What on Earth is a
social desktop?

Even if you shun Facebook and MySpace, **Marco Fioretti** reckons your desktop might well be on its way to making a socialite of you yet.

》》 When it comes to desktops, what exactly do you mean by social?
The same as the dictionary definition: "Relating to the interaction of the individual and the group, tending to form cooperative and interdependent relationships with others of one's kind".

》》 OK, so what does a social desktop do?
That depends on who you ask. According to collective internet wisdom, a social desktop can be any combination of four different things: it could be a new way to build social networks; a system to communicate online and search the web without browsers or email clients; sharing and collaborative production of documents; or a super helpdesk and software customisation interface.

》》 How would it be any different to what we have already?
A social computer desktop could be an environment where everything you can do in

> **"You could avoid the tedium of uploading by opening up local folders."**

Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and so on happens within the desktop itself without the need for a browser or maybe even a centralised portal.

》》 Any examples of what you could do?
The desktop could inform you when somebody with your interests is online and dedicated modules could alert you whenever your contacts add a comment to your blog or post on theirs. Meanwhile, a location plugin could show you where your friends are right now and other applets could let you know what they're listening to, the books they recommend or which events they plan to attend.

》》 What about the integrated search and browser you mentioned earlier?
That would blur the distinction between online and desktop activities even more. The idea is

that you shouldn't have to start a browser to surf the web, because the whole desktop acts as a search engine. Every application would know how to transfer files to or from the web and search for updates, tutorials and so on.

》》 All right, how would sharing and collaborative work happen?
Through file and window managers that could publish what's on your computer in a completely different way to today's peer-to-peer file sharing networks.

》》 What? You mean everybody would have unrestricted access to all my data?
No, the concept is more like extending Unix-style permissions to the whole world. You would still distinguish between private files, data that's only accessible to friends and data that the world can view.

》》 What's the benefit in it for me, though?
Privacy and convenience. Why set up a blog or Flickr account and give away a host of personal details just to let your friends see a few pictures or read some files? You could also avoid the tedium of registration processes, uploading and so on by directly opening your local folders to selected people.

》》 I'm still wary – how would it work?
By associating each file with a unique URL. Everybody who visits this URL will be able to see the file and add comments and tags to it that appear straight on your desktop.

》》 Hmmm. And how would you turn a desktop into a social helpdesk?
When users have problems now, they subscribe to mailing lists or search for answers online without any help to figure out which sources of advice are the most useful. A social desktop could integrate interfaces into apps or a window manager that enable you to ask questions to other users directly, or search a database of answers. In addition, you'd also get

notifications for new OpenOffice templates, scripts, desktop themes and so on.

》》 Is anybody working on this right now?
The two most active organisations in this field are Microsoft and KDE, although their visions for social desktops seldom overlap.

》》 What's Microsoft doing?
Microsoft is experimenting with a system that associates every file in your computer with a social URL to make it accessible from the internet. Such URLs would also enable authorised remote users to comment and tag your local files.

》》 How about KDE?
KDE's focus is on helping new users to get the most from their desktop and become active contributors. They plan to do this through direct contacts with other users and integration with an online knowledge base.

》》 Is anything already available?
KDE 4.3 should include a proof-of-concept plasmoid that enables you to find other KDE users near you. Also, there are application programming interfaces (APIs) to add other components available in several programming languages. The knowledge base should contain everything you can find today at **OpenDesktop.org** and Get Hot New Stuff (**http://ghns.freedesktop.org**).

》》 Isn't all this possible already via RSS, email and chat clients?
Yes, but in a limited and fragmented way. The social desktop concept is to make all this, and more, happen smoothly and transparently.

》》 KDE's version of the social desktop seems like a good community building tool, but I fear that only users already active in that community will use it.
You're right, a fair proportion of the new users of KDE or Linux in the coming years are likely to be the kind of people who won't want to customise their desktop extensively or be an especially active part of the traditional free

You don't have to start a browser to surf the web

It's smoother, more transparent and more productive

software community. They still might appreciate a thorough help system, though.

But surely you're likely to be more annoyed by all the interruptions, especially if you don't use your computer for collaborative work?

You've hit on a couple of cases where having a social desktop will be of little or no use. If you don't think that all your digital activity should be quickly shared with as many people as possible then social desktops (or portals, for that matter) aren't necessary and may turn out to be an annoyance.

Oh, and what about people who can't keep their computers online 24/7 or don't have a flat-rate broadband connection?

Again, a good point. A lot of social desktop functionality will only be useful if you're connected to the internet for extended periods of time. If you're inhibited by connectivity or cost, you have little to gain from all this.

So social desktops are totally useless then, aren't they?

Don't be such a pessimist – social desktops will make a number of people happy or more productive as long as they're built to meet a few key conditions.

Which are?

Resource optimisation, privacy, choice and data ownership. If a social desktop doesn't hog your CPU, comes with 100% privacy protection by default and can be completely turned off when you need all your brain cells, bandwidth or RAM for something else then there's no problem, right?

It's the choice and data parts that concern me most...

Us too, mainly because social desktops could replicate a problem that today's social networks have, but more intractably: what if you can't move all your social settings from one social desktop to another?

That's no problem, we'll write filters by looking at the source code!

That's only a viable solution for experienced users. Let's just hope the developers take these issues into account from the beginning, instead of making our lives more difficult than they need to be.

My interest is piqued, where can I find out more about what's happening?

You can find more details about the Microsoft and KDE social desktops at their overview pages. These can be found at **http:// research.microsoft.com/en-us/projects/ SocialDesktop** and **http://dot.kde. org/2009/05/01/social-desktop-starts- arrive** respectively.

If you're an interested developer seeking documentation about the subject instead, you can find some resources by heading over to **www.freedesktop.org/wiki/specifications/ open-collaboration-services** and **www.opensocial.org**. **LXF**