Review: NASLite+ v1.x

By Will Wagner | March 2nd, 2005

Do you need to build a file server on a shoe string budget? If you have
an old PC (we're talking original Pentium old) lying around with an
ethernet card, then NASLite+, the new offering from ServerElements,
may be the best way to build a a big file server for very little money.
I've used the original, free, NASLite for quite a while now, and having
tried NASLite+, it is well worth the $24.95.

Both NASLite and NASLite+ seem to do the impossible of reading big
new drives that weren't originally supported in the hardware. The software bypasses the
computer's bios and reads the drives directly, making it easy to build up to a terrabyte
server on that antique sitting in the corner of your office. NASLite and NASLite+ contain
both operating system and server software, so you basically insert the CD (for NASLite+)
or floppy (NASlite), reboot and the PC magically turns into a dedicated, monitor-optional,
file server.

NASLite+ appears to work with any old PC (486 DX or higher) with an IDE interface,
any old graphics card, an ethernet card, a CDROM and a working floppy drive. Typically
that means you can connect up to 3 hard drives to it (all four if your PC Bios can boot to
another interface like SCSI, FIREWIRE, or USB). It also supports most popular 10Mbit,
100Mbit, and GigaBit ethernet cards, so it can keep up with the speed of your home
network. For building a big file server with an old PC that already has these components,
it's as simple as installing a couple of big IDE hard drives.

NASLite+ is well worth the upgrade price in my opinion. The original NASLite took
some finagling to create the floppy properly on a Windows machine and made you
choose one of a variety of server protocols (SMB, NFS, FTP, HTTP) and network card
speeds (Gigabit, 100Mbit, 10Mbit). Install is a snap with NASLite+ and it runs all four
protocols simultaneously. An even more important reason to upgrade to NASLite+ is the
speed, literally 4X faster on my home network.

Upgrading from NASLite to NASLite+ was trivial, and more importantly, all my data
remained intact. I ran into a slight glitch with a new unformatted drive that I added to the
PC, but a new version of NASLite+ (v1.1) has already been released that fixes the
problem in its tracks. To set up a NASLite+ server software, you simply create a CD
from the downloaded ISO, boot your server with the CD, follow a few quick
configuration screens to setup an administration password, the IP settings, configure each
disk, and within a few minutes the system is up and running.

Once NASLite+ has been set up, you can disconnect the monitor from your file server and connect and manage the server remotely. Via telnet, you can access all the administration functions from another computer. Additionally, it has a nice web interface built in, so you can check on the server using a web browser. To aid running the server without a monitor, NASLite+ also plays a particular beep sequence through the built-in PC speaker during boot if everything is functioning normally, and a more ominous beep if something is amiss (NASLite will also monitor each drive if they support S.M.A.R.T).

NASLite has been rock solid in my basement, running for months at a time without having to reboot. In the three weeks I've tried NASLite+, it's been just as dependable. As host to our family's DVR, MP3, and video library, it has gotten a pretty good workout, and I'm happy to report no wife annoyance, the true test for a married geekster like myself.

Like all products, there are a couple of features that could add value to NASLite+ in the future. For instance, there are virtually no security features included like password protection, so while it works fine for the home environment, you might not want to archive your corporate financial data on a NASLite+ server. Using the SMB protocol (for Windows users), there is a 4Gig individual file size limit, which one can bump into if you are saving large video files. It would be nice to support additional IDE and Fireware cards, allowing someone to add more than the four original IDE drives for storage (you can boot off of a firewire device, but you cannot use a firewire drive as part of your storage). If you don't have any another bios boot options (eg a SCSI or USB bootable bios), your server can only serve up three hard drives with the CDROM booting NASLite+.

I raved about the original NASLite last Fall, but NASLite+, with its superior performance and easier setup, is an even better product. If you have an old computer sitting around doing nothing, it's the most economical way to build a home file server and there's a certain satisfaction in making that trusty old Pentium PC useful again after years of neglect.