

# COMPUTERWORLD

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## Obsolete tech: 40 things on their way out

A fond farewell to once-common tech-related activities that soon we'll do no more

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**August 19, 2009** ([PC World](#)) By the time you read this story, the Internet may be obsolete.

Okay, maybe not. But you never know. With technology evolving at breakneck speed, no one can say for sure what's around the next corner -- to say nothing of the one after that. The circle of life, however, remains constant: When a new high-tech creation is born, something else may die as a result. Sometimes, the loss is a good thing -- who wants busy signals or staticky TV? -- but at other times, the departure stirs bittersweet feelings (remember saying farewell to your trusty old C:\ prompt?).

We've compiled a list of 40 once-commonplace activities that are rapidly approaching extinction. Some are in danger of disappearing, while others have already vanished. So join us for a spirited send-off.

### 1. Playing Video Games at an Arcade

*Status: On life support*

Once a favorite activity of geeks worldwide, going to the arcade to play video games began fading away in the mid-1990s, just as going to the arcade to play pinball had done a decade before. A few arcades survive, but the days of gamers lining up to toss quarters into Street Fighter or Mortal Kombat are long gone. It's easy to see why: The advent of advanced gaming systems allows you to experience the same action at home, minus the dungeon-like lighting, the deafening game noise, and the premature exhaustion of your lunch money for the week.

### 2. Running Out of Hard-Drive Space

*Status: Deceased*

With [terabyte-size drives](#) now selling for less than \$70, hard drives that exceed your storage needs aren't exactly hard to come by these days. But remember when an 80MB drive was the pinnacle of luxury and a 1GB drive would have seemed as spacious as Carlsbad Caverns?

### 3. Getting a Busy Signal

*Status: Nearly deceased*

Thanks to advances in voicemail and call-waiting technology, you rarely hear that annoying broken tone any more. Unless, of course, you're voting for American Idol or listening to Pink Floyd.

### 4. Going on a "Blind" First Date

*Status: Deceased*

What with Google, dating sites, and a slew of social networks, it's not difficult to get to know a person digitally before choosing to interact with them in a brick-and-mortar environment. Heck, you might even get to know them intimately before ever meeting. Or instead of ever meeting.

### 5. Needing to Be 18 to Have Access to Porn

*Status: Deceased*

It may sound crazy, but in the old days a fella had to be 18 to get his hands on prurient materials -- either that or have an easily bribable older brother. Or a friend with such a brother. Or a dad with an obvious stash. Not that I know anything about such matters.

## 6. Chatting With the SysOp

*Status: Deceased*

The [SysOp](#) -- short for system administrator -- was a figure of power beginning in the late 1970s and continuing into the early 1990s. As the creator and overlord of the local [bulletin board system](#) (BBS), the SysOp watched over the users who dialed into his pre-Internet electronic communication system. He chatted with visitors, kept the system running smoothly, and occasionally hit the disconnect button when someone remained logged in for too long.

## 7. Paying for Long Distance

*Status: Nearly deceased*

Once upon a time, people had to pay expensive per-minute fees for long distance. Then, the big bad [cell phone](#) came along and blew those charges away like a straw house. The end.

## 8. Getting Fuzzy TV Reception

*Status: Deceased*

When the United States [flipped the switch](#) on an [all-digital broadcasting system](#) this summer, it also effectively sent [the fuzzy "white snow"](#) to the graveyard. So long, annoying static; we always loathed you.

## 9. Hearing the Sound of a Modem Connecting

*Status: Nearly deceased*

How a familiar series of sounds could simultaneously be so grating and so gratifying is a mystery that man may never unlock. Jonesing for a fix? Try the [56K Modem Emulator](#).

## 10. Shooting Polaroids

*Status: Nearly deceased*

Polaroid plans to [stop selling its signature instant film](#) at the end of this year.

## 11. Waiting to Get Photos Developed

*Status: Showing signs of illness*

Though film-based cameras aren't completely gone, the advantages of [digital snapshots](#) -- namely, that you can view a picture immediately after taking it and that you can discard bad shots at no cost -- have certainly made traditional cameras far less common.

## 12. Typing on a Typewriter

*Status: Nearly deceased*

The clickity-clackity sound of the standard typewriter has quieted over the years. Unless you work in the [New York City Police Department](#), which reportedly just signed a \$1 million typewriter-purchasing contract.

## 13. Removing the Perforated Leader Strips From Continuous-Feed Paper Printouts

*Status: Nearly deceased*

Born in the 1970s, the dot matrix printer delivered low-quality printouts for nearly two full decades before inkjet technology offered an alternative that was slightly less hard on the eyes. The dot matrix printer will be remembered for its frequent paper jams; for its slow, noisy operation; and for the thin strips of perforated paper that you had to tear (carefully, so you didn't end up with a document that looked as though a tiny but voracious shrew had been sampling it) off the left and right sides of a printout once their work of keeping the

paper properly aligned in the printer was done.

#### 14. Having Easy-to-Remember TV Channel Numbers

*Status: Nearly deceased*

[Fifty-seven channels and nothin' on?](#) More like 557 channels (and still nothin' on). Try writing a catchy tune to that, Springsteen.

#### 15. Checking Your Answering Machine

*Status: Seriously ill*

"Hi, you've reached the answering machine. I'm still around, but most people are now using dial-in voicemail instead of me. What a bunch of ungrateful little...BEEP!"

#### 16. Enjoying Complete Privacy

*Status: On life support*

In the face of constant monitoring by [Google](#) and the [many forms of GPS tracking](#) in our lives ([social networking shoe](#), anyone?), privacy has become a rare and precious commodity within the connected world. Speaking of which, that's a nice shirt you're wearing today.

#### 17. Making Someone a Real Mix Tape

*Status: Deceased*

Web sites like [Mixtape.com](#) and [Songza](#) may attempt to fill the void, but the art of laboring over a custom-made mix tape tailored for a special occasion or a special person -- as romanticized by John Cusack's character in [High Fidelity](#) -- seems to have gone the way of electrical appliance repair and blacksmithing. It's a damn shame, too, because mix tapes made great gifts for dates (and by "great" I mean "potentially highly prized by the recipient and yet incredibly cheap and easy to assemble").

#### 18. Wearing a Calculator Watch

*Status: Deceased*

Affectionately dubbed "[the nerd watch](#)," the [calculator watch](#) once served as a proud badge of a person's abiding amusement with mathematics -- as diagnostic as a pocket protector or membership in the high school Slide Rule Club. Nowadays, the only sure way to ascertain an individual's true geek quotient is to test their Star Trek knowledge.

#### 19. Seeing Pages and Pages of Phone Sex Ads in the Back of Free City Weeklies

*Status: Showing signs of illness*

Those naughty 900 numbers may still exist, but cybersex and the scandal-du-jour phenomenon of [sexting](#) have stolen most of the spotlight from landline lovin' these days. Not to mention that Craigslist and online events calendars have left free city weeklies looking pretty anorexic themselves. It's true that lying about yourself and your various physical characteristics is just as easy when you're talking on the phone as when you're typing on a keyboard -- unless the lie is "I don't sound like Donald Duck" -- but online the person you're communicating with can't hear that repellant note of desperation in your voice.

#### 20. Using a Public Phone Booth

*Status: On life support*

Now that everyone and his cockatiel has a cell phone, public phone booths are getting tougher to track down. Translation: Superman is screwed.

#### 21. Dialing on a Rotary Phone

*Status: Nearly deceased*

The ease of touchtone dialing has made active use of rotary phones a novelty, though it isn't clear whether those old Bell Telephone models will ever become truly rare, since they were built to withstand thermonuclear

attack. In any case, mimes may never let the motion go from their repertoire.

## 22. Storing Data on a Floppy Disk

*Status: Nearly deceased*

A disk with 1.44MB of storage? Shyeah, right. The once-standard protocol for storing and transferring data seems puny by today's file-size standards. (And don't even get started with the truly floppy 5.25-inch variety.) Few new PCs are being built with floppy disk drives anymore; and as a result, the era of the A:\ prompt is in its twilight. As for the [Zip drive](#), lomega may [still say it sells 'em](#) -- but is anyone buying it?

## 23. Booting Up to a C:\ Prompt

*Status: Nearly deceased*

DOS, we'll always fondly remember seeing your blinking prompt upon boot-up. Rest in peace, dear friend.

## 24. Typing on an Old-School Word Processor

*Status: Deceased*

Let's face it: [Doogie Howser](#) wouldn't have been nearly as endearing if he had typed his nightly journal on [Microsoft Office 2010](#). But boy, that plain [blue-and-white screen](#) just screams "1991."

## 25. Having Your Mobile Phone Attached to Your Car

*Status: Deceased*

I remember those early mobile phones that mechanics installed in people's cars. What I can't remember, though, is what today's important-looking [Bluetooth-always-in-the-ear](#) guys did to make themselves look like tools back then.

## 26. Putting in a Videotape to Watch a Movie

*Status: On life support*

Dearly beloved, we gather here today to mourn the passing of VHS. The lucky twin of the long-deceased Betamax (whose [cause of death remains a source of controversy](#) decades later), VHS gave us hours of videotape-watching enjoyment -- and almost as many hours of trying to adjust the blasted tracking knob to get a steady picture.

## 27. Holding Up a Lighter at a Concert

*Status: Showing signs of illness*

Listening to a power ballad in a dimly lit stadium without a sea of gently undulating lighters for company is like spending time at Twitter without a sea of [social media experts](#) offering their insights and informed criticism: Something about it doesn't feel right. Sure, holding up thousands of illuminated cell phones might be safer -- but even if the phones have [virtual lighter apps](#) installed, it just isn't the same.

## 28. Watching a Movie on a Laser Disc

*Status: Deceased*

The only proof that anyone ever actually watched movies on laser disc is the (at this writing) 5282 entries posted on eBay by people trying to dump their LDs. But whether fact or fiction, the technology is definitely obsolete now.

## 29. Using Proper Grammar and Punctuation

*Status: On life support*

txting and iming has made proper grammar seems kinda old skoo, dont u thnk? heres hoping 4 capitalization & punctuation 2 make a comeback in emails & other writing. the gr8 gatsby probly wuld hv been way less gr8 if it wuz written like this. lol

## 30. Getting a New Car With a Cigarette Lighter

**Status: Showing signs of illness**

Built-in cigarette lighters -- standard-issue accessories for many nicotine-friendly decades -- are losing favor among automobile manufacturers. In fact, most new cars today ship cigarette lighter-free, instead dedicating the ports to electronics charging.

**31. Flipping On an Incandescent Light Bulb****Status: On life support**

More and more nations are [saying so long](#) to the traditional [incandescent light bulb](#) and encouraging their citizens to use relatively ecology-friendly, energy-saving bulbs. Cartoon characters getting "bright ideas" have yet to adapt, however.

**32. Sitting in Front of a CRT Monitor****Status: On life support**

I won't miss staring at blurry, hard-to-read text on a CRT screen. But I will miss the dramatic effect of seeing one of those bad boys dropped from a third-story window. Flatscreen monitors may be more aerodynamic, but they just don't blow up as well.

**33. Playing Music on an Audiocassette****Status: Nearly deceased**

You can try to rewind, but the life of the cassette is on its last legs. If anyone knows a practical application for four boxes of late-1980s, early-1990s rock tapes, please advise.

**34. Going to the Local Music Store to Check out CDs****Status: On life support**

Local music stores are becoming harder and harder to find. Here's hoping that the remaining few can manage to hang on/ Losing them would leave a cultural void that iTunes is not equipped to fill.

**35. Getting an AOL Disk or CD in the Mail****Status: Deceased**

Ever wonder how many of those floppies and CDs AOL sent out over the years? [You're not alone](#). But no one seems to know the answer. The supply of AOL marketing material appeared endless, right up until the [mailings stopped](#) a few years back. People who devoted their time to [collecting](#) or [shunning](#) the discs haven't figured out what to do with themselves since (nor have I figured out what I'm supposed to use for coasters now).

**36. Looking Up Numbers in the Phone Book****Status: Showing signs of illness**

Phone companies still hand them out, but printed phone books have definitely seen better days. The combined influence of the Web and of phone services such as [GOOG-411](#) has sharply reduced everyday use of phone books; and today the traditional walking of fingers through wood-pulp pages seems antiquated to many tech-friendly families (and wasteful to many green-friendly families).

**37. Using Carbon Copy Paper****Status: Nearly deceased**

With even low-end printers now able to scan, copy, and possibly make toast, you don't see old-fashioned [carbon copy paper](#) too often, making carbon paper a candidate to join purple-on-white mimeograph paper any day now in the museum of antiquities. And I doubt that anyone's complaining.

**38. Sending Documents via Fax****Status: Showing signs of illness**

Why fax when you can attach? Especially since most documents are now created on computers, the facsimile may soon find itself on the endangered species list. Fear not, though, Office Space fans: The legend "[PC Load Letter](#)" will live on forever.

### 39. Rockin' Out With Your Boombox

*Status: Nearly deceased*

Your iPod may look cool, but can you balance it on your shoulder and blare your funky beats at obnoxiously high volumes? Didn't think so. The boombox -- also known as the jambox, the ghetto blaster, or the jerkface apparatus -- reached its peak popularity during the 1980s, when big hair, stone-washed jeans, and bad dancing enjoyed similarly unaccountable heydays. Though updated editions of the boombox may be on the market today, the era of not being able to ride in peace on a randomly selected public conveyance on a randomly selected day is, thankfully, behind us.

### 40. Giving Someone Your Undivided Attention During a Social Interaction

*Status: Showing signs of illness*

Oh, come on -- talking without simultaneously texting or tweeting is so 2008.

#### More Chances to Live in the Past

For further excursions down memory lane, see the following articles from our archives:

- [The Floppy Rises Again](#)
- [The 50 Greatest Gadgets of the Past 50 Years](#)
- [The Most Collectible PCs of All Time](#)
- [The 25 Worst Tech Products of All Time](#)

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