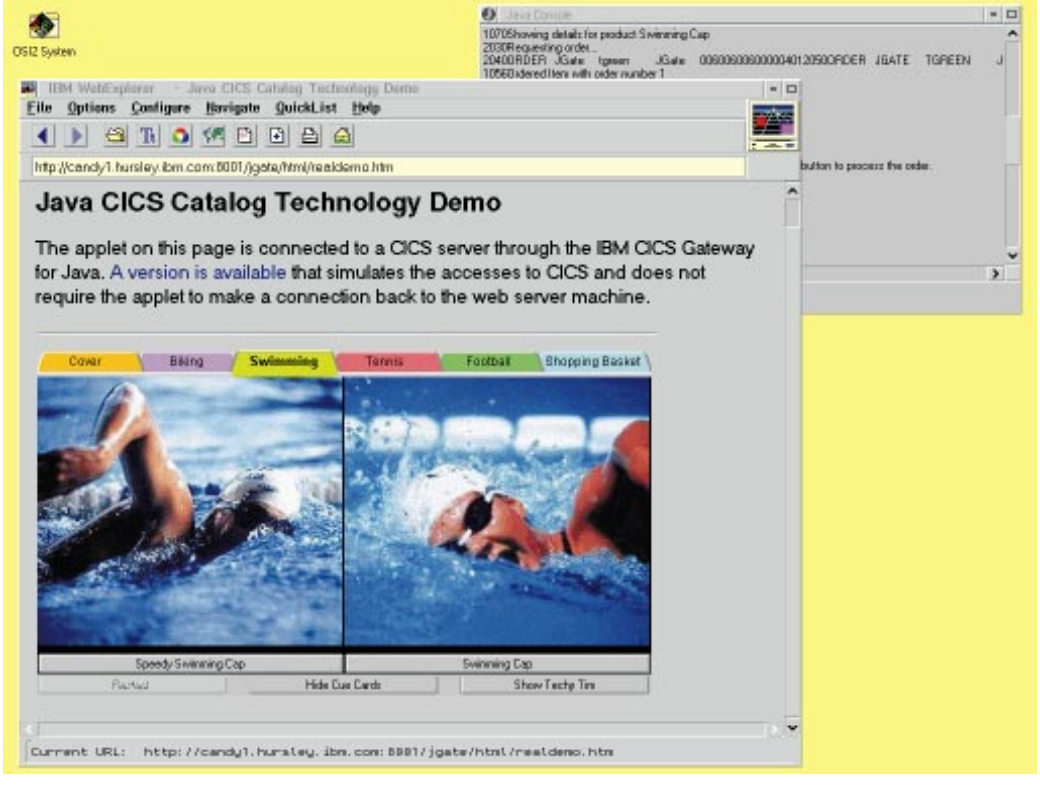
The internet has transformed the OS/2 online experience from being basically quite poor, to rewarding and full of potential. Terence Green applauds the way forward.

A while back I promised to report on my experiences with online services and how OS/2-friendly they are. Basically, they aren't very; but thanks to the internet, the online experience is turning out to be far richer and more difficult to summarise. And it moves rather quickly: within a year, Java has become very important and OS/2 is well placed. I'm running a Java-enabled OS/2 browser now, and Merlin will ship with Java support as part of the operating system. You will be able to drag a Java applet onto the desktop and run it anytime.

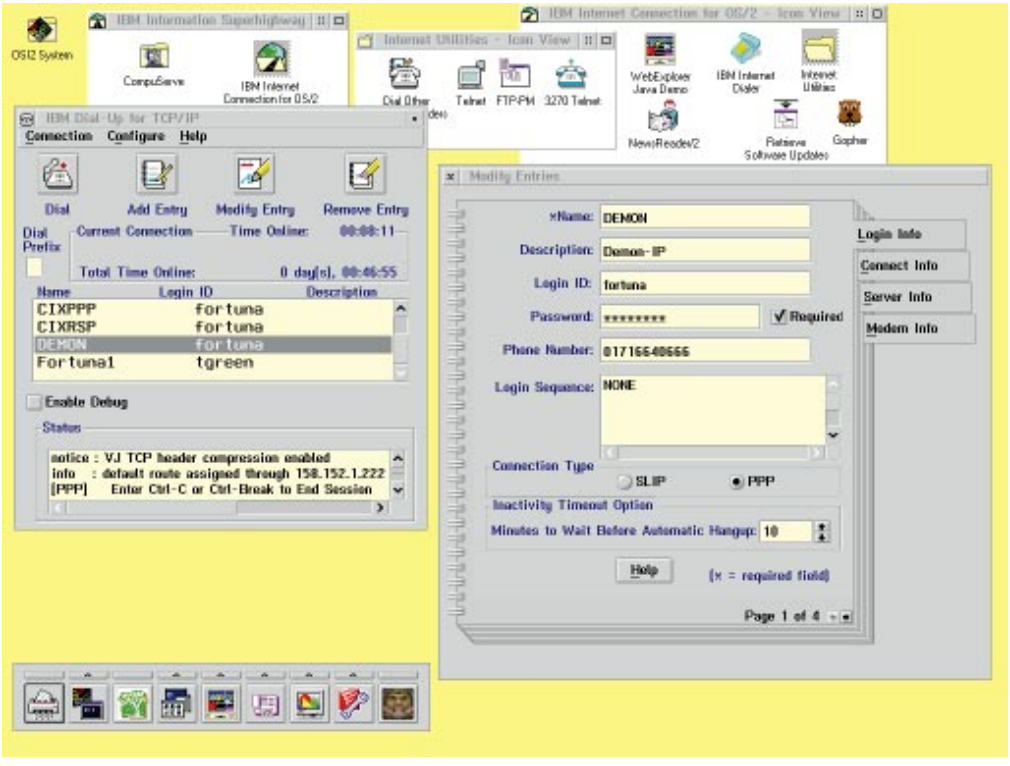
It puts Warp users in a good position. Warp was the first general-purpose desktop OS to include internet access software. Merlin will be the first general-purpose desktop OS to run Java, a platform-neutral way of creating internet applications which has garnered the support of every major player in the business. And it's nice to hear that an OS/2 Netscape is in prospect, although the Java-enabled Web Explorer (below) is pretty neat for a product that started with a couple of IBM employees and was bundled into Warp back in 1994.

All my fiddling with early beta code for Merlin and Java means you'll have to wait another month for a full internet round-up including a selection of news-readers, mailers and access tools, but I'll cover basic CIX and Demon access here. Remember, if you're an international traveller, you'll want an internet service provider with worldwide local access points such as CompuServe, AOL, MSN or the IBM Global Network. Demon may expand into Europe, but CIX looks firmly settled in the UK.

This month's CD grab bag includes some demos, namely Colorworks, UniMaint, FileStar/2 and some fixes (ATAPI CD-ROMs, Adobe Type Manager 3.x for Windows, PPP dialler, an interface monitor, small fonts for S3 video) and the latest Web Explorer 1.1D official release, plus information on setting up with an Internet Service Provider. Look (or rather search for it, as the CD production people like to hide the OS/2 stuff lest its presence upsets Windows users) on the covermounted CD.



A live demonstration of a Java-enabled Web Explorer accessing a CICS order processing system at IBM's Hursley Labs where Java development is centred



Setting up IBM's catchily-named Dial Other Internet Provider utility. It's important to get every detail correct in order to avoid connection errors

To set up the DOIP dialler, choose to add an entry and fill in the details on all four pages. Select PPP for Connection Type on page one; enter Login ID (your CIX-IP login name) and Password on page one of the dialler notebook. Enter the IP address of your host for CIX or Demon, and the nameserver IP address on page two. Fill in the modem details on page four.

For CIX, type the following script into the Login Sequence entry box on page one, save it and you're in business.

```
\r name:
[LOGINID]
word:
[PASSWORD]
ster>
ppp\sxxx.xxx.xxx.xxx\r
```

Replace "xxx.xxx.xxx.xxx" with your CIX-IP address. To use the Internet dialler with Demon Internet, enter details as above, leaving the Login Sequence field at its default "NONE". Demon's login procedure is a straightforward PPP login. The Warp dialler automatically passes the Login ID and Password fields to Demon.

Java jive

Java is only a year old, yet it has taken the industry by storm. The reason is, it promises platform-neutral network applications that will run anywhere. A Java applet only needs to be written once and the binary code will run on any platform with any Java-supporting operating system or web browser.

The code is still a little slow, and it's hard to find applications that do something other than bouncing heads and spinning frogs in blenders. But this is changing. Sun will deliver Java 1.1 this autumn, and together with Just in Time (JIT) compilers the speed of execution will increase. JIT compilers change the Java bytecodes into native processor instructions on the fly. A further optimisation phase, yet to be included in the JIT compilers, will also drive performance.

However, the really interesting stuff is still being worked out. I referred to Arabica in a previous column, suggesting that it was Java in an OpenDoc container. I was wrong. Arabica is the generic name for IBM's approach to Java Beans. Just as Java is a platform-neutral binary format for programs, so Java Beans is a platform-neutral component model for programs that will run anywhere.

Java Beans can be plugged into other component architectures such as ActiveX and OpenDoc or the new component model with a funny name that IBM's website says is super-secret stuff. Java Beans components will retain the ability to run on any platform, in contrast to the OpenDoc or ActiveX model where components must be compiled for specific platforms although they can interoperate.

Why is this interesting, and why is it so important to have platform-neutral binaries? Because users can freely choose their desktop platforms. IT departments spend most of their time reconciling the conflicting needs of multiple different desktop platforms with multiple versions of the same or similar programs. Imagine a Java applet sitting on a server, an internet server or a corporate server on a private network. Anyone can run it, execute it directly with a Java-enabled OS such as Merlin, call it from a Java-enabled web browser from the LAN, or dial in with a browser or LAN connection. Compile that application, for example in OpenDoc or ActiveX, and you need separate binaries for every operating system. In specific cases this is desirable, for power-user applications, but there's lots of real work that can be done with Java.

The screenshot of the IBM Java Gateway for CICS (above) shows a transaction processing system being accessed via a web browser. I took the screenshot while using the Java-enabled Web Explorer Demo but it worked with Windows NT and Internet Explorer, and with NetScape. I've seen it demo'd elsewhere on Windows 95, and IBM also has a Java-enabled Windows 3.1 in the pipeline. And there's Java on Macs and Unix and pretty soon on televisions too! Ordering sports gear, checking stock, data on the mainframe, on mid-range, on the web, on networks — all freely accessible with Java binary applications that only need to be written once to run everywhere.

The demo CICS ordering system based in Hursley may still be at http://www.hursley.ibm.com/cics when this appears in print. By the end of 1996 you can expect to see real applications that run everywhere and do really useful stuff.

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