

What's in a (Domain) Name?

by Mark Navin

The explosion in the popularity of the Internet has been partly fuelled by the program that allows people to access it—the Web browser—taking on a form that general computer users can easily navigate. As a consequence the moniker www.something.com has become commonplace in modern society.

The Domain Name System (DNS) was developed over 20 years ago by two Californian computer scientists to help people navigate the Internet. Every connected computer has a unique address (like a telephone number) called an Internet Protocol (IP) address. This is a string of numbers (see February's article for more). Since this sequence is difficult to remember, the DNS allows users to input familiar letters and numbers in place of the IP address, making surfing the Net a lot easier.

While the term dot-com has become a fixture in everyday speech (even UK band Fatboy Slim paid homage in the hit single "Slash Dot Dash," with the resonating lyrics: "Slash-

dot-dash-dot-slash-dot-dash-dot, slash-dot-dash-dot-slash-dot-com, dot-com, dot-com, dot, dot, dot, dot-com"), many people still don't understand the concept of domain names. The original suffixes were limited to .com (company), .net (network) and .org (organization), but these were pretty much interchangeable and quickly lost any real relevance in describing the registrant. Many people registered all three possibilities to keep the name.

These three suffixes were also initially meant to signify a North American-based entity but this changed as well and these domain name suffixes have now become global. Registration of these domain names was originally with a quasi-US government organization (www.networksolutions.com) but has since been privatized. This has also meant that there are now a number of other profit-based organizations able to register domain names, including Go Daddy at www.godaddy.com/ and Internic at



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www.internic.net/index.html, which has information on what domain names mean and how to register your own.

Nations have adopted their own domain name suffixes for organizations based there. The UK, for example, uses co.uk, while Australia uses com.au. There is no hard and fast rule, however, for this naming convention. For the full list of all country suffixes, visit www.norid.no/domenenavnbasert/domreg.html. Some countries have used their suffix to generate revenue. In 2000, the coral island group of Tuvalu in the South Pacific leased its much sought-after domain name of .tv for 12 years for \$50 million. Tonga's suffix of .to opened up a world of possibilities, most of them of lurid. While Belgium with .be allowed people some humor (www.letme.be/).

In Japan, the criteria are more stringent for registration and to obtain a co.jp, or.jp or ne.jp domain name it's necessary to be a registered business with a name that has some relevance to the domain name being registered. www.i-love-epson.co.jp/ does push this more than a little however. The strict control is to prevent individuals registering names of large Japanese corporations and potentially making money through "cyber squatting." In the initial rush to register names, there were plenty of examples of this as people sought to accrue something they could sell later. Market forces and the occasional lawsuit have reduced this to a minimum. Japan has recently made the .jp suffix available to anybody.

Now almost any variation of six letters and/or numbers with a .com, .net, or .org suffix has been registered. It's a business and a number of companies specialize in the registration and sale of domain names, just as if they were real estate. Companies like Great Domains at www.greatdomains.com/ offer a range of names for sale. Prices range from a modest \$5,000 for khakis.org to the astronomical \$750,000 for my.com.

The sheer volume of name registration has meant that it's become necessary to expand the suffix list and there's now a plethora of choices with more planned. Recent additions include .us, .cc, .tv, .biz, .pro, .museum, .coop, .aero and .info.

So what's the benefit of all this to the home user? These days, a majority of Internet service providers offer space for a Web page along with the e-mail address and the physical connection so you can have a Web page link such as www.something.com/users/mark, which is both uninteresting and irrelevant. Most family names have been taken but there is some flexibility with such variations as www.smithfamily.com/. Having your own domain name means that you own that space and can generate almost limitless e-mail addresses for the family such as mum@smithfamily.com or freddy@smithfamily.com, bearing in mind the caveats on reducing spam as outlined in January's article. Since you own the domain, you can take it with you. So, while an e-mail address would change as you switch provider, your domain name doesn't.

Once you have acquired a domain name, you need to find a suitable company to host the name so the world can find you. This is a very competitive end of the IT industry so there are cheap deals

with registration and hosting companies such as www.bigfuji.com and www.ipowerweb.com/. The service can be as little as \$80 a year, which often includes the initial registration of the domain name, a large number of e-mail accounts and Web page hosting. These sites may also offer incentives for referring a friend.

Building your own home page is fairly straightforward nowadays. Most companies provide a Web-based interface with applications ranging in complexity. Microsoft has a program called FrontPage (www.microsoft.com/office/frontpage) for home users to produce their own basic Web pages. Many hosting companies have developed an interface to this to allow easy uploads of the Web site pages. A Web site can become a complex interactive experience with all kinds of possibilities for displaying the creativity of the owner. Webcams, streaming video, music and online diaries called blogs are just a few of the options that await you on the World Wide Web. □

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