

The logo for the DICE newsletter. It features a red circle above the word "dice" in a blue box, followed by the word "NEWSLETTER" in a large, blue, outlined font.

September 2005

Welcome to the first DICE newsletter of the new academic year. Since the last edition we have bidden au revoir and good luck to Carwyn Edwards, who has taken up a post within the School working with Peter Buneman, to Computing Support Officer Sarah Reed who has gone on maternity leave, and welcomed Shehzad Ali, who will be covering in her absence.

Computing staff have had a very busy summer, upgrading DICE machines to FC3 (see June newsletter) and supporting several conferences. In this edition of the newsletter, we remind users of how to make the best use of Computing support, explain how to use the new room and resource booking system and discuss how users choose to deal with their electronic mail requirements.

Your Frontline Support Team

We'd like to extend a warm welcome to all new staff and students and to those who are returning once again after the summer break.

The Frontline Support team provides help, both direct and indirect, to the users of the School of Informatics' computers. The team is composed of:

- Alison Downie (Team leader)
- Lindsey Brown (JCMB)
- Richard Bell (JCMB)
- Carol Dow (JCMB)
- Charlie Penman (AT,FH,BP)
- Ross Armstrong (AT,FH,BP)
- Shehzad Ali (AT,FH,BP)

There is an on-line FAQ page which many people find very helpful. If you have a query, then you can try looking there first of all. The page can be found at: <http://www.inf.ed.ac.uk/systems/support/FAQ/>

There are various ways that you can contact us but the preferred option is to use the Support Form which you can find at: <https://www.inf.ed.ac.uk/systems/support/form/>

This option is best for everyone as your request is logged, monitored and you can also check on it's progress at any time. It also helps us to schedule and prioritise our workload fairly. We do appreciate however that there may be occasions where you would like to talk to one of the support team or contact us

with an urgent problem. There are support offices at each site but please remember that these offices are only manned by one person so they may be out of the office dealing with another problem when you call! If you do pop in to one of the support offices, you may still be asked to report your request using the support form, particularly if the CSO is busy (we usually are!) and your request is not urgent.

You can also contact any of the support team by phone. The details are:

Appleton Tower:

Room 5.06 (at the back of the big lab: take your card with you): tel. 650 2686.

Buccleuch Place:

2BP-1R19: tel. 650 4409.

Forrest Hill:

Room A5, by the front door: tel. 650 4503.

JCMB, King's Buildings:

Room 2421: tel. 650 5112.

Do not be alarmed if you hear that there is no CSO at your site on a particular day as all the CSOs can see your request on the support form and potentially respond to it. The rest of the team will know about it and will be looking out for any requests for your site.

Lastly, much as we would like to be able to resolve all user problems, we simply do not have the resources to manage this. If you opt to use a self-managed machine, we will do our best to give advice but we cannot guarantee that we will always be able to help.

Alison Downie <alisond@inf>

Mail Clients and How We Use Them

Having recently started using a Macintosh laptop, I decided that it was time for one of my periodic reviews of available mail clients to see whether it was worth the pain of switching from my faithful exmh.

Out of interest, I surveyed a few people about their mail clients, and the responses were surprisingly varied and interesting. People seem to have quite different preferences, depending on their work patterns, and I thought the results might be worth sharing:

What mail clients do you use?

	Unix	Windows	Mac
Pine	6	2 (via ssh)	
Thunderbird	5	4	2
Exmh	4		
VM	1		
Mozilla	1		
Web	1		
Mac Mailer			1
Outlook Exp.		1	
Eudora			1

A small assortment of other clients were used for remote access, including web interfaces, and mobile phones. Some people were concerned about clients being efficient over low-bandwidth connections.

Do you keep all your mail on the server, or keep copies (for offline use) locally?

Uses local copy only	4
Uses server copy only	4
Mixed (some boxes in each cases)	6
Local cache copies of everything	1

Downloading all mail onto a single local machine isn't appropriate for people who travel a lot, since it is only available in one place. Leaving it on the server makes it available from many places, but it isn't available from your laptop in the plane. The IMAP protocols now seem to be sufficiently well supported that it is practical to keep synchronized copies both on the server, and a local machine. Most people were happy to leave their spam only on the server though!

Do you separate your home and work mail and treat them differently?

Same home/work mail	8
Separate home/work mail	7

Privacy concerns about holding personal mail on University servers seem to be increasing, and there seems to be some uncertainty about this with respect to the Freedom of Information Act.

So what did I decide?

My previous solution involved a complex process of downloading mail and synchronising the local mailboxes using Unison. I'm now using Thunderbird on my Unix desktop (mailboxes on the server only), and the native OsX mailer on my Macintosh laptop (with local cached copies).

The user interface on the two mailers is sufficiently similar that this is quite comfortable, and some people reported Thunderbird as somewhat unreliable under OsX. The native Macintosh applications also interface well with the rest of the system.

I've been a little concerned about security with mail stored unencrypted on the central server - none of the encryption solutions handle encryption of existing messages well. Low bandwidth connections (eg. GPRS) are also more of a problem since the IMAP synchronisation can generate a lot of traffic. However, in general, I'm happy with this choice - since my mailboxes are also stored on the server, I can access them using the web interface as well if I need to.

Now to tackle the problem of address books and diaries!

Paul Anderson <dcspaul@inf>

New Desktop Environment

As we are upgrading machines to FC3, and preparing for the next academic year, we have also reconsidered the default desktop under FC3. Until now, we have been suggesting KDE as the default - but as the trend seems to be towards Gnome, we have opted for this instead. Note that, if you are an existing KDE user (or any non-Gnome user), this should not affect you - your setup will continue as currently configured, with all your local customisations included.

Any existing Gnome users will also be unaffected, with the exception that anyone using the absolutely vanilla defaults (for example the Fedora blue-swirl desktop background) will notice one or two changes - the desktop background will become the dice logo on a blue screen, and menu-bar will change slightly. If you have already changed your desktop background or menu-bar settings (or any other settings for that matter), these will remain unchanged.

As always, we are only suggesting a default - something for people to use who have no preference or experience of other desktop environments. If you already use another environment, or wish to experiment with something different, then please feel free to do so. The new login screen allows you to choose between Gnome, KDE, Xfce 4, or a Custom session (which executes your .xsession file, so you can start any window manager using that method) - there is a "Session" selection button on the bottom of the login screen).

Note that a brief overview of the new Gnome desktop environment will be included in the "**Introduction to the System**" lectures given as part of the Inf1A course, should any of you feel the urge to attend... The lecture notes and other information (practicals and links to additional information) will also be available on-line

at:

<http://www.inf.ed.ac.uk/teaching/courses/inf1/system>
(note that this location currently contains LAST year's notes - revised versions for the new academic year will be available shortly).

Roger Burroughes <roger@inf>

Room and Resource Booking

The Shezhu Resource Sharing System (<http://www.shezhu.org/>) is an application for scheduling and booking shared resources such as rooms and equipment. It was developed in the School of Informatics taking into account the special requirements of some of the sites in the School and their users.

Portable - client only needs a modern web browser

Point and Click - almost no typing required

Intuitive - simple, obvious, consistent and user friendly

Innovative - visual filters for making block/repeat bookings

Powerful - concurrent users and double booking prevention

Configurable - local site customization supported

Useful - built in support for configurable academic term, semester and session blocks

At present, rooms and resources at Buccleuch Place may be booked via the web using Shezhu.

<https://bprbs.inf.ed.ac.uk:1024/>

Authentication will be automatic when using Mozilla/Firefox on a DICE machine but you will need to use the Authentication Portal otherwise

See <http://www.inf.ed.ac.uk/resources> for how to book other School resources.

Tim Colles <timc@inf>