

Tutorial Tuesday

Do You Know Your Address?

by Scott Holstad

Have you noticed recently that every flippin' ad you see on TV includes that company's Web site, (<http://www.bigcompany.com/buy/our/stuff/now/or/else.html>)? What, do they expect everyone to run for a pen and write this stuff down, all in the one second it's on the screen? What makes it worse is when your grandmother sitting in her rocker over in the corner starts badgering you, asking what the heck that stuff on the screen means. Well, here's your chance to WOW her; Granny's gonna want to run right on over to the computer and see for herself after you've explained ... the News of the wURLd (okay, maybe not, but it was worth a try).

What exactly is a URL (pronounced U - R - L)? A **Uniform Resource Locator** is like a street address for a Web page. It contains the information you need to reach your destination. You can find the URL displayed, typically, in a white text box underneath the tool bar in your browser. This text box can be quite handy. Should you encounter the URL of a site you want to visit, simply copy it and paste it into said text box. After you press your keyboard's Enter (or Return) key, you'll be on your way to that site!

Believe it or not, URLs are not arbitrarily constructed. They have a very specific syntax. Their format is:

scheme://machine.domain-name/file-path

For example, the URL for this document is:

<http://www.earthlink.net/daily/tuesday/url.html>

Incidentally, Web addresses (the domain name part, anyway) are simply words fronting for numbered IP (Internet Protocol) addresses. The idea is that we can remember words (**earthlink.net**), but remembering numbers is something entirely different. You will, however, occasionally see URLs like **http://205.87.91.1/**; now you know why.

What Does It All Mean?

Has your introduction to the Internet and URLs felt like it's been in German? Well, let's look at our earlier example,

<http://www.earthlink.net/daily/tuesday/url.html>

Http is the URL scheme, meaning we're using the HyperText Transfer Protocol to access files (usually HTML files). There are other schemes including Gopher and FTP, but HTTP is the one you'll see most often. (By the way, schemes are separated from the remainder of the URL by two slashes, while files are separated by one.)

Earthlink.net is the domain name of the organization hosting the Web site. A domain name is always the

major part of the URL -- without it, you will never get anywhere. The segment of the URL immediately preceding the domain name -- **www.** -- is the name given the computer (or the server). It tells you which machine you're actually connected to, or what kind of software it's running. Most often, Net entities name their servers **www** to designate it their Web server (there are other servers, such as a news server, mail server, etc.). Occasionally, you'll find more creative naming structures. (I once had a university account on a machine in a Sun (computer) lab. Each machine had been named after planets and stars, so that part of the URL looked like **pluto.ucla.edu** or **jupiter.ucla.edu**.)

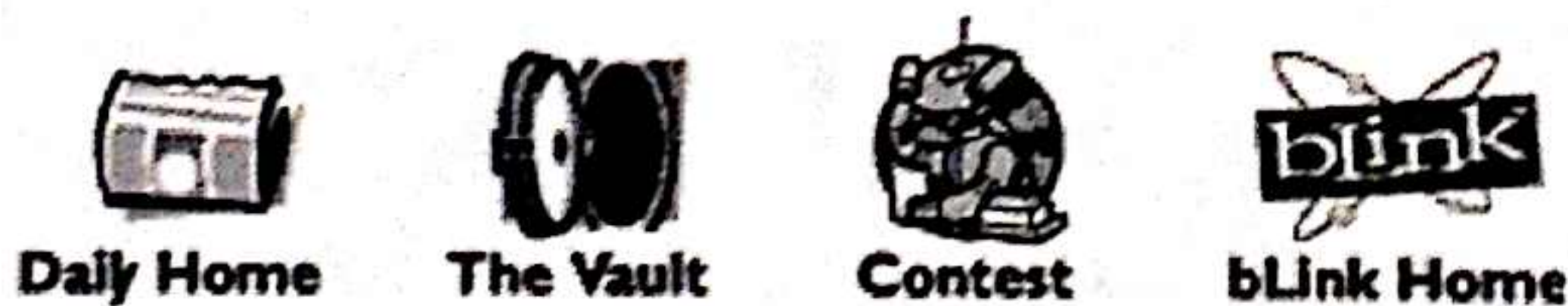
The information following the domain name (following the single slash) is the actual file information. For instance, by accessing this Web page that you are currently reading, you have snagged the **url.html** file from the **tuesday** directory, located in the **daily** directory, accessed through the Web server owned by EarthLink.

But what if you want to access a URL which ends in a slash (/)? Fear not -- that simply indicates the URL is pointed toward a directory (such as **tuesday**), rather than a specific file. In such cases, the Web server typically generates the designated main page, often called **index.html** or **home.html**.

This information may be especially useful when trying to locate Web pages that seem non-existent. How many times have you found references to a cool-sounding utility, clicked on the link, and gotten an irritating "file not found" message? (Too darn many is my guess.) Well, you might be surprised to know that many times you can work backwards in the URL and find your file.

For instance, let's say you're looking for program called **greatgame1.html** but can't locate it. If its URL was supposed to be **http://www.gamecompany.com/cool/games/greatgame1.html**, eliminate the file name itself (so that it looks like this: **http://www.gamecompany.com/cool/games/**) and you could find that a new version has been released (**greatgame2.html**) or that it's been shifted to another directory (there may be a message stating so), etc.

URLs can tell you a lot about the site you're visiting. Start looking over the URLs of the sites you visit, and thinking about their structure. Who knows -- maybe your ability to translate that gobbledygook for Grandma will, one day, earn you the title of Master Geek.



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