

Web Watcher



By Glenn Fleishman

How free resources are staying free

Net Generosity. Most of the best resources on the Internet used to be provided by a variety of educational and U.S. governmental organizations, generally without funding and always for free. And Net vets worried that the commercialization of the Internet would cause a major secondary effect in a big hurry—the loss of those resources.

The Info-Mac Archives are a good example. These archives comprise a few gigabytes of freeware and shareware programs, utilities, and information, available over the Internet using the standard FTP (file transfer protocol). Info-Mac was run for years off an old Apple Macintosh running UNIX in Stanford's artificial intelligence group. Why in that group? Because someone there had the yen to set it up years ago, when there were only perhaps a couple hundred thousand Macintosh users on the Net.

After the wave of commercialization began to swell, a group of volunteers put identical copies of the archive on machines around the world in order to lower demands on any one system and reduce the bandwidth used across countries. These "mirror" sites automatically update themselves frequently to keep each mirror as close as possible to the master site.

This structure made it easy for America Online to provide a big boost to Info-Mac and other archives resources: the online service set up a beefy FTP server (<ftp://mirrors.aol.com>) that mirrors not only Info-Mac but also the University of Michigan's extensive Macintosh archive, the WinSITE Group's PC/Windows archive, and the MIT Usenet FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) archive. AOL made the material available in late 1994.

Another counterexample to our fears comes from c|net, aka the Computer Network (<http://www.cnet.com>), in the form of a massive database of shareware resources from around the world ([\[ware.com\]\(http://www.shareware.com\)\). Not only does shareware.com have an increasingly authoritative list of all shareware—along with abstracts about what the programs do—but the staff also continually tests and rates the FTP sites that contain the shareware for how difficult it is to access them.](http://www.share-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Because of these and other changes, the grim picture of several months ago has been replaced by broad grins on many people's faces as a level of commercial responsibility has risen to carry on the volunteer work of years past. The mercenary factor, of course, is the advertising revenue that c|net and others can generate from having thousands of people pass through their doors every day.

Metacrawling. Last month I talked about Perfect Knowledge and using an agent to help you find it. That was for commerce, however. A new engine has come online that helps you find "perfect information"—information from a variety of sources presented on a level playing field—though its lifespan is uncertain. Metacrawler (<http://metacrawler.cs.washington.edu:8080>) is a system that submits

your queries to the major Internet indexes. It creates a summary, removes duplicates, and verifies that all the remaining pages actually exist.

The problem with perfect knowledge, as noted last month in the case of audio CDs, is that businesses don't necessarily share the belief that consumers should know everything in equal amounts. Metacrawler is up and running and none of the indexes have locked it out—yet. However, since most services now make the majority of their income through advertising, Metacrawler could be a problem; it displays only summaries, not the ads on the pages from which the information is drawn.

The grad student behind Metacrawler, Eric Selberg, said at a recent WWW conference that the engine's usage is currently low enough that Metacrawler is just a drop in the bucket compared with the use of other indexes. But we have to remember that Yahoo—now a multimillion-dollar, venture-capitalized operation—started out as a couple of guys making public a tool they wrote to create a tidier hotlist for themselves. ■

The Scorecard

You can't tell the technology that's being hyped without a program. No, I don't mean a software program:

Java: Sun Microsystems' programming language for browsers, which will allow neat little applications (applets) to run on every kind of computer identically with perfect security. Sure. (<http://java.sun.com>)

HotJava: Sun's own browser to demo Java applets until better-known browsers catch up.

JavaScript: A simplified version of Java "for the rest of us," put together by Netscape and Sun; formerly called LiveScript. (<http://www.netscape.com>)

Amber: The code name for the next version of Adobe Acrobat. Some of Amber's features include the ability to display PDF (portable document format) pages inside Web-browser windows and download individual PDF pages instead of whole documents. (<http://www.adobe.com/Amber/Index.html>)

Shockwave: Macromedia's format for delivering interactive Macromedia Director presentations over the Net. (<http://www.macromedia.com>)

RealAudio: A way to play audio in real time over a 14.4- or 28.8-kbps modem. You don't have to download it in advance—just click, wait a few seconds, and there's the NPR piece you missed last week. (<http://www.realaudio.com>)

Intranet: Internet technology being used to do work inside corporate networks, rather than to reach out to the rest of the world. Very hot, very now. IBM notes it has 30 internal Web servers for every publicly accessible external one.



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