

Search for the Perfect Network Attached Storage (NAS)

Tuesday, 12 June 2007

You might have heard I'm looking for a good DAM system. That's a good DAM system, not a goddamned system. In other words, a Digital Asset Management System for my 40+ Gigs of photos.

It's high time that I sorted them and keyworded them, because the job is not going to get easier as I shoot more.

Well, in conjunction with that, I'm also looking for a reliable NAS, or Network Attached Storage system. Simply, it is a network hard drive, which can be accessed by any computer that has permission and is on your network. It plugs in via the RJ45 jack of a regular network port.

Last year I bought two external hard drives. One was a USB external drive, meant to be a backup to my Dell Pentium 4 behemoth that sits in my basement. It's a great machine with lots of drive space (2 hard drives), a DVD reader, a DVDRW drive, and wireless keyboard and mouse. But I became very concerned, having experienced hard drive failure in the past, that the photos I kept on that machine, and all the Photoshop work I did, would vanish in the blink of an eye, should the drive(s) fail. It would be disastrous. So I bought an IOGear 300 Gig external drive for that purpose, to back up the desktop.

The second hard drive I bought was my first ever NAS device. It's a device called SimpleShare made by SimpleTech (<http://www.simpleshare.com>). Though I had some initial trouble setting it up and running (a call to tech support made me aware of a firmware upgrade that I needed, though nowhere was it mentioned on the site), I got it up and running. The device can also function as a print server if you attach a USB printer to one of its 2 open USB ports in the back. The ports can also be used to attach other external drives, which can mirror or add to the original drive. In essence, backup the network drive.

Why would I need such a thing? Well for a long time, my Dell P4 was my workhorse, but as time went on, I got sick of being in the basement and running upstairs every time one of my little girls needed something, or my wife asked a question or needed help. Besides it was hot in the summer and cold in the winter, and wasn't all too comfortable to work in. It has now become a dumping ground for anything we need to hide when company shows up in short order. So, it's not a great place to work, though the basement was originally billed to be my working area, including darkroom, print drying area, drafting and art table, etc.

Fast forward to my getting a laptop because I wanted to work anywhere, and be able to carry my files around. Then came the wireless network for the house so I didn't have to be landlocked to the ports. Now the laptop I bought has gone to my dad, because I now have a nice new Mac Intel (MacBook Pro) from work.

See where this is going?

All in all, the bottom line is, you will move from point to point, change machines, and want to work anywhere. That IS the promise of the wireless networked world, isn't it? Well, what that means is that your files need to be accessed from anywhere, at any time. You should be able to leave the number cruncher at home, or where ever, and still be able to get to the work you were doing.

Unfortunately, while the SimpleTech is great at holding and serving files, it is a bit slow, and so far I have not seen any way to access my files remotely, i.e., from when I'm away from my internal network.

Therefore, I've been on a quest to upgrade the storage and file server to something even more robust. I'm looking at a home-brew NAS, which is possible with an old desktop machine, and a few parts, and I like the sound of RAID5 for my own peace of mind (RAID5 is a system of multiple disks which act as one, and one drive's failure is of no consequence as all your data can be recovered from the others).

So recently, I stumbled onto a device called reByte (<http://www.rebyte.com>). It's a small card which fits between the IDE

controller of your motherboard and the drives. It contains a Linux kernel and has software RAID5 embedded. It also is great because it does act as a print server, and can be accessed by <http://> (i.e., through a browser, anywhere). I'm not jumping feet first into this right now, but it looks really good, and is certainly a lot cheaper to do than buying a commercially available consumer appliance which would do the same thing. That device exists already: it's called the Mirra server, and is currently a Seagate product.