

# A rant about mail clients

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A while ago I described why [migrated my agendas from iCal to orgmode](#). To sum it up, my main motivation was to gain more freedom in managing my information: where iCal imposes a rigid format for events and insists on storing them in its own database, inaccessible to other programs, orgmode lets me mix agenda information with whatever else I like in plain text files. Today's story is a similar one, but without the happy end. I am as much fed up with mail clients as I was with iCal, and for much the same reasons, but I haven't yet found anything I could migrate to.

From an information processing point of view, an e-mail message is not very different from lots of other pieces of data. It's a sequence of bytes respecting a specific format (defined by a handful of standards) to allow its unambiguous interpretation by various programs in the processing chain. An e-mail message can perfectly well be stored in a file and in fact most e-mail clients permit saving a message to a file. Unfortunately, the number of e-mail clients able to open and display correctly such a file is already much smaller. But when it comes to collections of messages, information processing freedom ends completely.

Pretty much every mail client's point of view is that all of a user's mail is stored in some database, and that it (the client) is free to handle this database in whatever way it likes. The user's only access to the messages is *the* mail client. The one and only. The only exception is server-based mail databases handled via the IMAP protocol, where multiple clients can work with a common database. If you don't use IMAP, you have no control over how and where your mail is stored, who has access to it, etc.

What I'd like to do is manage mail just like I manage other files. A mailbox should just be a directory containing messages, one per file. Mailboxes could be stored anywhere in the file system. Mailboxes could be shared through the file system, and backed up via the file system. They could be grouped with whatever other information in whatever way that suits me. I would double-click on a message to view it, or double-click on a mailbox directory to view a summary, sorted in the way I like it. Or I would use command-line tools to work on a message or a mailbox. I'd pick the best tool for each job, just like I do when working with any other kind of file.

Why all that isn't possible remains a mystery to me. The technology has been around for decades. The good old Maildir format would be just fine for storing mailboxes anywhere in the file system, as would the even more venerable mbox format. But even mail clients that use mbox or Maildir internally insist that all such mailboxes must reside in a single master directory. Moreover, they won't let me open a mailbox from outside, I have to run the mail client and work through its hierarchical presentation of mailboxes to get to my destination.

Before I get inundated by comments pointing out that mail client X has feature Y from the list above: Yes, I know, there are small exceptions here and there. But unless I have the complete freedom to put my mail where I want it, the isolated feature won't do me much good. If someone knows of a mail client that has all the features I am asking for, plus the features we all expect from a modern mail client, then please do leave a comment!