



i3net 2000-2001

Brief notes on activities

Highlights from the past year

i3magazine

i3 magazine has become an important source of information on, and discussion of, advanced and adventurous IT research of the kinds done by the i3 community.

i3 partnership programme

The partnership programme has been extremely active organising a series of exhibitions, providing i3 member assistance with technology transfer, working on publicising the i3 community as part of the external communications task group, and much more. The partnership programme has also produced an absolute success in linking the i3 community with COMDEX Europe 2001 and preparing for discussions with COMDEX Europe 2002 as well as with COMDEX 2002 in Las Vegas. For the i3 community, this means that we will no longer primarily have to exhibit our results to ourselves but are able to reach an enormous international audience of maybe 80.000 IT-interested visitors from companies and the general public to the i3 Research Village. It also means that we have been able to open up our exhibition activities for non-i3 member projects from all over Europe including other Europe-wide networks.

i3 Spring Days

The Spring Days event in Porto with their dozen or so workshops and between 100 and 200 participants have proved that this event can stand on its own and attract a substantial number of workshops organised and attended by people from outside the i3 community. Also, the Spring Days can do so unsupported by ongoing Commission-funded projects, reviews, etc. The next step is to work towards linking the Spring Days to a major international conference in order to boost participation further through the customary synergy between large conferences and adjacent workshops.

i3 summer school

A new kind of event launched this year was the 10-day i3 summer school gracefully hosted by the new Interactive Design Institute in Ivrea near Torino. The summer school concept aimed to pass on knowledge and skills to more than 60 next-generation researchers, designers and developers through lectures and hands-on collaborative work. The concept proved to be a fine success which clearly demands repetition in the years to come.

i3 books

Three i3 “legacy” books have been initiated in the past year and are now in preparation, on Connected Community, Inhabited Information Spaces and Experimental School Environments, respectively. This is an excellent way of explaining the results of i3 research programmes to the world.

Future probes

A relatively small number of future probes have been completed and launched in the past year. Without a significant number of proposed ideas, the future probes programme clearly runs the risk of reduced quality. However, this part of our activities is intended to receive a strong boost in the coming year.

i3labTV

i3labTV streams videos of advanced IT research at work over the film company Zentropa's web TV station. Having established a scientific board, i3labTV is presently negotiating the future with Zentropa. The film company has realised that the web advertisements which were supposed to finance their web TV efforts are not as profitable as initially expected.

New members

Despite the fact that no campaign has been launched to increase i3 community membership during the past year, new organisations have continued to apply for membership, so that the number of i3net member organisations is now close to 120. The reason why a membership campaign was not launched in the past year is that the CG has focused on making i3 members out of the 50 or so organisations involved in the Disappearing Computer research programme.

CG

i3net is governed by the Coordinating Group which decides on strategy, new activities, terminates activities which have run their course, and monitors progress on all fronts. The CG which was elected at the i3 Annual Conference in Sweden last year has worked with unwavering enthusiasm to launch and maintain the many activities described above.

Summary

On behalf of the i3 community, I would like to warmly thank everybody who have contributed to the work done for the community in the past year for their enthusiasm and effort. There is no way to service as large a community as ours without both the unpaid efforts of dozens of volunteers and the dedicated work of paid i3 workers, such as the partnership programme leader Marc Blasband, i3magazine editor Mimo Caenepeel, and Svend Kiilerich and Nanett Mosumgaard from i3net coordination. I think you will agree that special thanks are due this time to Marc Blasband who made the i3 Research Village at COMDEX possible.

The state of i3net today is, I think, fundamentally healthy and promising. We have found a solution to the annual conference and exhibition problem of mostly exhibiting to each other rather than to the world at large. We have launched the first i3 summer school in the most promising way, thanks to the efforts of Giorgio de Michelis and many others, we have proved the potential of i3 Spring Days thanks to the efforts of Thomas Rist, Pedro Pinto and many others. We have a great magazine thanks to Mimo Caenepeel and her colleagues. We have taken care of the legacy of past research programmes by launching the i3 books. And we have a low-fat, highly flexible, democratic organisational structure which can respond immediately to new challenges and launch new initiatives with a minimum of bureaucracy. We have at least four working fora for members to meet, make friends, collaborate and discuss: COMDEX, the Spring Days, the summer school, and the magazine.

Given the experimental nature of most of the things we try to do, there are always initiatives which need revision or, sometimes, termination, and there are always a large number of options to do new interesting things together in the i3 community.

The future

Disappearing Computer

During the annual meeting in Sweden a year ago, the CG decided to invite four participants in the Disappearing Computer research programme to join the i3net CG. This happened almost immediately and the DC membership on our CG was confirmed more formally by the DC project participants following the launch of the 17 or so DC projects in January 2001. In early February 2001, the CG extended an invitation to all DC project participants to join i3net. This invitation was conveyed to the DC project participants in May 2001 by the DC representatives on our CG.

So far, our DC colleagues have not shown any strong inclination to join i3net except, of course, for the 30% or so of them who were already i3net members. In May 2001, their representatives on our CG decided to have observer status rather than full CG membership. One likely reason for not being in a hurry to join i3net is that all DC projects have funds for self-organisation. So they did not need i3net right away.

However, those funds will expire next year or so, at which point, if not before, it would make good sense to join together the i3 community and the DC project participants. Meanwhile, DC could carry out their research, meet separately from the rest of us as they have done on one occasion by now, and experiment with a range of cross-project collaboration and project support mechanisms. This has been the i3net CG's assumption as well as FET's assumption when planning for the new network.

The new network

i3net's contract with FET expired on 3 September 2001. We expect to have an unfunded 6 months extension to the contract and we are in fact operating under that expected extension right now.

To prepare the future of i3net, the CG has been working on a proposal for a new network through the spring of 2001. This involved CG meetings in April and May 2001, distributed drafting of goal statements and descriptions of main ideas for new initiatives to be launched, a special brainstorming session among CG volunteers in early June 2001, and a subsequent write-up period in June 2001. The proposal was submitted to FET in late June 2001 as for a 4-year network with about 40% more funding per year than at present.

There were lengthy discussions on the name of the new network. Some felt that the i3 acronym, Intelligent Information Interfaces, was all right. Others felt that this title was becoming if not obsolete then inadequate for representing the i3 community's research and the research going on in DC. And yet others felt that we should try to keep the brand acronym i3 but change the acronym, upon which, as one can imagine, a wealth of ideas started to emerge on what the new acronym might be. The network name was therefore left undecided in the new network proposal which simply listed some of the ideas for a new name around.

In any case, there was agreement that the new network proposal should be submitted on behalf of both the i3 community and the DC projects. This was done with due regard for both the existing community support mechanisms in i3net and the new experimental project support mechanisms in DC. In addition, the proposal preparations generated a substantial number of ideas for new activities which were included in the proposal.

In a very brief summary, it was proposed to: (i) continue with successful i3 activities, such as the partnership programme and COMDEX, i3magazine (to be linked to a professional publishing house), Spring Days (to be linked to a major international conference), and the summer school; (ii) consider including so-far untried DC mechanisms, such as the troubadours and the ateliers; (iii) anticipate Framework Programme 6 ideas of strong involvement of

national research projects and the role of the network as a breeding ground for highly innovative small-scale research and brainstorming; (iv) work towards a network with a Europe-wide role in the future technologies debate among politicians, grassroots, user organisations and other stake-holders. Finally, the proposals argues for keeping the existing organisational structure with a small coordinating centre, outsourcing of core activities to professional sub-contractors, such as i3magazine, and massive use of the task groups which have demonstrated their flexibility and efficiency to quickly address new demands on behalf of the i3 community.

Evaluation

At the time of writing, it has not been possible to take a look at the evaluation report. So, the following are strictly personal and no doubt biased impressions from oral communication with FET representatives.

The reviewers appear to acknowledge that the network is successful in its results.

It is not known to which extent the reviewers agree with our proposed ideas for activities to be preserved or new initiatives to be launched. The only thing known in this regard is that the reviewers seem to have wanted even more commitment to innovative activities than proposed. I think we had rather expected them to point out that the set of proposed ideas was too ambitious for the funding requested. This point may be, but is not necessarily, linked to the next one.

The reviewers seem to have wanted a more detailed workplan with longer lists of deliverables etc. than the one presented. The logic seems to have been that, without it, we might not do what we say we would be doing. From a different point of view, this criticism might seem to ignore the very nature of a network, which is to be able to respond flexibly to new circumstances and to be run by a changing group of democratically elected people. It is hard to commit the next parliament to an entirely specific course of action. A network is not an R&D project which, in order to succeed, has to have a highly detailed long-term plan in advance.

The reviewers also seem to have wanted a more detailed account of our actual procedures, criteria, principles etc. for making the decisions made by the CG. So far, we have operated without a comprehensive set of explicit rules. It is of course possible to devise such a comprehensive rule set for most everything going on. There may even be arguments for demanding this. However, we have managed for five years with a restricted rule set including principles for task groups, sub-contracts, elections, reportings, management, reviews by scientific boards etc., so it may not be entirely obvious why we would need far more rules all of a sudden.

Finally, the reviewers seem to have wanted many signatories to the proposal, including some DC-not-already-i3net-member organisations. This is not a legal requirement for a proposal and, given i3net's organisational structure with the small-centre construct and massive and flexible outsourcing, did not appear necessary at the time of submission of the proposal.

I would like to add that, after many years of experience with EU evaluation reports, these have almost always been fair and the reports have almost always included some important point which the proposers did not think of but should have. The same may be the case with the present evaluation report. So far, however, there are also indications that the report may state something like: it produces success, it ain't broken, fix it!

Next phase

Given the evaluation, contract negotiations for the new network will have to focus on a limited extension of the network, for instance for one year, with limited funding, such as about 200 Keuro. During this limited extension, the network members will have to consider whether to submit a new proposal for a longer-term new network.

Given the fact that i3net now runs under an expected unfunded extension, it is essential that the contract negotiations for the limited-duration new network be completed speedily so that the network can start in January 2002. At least, this is essential if we want to continue the successful accomplishments achieved so far. Even then, this will be difficult to do. Preparations for COMDEX 2002 will start in a few week's time, Spring Days preparations are already running late, summer school preparations should start as soon as possible, and so on. We don't even know at this point if the evaluation will, in fact, recommend us to continue those activities. It will be a real challenge for the new CG to make ends meet in the coming months.

Other news

Having coordinated i3net for more than five years, it is time for me to step down as coordinator. A new network contract provides a natural point to change network coordination, and the unfunded extension of the present network contract provides time to make this happen in good order. It has been a lively experience to coordinate i3net, to work with all of you, to try to make the technology world meet the design world, to be a guinea pig for the Commission in the new, important area of cross-project collaboration, and to experimentally deal with more matters outside my experience and the experience of most of us than I care to remember. I am thoroughly and unforgettably impressed by the energy present in the i3 community in general and among the CG members in particular. Thanks to everybody who gave a hand! I would like wish the community and the new CG luck in tackling the challenges ahead.

Niels Ole Bernsen, i3net coordinator, 24 September 2001