THE VISION THING...

The Highest Standard

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Now that I'm no longer a teenager boiling in his own hormones, I can honestly say that the dominant force in my life is *curiosity*. If someone drops a word I've never heard before, I must look it up. If I read of a place previously unknown to me (such as happened recently with Queen Maud Land and the Kerguelen Islands), I'm on the floor with a book in my lap, devouring. If something makes the inside of my head itch, dammit, I gotta *scratch*.

That's why when I first experienced the Net, what I saw was not dirty pictures or chat rooms or political arguments, but a Virtual Encyclopedia of Absolutely Everything, through which I could zero in on any arbitrary element of all human knowledge. Almost two years ago, in keeping with the all-volunteer nature of the Internet, I sat down

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and tried to give things a push in that direction. It didn't work. I hit a wall.

The problem: Knowledge is more than information—it's information with an implied order of some sort. Paper encyclopedias list topics alphabetically because they're on paper—only one ordering is possible, and that's the most useful order to have. But a Net-based virtual encyclopedia can be ordered in any number of ways. We can have the traditional alphabetical view, as well as a true hierarchical view of knowledge, where we gather together related items in a vertical tree without forbidding hyperlinks to any other arbitrary point on the tree. Bichons? Under nonsporting dogs,

under dogs, under carnivores, under mammals, under vertebrates, under animals, under biology. Hot link to the Canary Islands, to allergy medicine, to canine hip dysplasia.

What nailed me was trying to build the tree. Sheesh, that rock was heavier than it looked! I was trying to create a category for everything (each with a unique numeric code), with every category in an acceptable position in the Big Tree. This was first of all a lot of work, and more importantly, it required a lot of decisions involving many areas I knew nothing about. (Imagine me trying to categorize skin diseases or Asian languages.)

It's possible to do a lot without such a hierarchical structure (see my article on the Virtual Encyclopedia in this issue), but to truly be a *virtual* encyclopedia, the hierarchy has to happen. People have suggested using the Dewey decimal or Library of Congress cataloging systems, but while either could be helpful, neither is hierarchical. (The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defined a hierarchical organization of knowledge 25

years ago in their Propedia, but they own it, and I don't expect them to hand it to the world gratis.)

No. What we need is a new Internet standard, not for protocols, but for the hierarchy of knowledge. It's a big job, but it could be done with some intelligent committee work. Consider it the ultimate exercise in structured analysis.

And because the goal is to build a *tree*, the project could proceed incrementally. Start by deciding what the root categories are: science, technology, humanity, art, philosophy, religion, and so on at that highest level. That one level alone would be useful to our overburdened search engines. Then hand off each root category to an expert in that area for subdivision into the next level. Once each level of subdivision is agreed upon, it can immediately be used without invalidating anything that came before. As each level of the tree takes form, it adds a new degree of precision to our ability to create virtual views of all human knowledge.

The description of the tree, and how it should be encoded into Web documents, should be catalogued as an RFC (Request For Comment), as nearly all other Internet protocols are. It should be in the public domain. Even if it never gets down to individual skin diseases, it still could become spectacularly useful, especially as the number of items on the Web grows astronomically and even well-tailored searches yield hundreds of hits.

I'm trying to get various people in influential positions interested in such a project. More on this as it happens—and your feedback, as always, is more than welcome. ▼