

# Here's How

## 11 Uses for an Old PC

BY LOYD CASE

YOU'VE FINALLY bought a new PC. It has a boatload of memory, lots of cores, and a fast, modern graphics card. But now your old computer sits in a corner—and you feel guilty about the whole idea of throwing it out. After all, it's perfectly functional.

Here are a few ways to put that old system to work.

### 1. Convert It Into a Server

If you have a home network with family members on it, reusing the PC as a NAS (network-attached storage) box or even as an actual server may be just the ticket.

However, it's not simply a matter of plugging an old PC into a network connection. Most desktop systems aren't configured to be effective servers or storage systems. For one thing, they probably use too much power. You'll want to set BIOS power management to run cooling fans in quiet mode, if that option exists. You'll also need to set up the operating system so it doesn't shut down at inconvenient times, yet runs in a low-power state when not being actively used.

Bear in mind that you'll probably want to run your

Just because you bought a new PC doesn't mean you must throw away the old one. Here's how to make the most of an older computer.

server "headless" (that is, without a monitor), and sans keyboard and mouse as well. While you'll require a display and input devices for initial setup, make sure that

for each person who might need access. You may also want to set storage quotas.

A better solution: Install a proper network operating system. One choice is Windows Home Server. However,



the reused system will work properly without them.

Also, the operating system is likely not well suited for storage applications, particularly for multiple users. Windows XP, Vista, or Windows 7 can function well as a storage repository for a couple of users, but you'll want to create user accounts

er, it costs over \$100, and it may prefer newer hardware.

An alternative is FreeNAS. Open-source software, FreeNAS ([find.pcworld.com/71101](http://find.pcworld.com/71101)) is designed to turn a PC into a network-attached storage device and is based on FreeBSD, a Unix variant. If you're not certain you want

to commit to an unfamiliar OS, you can download FreeNAS as a LiveCD version; this is an ISO file that, when burned to a CD, will boot off an optical drive and run from memory. You can keep your old OS on the hard drive until you determine whether FreeNAS fits your needs.

### 2. Give It to a School

If your PC isn't too archaic, consider donating it to a local school or day care center. It could go to the high school computer lab; alternatively, the school district's computer services group might use it for parts.

If you go this route, consider buying some low-cost educational software packages and preinstalling them before donating. Also, as with selling a computer, you'll want to remove all software on the old PC that you've reinstalled on your new one. And make sure to include all license information for software you're preinstalling on the giveaway.

### 3. Turn It Into an Experimental Box

You've heard about this Linux thing, and maybe you'd like to give it a whirl. But the thought of trying to create a dual-boot system on

your primary PC leaves you a little green around the gills. Now you can experiment to your heart's content on your old box.

Check out Ubuntu ([ubuntu.com](http://ubuntu.com)), the sexy Linux distro that geeks love to, well, love. The neat thing about Linux is all the built-in support for older hardware, so installation is usually easy—in fact, installing Ubuntu is sometimes simpler than installing Windows. And a wealth of free software for Linux is just waiting to be tried out.

A number of true Unix-based operating systems are available, ranging from FreeBSD or PC-BSD (based on the Berkeley Unix version) to OpenSolaris, based on the Sun Microsystems version of Unix.

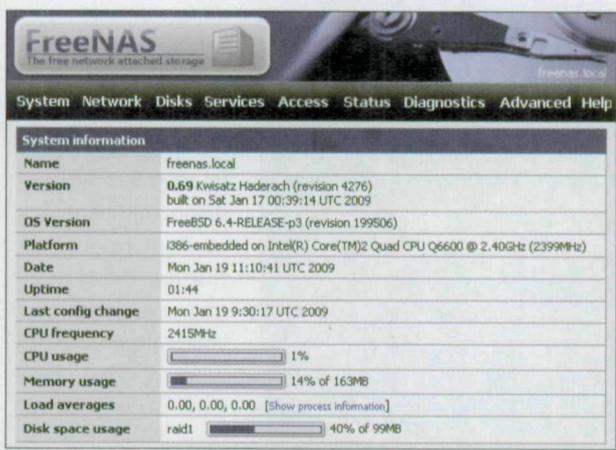
#### 4. Give It to a Relative

I do this all the time. My brother-in-law has modest computing needs, so I often just hand over one of my two-year-old PCs, though I'll usually throw in a midrange or entry-level graphics card.

I don't generally recommend doing this with your kids, though—they often need as much or more PC horsepower than you use on a regular basis (outside of gaming and photography).

Also, giving a system to family members means you are now the go-to person for tech support. (For help with that role, see "How to Fix Your Family's PC Problems," [find.pcworld.com/70375](http://find.pcworld.com/70375).)

You'll want to completely erase the hard drive and reinstall the OS from scratch. If it's an off-the-shelf system from a major



**YOU CAN TURN your old PC into a network-attached storage device with FreeNAS, an open-source, no-cost server operating system.**

manufacturer, restoring it to its original condition from the restore partition or the restore disc accomplishes the same thing.

#### 5. Dedicate It to Distributed Computing

Want to do a little good for humanity? How about dedicating your old PC to one of various public distributed-computing projects?

The best known is probably Folding@Home, which employs computing resources from all over the world to help study protein folding, an essential element of understanding how many diseases operate. Other

distributed-computing ventures include SETI@Home (the search for extraterrestrial intelligence) and various charities and research projects (get links from the online version of this article at [find.pcworld.com/71059](http://find.pcworld.com/71059)).

#### 6. Put It to Work as a Game Server

Do you have a favorite multiplayer game? If so, see if it's a game where you can host a server on a local PC, turning your old system into a dedicated game server. Older machines used as dedicated game servers often need surprisingly little system horsepower.

#### 7. Use It for Old-School Gaming

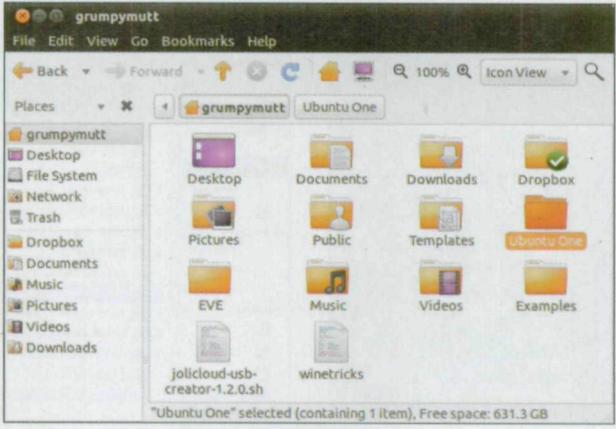
Related to the game-server idea, consider repurposing the box for old-school gaming. For example, you could install Windows 98 on it so that you can run older Windows 95 and DOS games, if you have a bunch around—although this isn't as necessary as it used to be. Online services such as Steam and Impulse offer older games that have been rewritten to work under newer operating systems, and DOSBox lets you emulate a legacy DOS environment so that you can get your classic-gaming fix.

Perhaps the most complete site for older PC games is Good Old Games ([www.gog.com](http://www.gog.com)). GOG offers many older titles, all of which work fine under newer operating systems. So if you've always wanted to go back and play Planescape: Torment, now's your chance.

Love arcade games? Don't worry about running out of quarters: To go really old school, install MAME (multiple arcade machine emulator) software. (One example is at [find.pcworld.com/71102](http://find.pcworld.com/71102).) It will allow you to play arcade games and titles written for older game consoles, provided that you have access to the ROMs and other related files you need to run the games. MAME software can become a gigantic time sink (albeit a very fun one), so consider yourself warned!

#### 8. Make It a Secondary Computing Server

If you're a content creator using a title like 3dsmax, Adobe After Effects, or >>



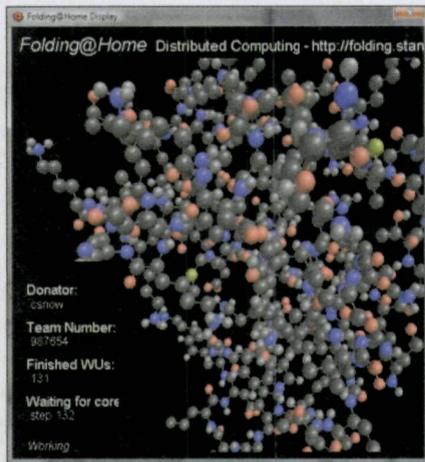
**TRY OUT UBUNTU, the most popular version of Linux, on an older computer. Linux offers built-in support for older hardware.**

Sony Vegas (see page 52), having another PC to help with distributed rendering chores can greatly speed up final renders for complex projects.

Each application handles distributed rendering a little differently, so you'll need to consult your documentation. But typically you'll install a lightweight application on the secondary rendering system, which will take data and commands from the primary system and then return results when done. The main app on your production system, or a separate manager app, manages the rendering across multiple networked systems.

### 9. Set It Up as a Light-Duty Living-Room PC

My family has a small PC in the living room that we often use for quick Web surfing and e-mail checking, and the kids occasionally use it for homework. This setup can work particularly well if you have networked storage in the house, so people can access their files whether



**HELP MEDICAL RESEARCHERS** by using your old PC to fold proteins with Folding@Home.

they're on a personal system or on the communal one.

You'll want security software that's as bulletproof as possible. With multiple users on one system, someone, sometime, will hit a Website that may try to upload a Trojan horse or other malware. (See our security suites feature on page 73.)

### 10. Salvage It

If you have a do-it-yourself bent and you build your own PCs, you might reduce the cost of your new system by salvaging parts from the old one. Good candidates for salvage include the PC case (if it's not a proprietary, prebuilt system), the optical

drive, the power supply, and sometimes the memory modules.

Depending on how much you reuse, the distinction between a new system and one that has simply been upgraded gets hazy: If you replace the motherboard, CPU, memory, and primary hard drive, but keep the case, power supply, graphics card, and optical drive, is it a new

system or an upgraded one?

That will still leave you with a few old parts—which brings us to our final alternative for old-PC reuse.

### 11. Sell It

Somewhere on eBay, someone is looking for a computer. They may not be able to afford a new PC, or are looking for a second one for the family. Your old computer, at the right price, may be just what they need. If all goes smoothly, everyone wins: You unload your old hardware, which finds a good home with a new user who can appreciate it.

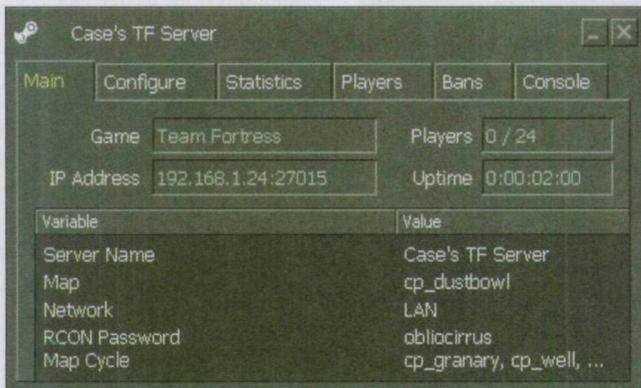
However, it's not as simple as selling it at a garage sale.

For one thing, scammers cruise both Craigslist and eBay, looking to convince unwary sellers to take deposits that mysteriously vanish when the sellers try to cash them. Always be suspicious of anyone who wants to use Western Union and has an overseas address.

My rule of thumb is to stick to selling locally if it's Craigslist, and only in the United States if it's eBay (since I live in the U.S.). Also, using an escrow site like PayPal (required for eBay anyway) can add a degree of safety. Read "How to Sell Your PC and Other Gadgets" ([find.pcworld.com/70212](http://find.pcworld.com/70212)) for more tips on selling your old tech gear.

As you can see, an old computer may have many uses, particularly if it's still in good working condition. And not all uses for a PC require quad-core systems with high-end graphics. So if that old system is sitting in a closet somewhere, dig it out and put it to use.

Who knows? It might be your old machine that identifies the signal that's the first sign of intelligent life outside our planet.



**TEAM FORTRESS 2** is a multiplayer online game that supports dedicated game servers—one role suited for an older computer.



**RELIVE THE GLORY** days of arcade games with MAME (multiple arcade machine emulator) software. You won't need quarters.

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva para fins educacionais.

Copyright of PC World is the property of PC World Communications Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission.

However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

**Fonte: PC World, v. 29, n. 2, p. 94-96, 2011. [Base de Dados]. Disponível em: <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>. Acesso em: 15 fev. 2011.**