EMAIL CLIENT/BROWSER SPECIAL UPDATE!

All change at Mozilla

There are significant upheavals afoot at the Mozilla project. But what effect will AOL/Time Warner's departure have on one of the most high-profile Open Source projects? **Andy Channelle** investigates...

The long history of the Mozilla project has not been without its problems. And yet, in the background during these tumults, the support of AOL/Time Warner, which purchased Netscape at the height of the browser wars, was constant. Despite a seemingly overwhelming competitor, AOL/Time Warner continued to pump time and money into Mozilla, betting on the Open Source development method long before it began edging into the mainstream. But no more.

The media giant has pulled the plug on its support for Mozilla and also announced there will be no more Netscape browser releases. The Netscape brand will continue as a web portal, but the application which played such a big part in helping kick off the web revolution we take for granted today has effectively fallen off its perch.

For a commercial application this would mean almost certain death, but the early decision to turn Netscape over to an Open Source group called Mozilla.org means that this is one technology that won't wither and die. In fact, its developers claim, this could be the opportunity Mozilla needs, to move out of the shadow of its monolithic 'parent' to stand or fall on its own considerable merits.

As a parting gift, AOL/Time Warner dropped two million dollars into the coffers of the newly formed Mozilla Foundation, and also donated Mozilla related intellectual property, trademarks and, crucially, hardware to the project. What Mozilla loses, though, is the efforts of the 50 full-time coders that AOL has either laid off or reassigned. A significant drop in development personnel.

Announcing the creation of the Mozilla Foundation, Mitchell Baker, who has headed the Mozilla project for the last two years and has been appointed President of the new foundation, said it had been an ambition to forge a genuinely independent organisation to move the *Mozilla* technology forward. "*Mozilla* was developed in an Open Source environment and built by harnessing the creative power of thousands of programmers on the Internet. Going forward, we will continue to partner with developers and industry leaders to keep content on the Web open." She said project leaders were grateful for the past and ongoing support of America Online – "and we look forward to continuing to work with AOL over coming years," – but that time was right to move on.

Positive Thinking

Baker told *Linux Format* that the core group were very excited about the creation of an independent group to oversee the future of *Mozilla*. "We won't have AOL to employ people, but we also have an enormous set of new opportunities." She said the project has needed this type of organization for a long time, not so much for individual contributors but to attract the attention of commercial entities. "Not having an easily understandable organization has made commercial adoption and participation much harder," she says. Mozilla.org was a 'loose coalition', the Mozilla Foundation gives the operation 'not-for-profit' status, which will make

A lizard divided
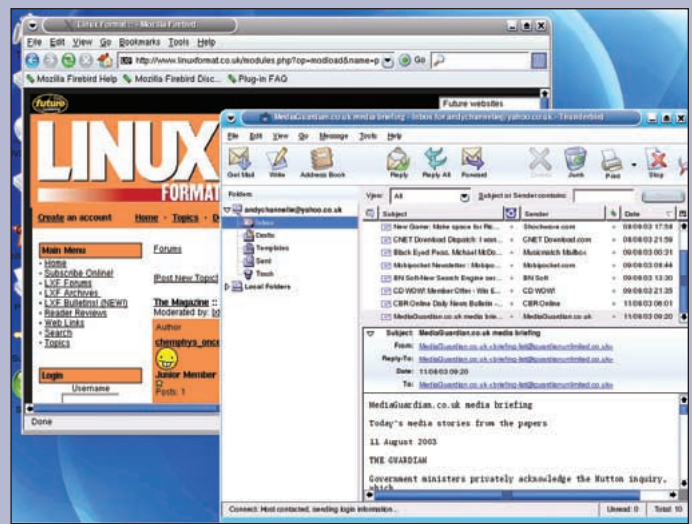### Separate Firebird browser and Thunderbird email client

One of the results of the structural change at Mozilla will be a new focus on end users rather than relying on third-parties for promotion and advocacy. The *Mozilla* browser suite, always regarded as a development tool, will be faded into the background, with promotional efforts concentrated on the *Firebird* browser and *Thunderbird* mail client.

The first demonstration of this change is a redesign of the Mozilla.org front page, which is also reachable on the www.mozillafoundation.org address, to make finding and downloading the core apps easier. And, for the first time, *Mozilla* will be available on a branded CD from the organisation itself. Spokesman Bart Decram said a deal had been reached with E-FLO (The company that previously managed Netscape's CD distribution program) which would allow the Foundation to offer CDs at "about $10."

Taking into account the time it takes to ramp up production, Decram says, "the most likely result is that we'll start offering CDs around the time of the *Mozilla1.5* release — initially we'll probably just ship the latest stable release of *Mozilla1.x* plus preview releases of *Firebird* and *Thunderbird*." The Foundation aims to have a more user-orientated product available by the end of the year.

However, in a recent developers' meeting, Brendan Eich suggested that 'a shippable product', based on *Firebird* and *Thunderbird* would take "about a year."

In addition to the two main components, the project has also thrown up a world class bug reporting tool (*Bugzilla*), an adequate HTML authoring tool and — the latest addition — *Sunbird*, a standalone calendar application that is in its testing stage.

Firebird and *Thunderbird* will replace the traditional *Mozilla* browser suite for both Linux and Windows end users.

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soliciting funds from the likes of Red Hat and IBM more effective.

The immediate result, she says, is less people paid to work full time on the project. But then: "We've reached a point where we need fewer people. The underlying components are stable, and Firebird and Thunderbird require fewer people than building the application suite did." The money from AOL, pledged over two years, would also be used to retain a core set of engineers.

"The Mozilla Foundation is hiring a key set of people," Baker says. "I'm sure we will wish we had more people, but we certainly won't be the only development organization wishing that." Three members of the current Mozilla team — Baker, Brendan Eich and Christopher Blizzard — will stay on the Board of Directors, and they will be joined by OSAF (see boxout) founder Mitch Kapor — Baker has also joined OSAF in its Chandler development

effort. "We'll talk about the specific people before too long. It's a great group, and very excited."

AOL vs Open Source?
It is ironic that AOL has made this announcement at a time when the rest of the world is investigating or wholeheartedly embracing the Open Source development model, but most of the people we spoke to at Mozilla were, understandably, unwilling to speculate

on the cause of their parent company's *volte-face*. ("As to AOL's reasoning, that's a topic for AOL; I have no special information on this," Baker maintains.)

Tight-lipped official sources haven't stopped the conspiracy theories emerging on the Net, chief among them the idea that AOL used its support of Netscape to leverage favourable terms in its recent negotiations with Microsoft on the integration of *Internet Explorer* with AOL's client software. These negotiations led to the two companies abandoning their long-running legal battles. Microsoft agreed to pay AOL $750 million and provide royalty-free access to *Internet Explorer* technology for the next seven years. The payout may have grabbed the headlines, but access to *IE* may be the most significant part, especially as *IE* Project Manager Brian Countryman said in a recent webchat that *IE6* (SP1) would be the last standalone version of the browser.

Whatever the reason, recent announcements by Apple, which is shipping its own KHTML-based browser, and Microsoft, will accelerate the evolution of the browser sector. The options for 'non-embedded' cross-platform browsers are effectively narrowed down to two: *Opera* and *Firebird*. And only one of these is free (in terms of both beer and speech). The question that faces the new Mozilla Foundation is: will users be happy to stick with what they're given, even if what they're given is inferior? **LXF**

The frontpage's makeover should appeal to Blaster worm victims looking for an *MS Internet Explorer* alternative!