

THIS & THAT

by
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What's in a name? It seems to me that I've used that opening question before, but for the life of me I can't find the article I used it in...but what the heck, it's still a good question. It's also the question I get lots from new computer users. The question really refers to the name given to a collection of information when it is saved on a computer's hard drive.

For example, when I attempt to save a newly written word processing document (a letter to my dear aunt Fanny), the program I wrote it with won't do a thing until I decide on which folder I want the letter to be saved in (e.g. *My Documents*), and what name I want to assign to the letter itself when it's saved (e.g. *My Fanny*---for short).

So when all is said and done, low and behold, my letter is saved on my hard drive as *My Fanny.txt*, in a folder named *My Documents*.

"BUT WAIT!" You say. There's more! What about that pesky *.txt* I see after the file name you picked. There's more there than just *My Fanny*. Stop laughing. This is serious stuff.

Ah yes, there is more...and it's that more stuff that folks really want to know about. The other stuff they mostly understand.

Well then, here's a bit of secret squirrel information I'll let you in on, but don't tell anyone I told you. Okay?

In order to understand the *.txt* portion of the file name, we have to go back to the beginning of time...well, maybe not all the way back...maybe just back to the beginning of computer time. It's not that long ago is it? Oh, I see. You say you weren't born yet. But I digress.

In the early days of computer information storage devices, the space provided for saving letters and such was expensive and quite limited; compared to today, that is. Sooo, when computer programmers discovered they were working with a limited amount of space, they knew they couldn't save things in picture perfect form. It would take up too much space if they did. They said, "We've got to do something about this."

And so they did. Here comes the long story, short part. They put their heads together and decided on a way to compress the information typed into the program so it required less space than what would be needed for a picture perfect copy. We don't care how they did it, we just have to know they did do it.

Then, during that time long ago, a short skinny programmer in the back of the conference room raised his hand and asked in a high pitched squeaky voice, "How will we know which stuff was saved using our program?" They all thought for a while. "After all," he went on, "we compressed it. Only our program knows how we did it. Only our program can decompress it back into its original form. Right?"

"True." Yet another programmer said in a

husky voice. “Well, we could add something to the File’s name that describes which compression system we used” This came from a tall, muscular woman who was eating an apple.

“What to you mean?” A third geek with a pocket protector and assorted writing instruments asked.

“Well,” the apple eater began once more. “What about putting a period (.) and a three letter code after the name our letter writer picks.”

“What would we call it if we did it?” The skinny programmer asked.

“How about calling it a *file extension*?” Muscles said while lobbing the apple core into a trash can.

“A *file extension*? Okay. Sounds good. So what *file extension* will we use for our program?” The geek asked.

They thought for a long time. Then one mumbled, “.txt.”

“What did you say?” Someone asked.

“.TXT” The muscular programmer repeated...apple bits popping out of her mouth.

“Why did you pick that?” Skinny asked.

“Well, *TXT* is short for text, and that’s the way our program stores stuff, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” They all agreed.

“Good. Then it’s settled. Anything we save using our new compression method will require a *.txt* extension added to its name.”

The skinny guy chimed in again, “How are we going to get the people saving their letters, using our program, to know they must do this?”

“Jeeze Louise! It’s just a simple *.txt*. That’s not hard to remember. Is it?” Muscles was

turning red in the face.

“No, but other programmers will probably do the same kind of thing when they code their stuff. They will, no doubt, pick their own extensions. I can see lots of these file extensions showing up. No one can remember all of them.”

“You’re right.” The pocket protector guy said. “But if we add the file extension representing our method to stuff saved with our program, and not even trouble the program user with that little detail, it will be there the next time that person uses our program to view the letter again.

“I like it!” A bald headed man wearing green eyeshades, and holding an adding machine said.” We can even copyright the method, so that only those who buy our program will be able to see our stuff. We’ll sell millions.”

And so the file extension was born. Now all program owners could protect their interests, and their programs would do a great job of saving and retrieving all the work done when using them.

Back to today.

So, this is where those funny dot something, something, somethings came from. They are nothing more than notations, describing the compression method used when the files were saved.

And, oh yes, this answers another question long plaguing people. This is why there are times when we get that stupid message, “Unable to open this file” when we try to look at an Email attachment someone has sent us. We don’t have a program on our computer that knows how to decode the stuff in the attachment.

Here's a helpful hint. When you come across a file you can't open, and would like to know the name of the program used to create it, just type whatever the dot something, something, something is into Google's search window, and click the search button. Chances are very good that you'll find your answer somewhere near the top of the suggestions Google sends back to you (<http://www.google.com>).

Now, I'm finished. You can back to more important things. See you next time.