

Job^{of a} Lifetime

Danianne Mizzy

Scouting out the best of the 'net

If the prospect of having the Internet as your special collection and the world as your audience exhilarates rather than intimidates, then working for the Internet Scout Project (ISP) might be your job of lifetime. Since 1994, the Scout Project, housed in the Computer Sciences Department of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has produced one of the oldest and best respected free Internet current awareness publications, the Internet Scout Report. David Sleasman has been metadata and cataloging coordinator for the past three years.

Sites and software

When I asked Sleasman to describe what his job entailed, I expected to hear all about cataloging the best Internet sites. What I didn't know was that from its inception, the Scout Project has also been developing its own open source software tools, notably the Scout Portal Toolkit (SPT), and, most recently, the Collection Workflow and Integration System (CWIS), and Sleasman has worked on both. "The Scout Portal Toolkit (SPT) was a project funded by the Mellon Foundation to develop a complete, open source package for Web portals. It is meant to be easily turnkey and customizable and is shipped with standards compliant metadata, OAI harvesting, etc. Currently there is a growing community of users in the United States, Europe, and Asia. CWIS was developed for the National Science Digital Library (NSDL) project and is a tweaking of the Scout Portal Toolkit software for the NSDL environment. They want to connect research scientists to the education community. Research scientists don't necessarily know about organizing



David Sleasman, metadata and cataloging coordinator for the Scout Project.

information except for their own purposes, let alone for exchange, aggregation, and building services across all that aggregation. This package is to help them bridge that gap. Groups or organizations can use this turnkey software to put new collections online. It provides a basic Web site that they can customize, so they don't have to reinvent the wheel. Once they set up the data, it can be harvested into the central NSDL repository. Both packages are available to download from the Scout site."

A very librarian-like skill

Sleasman's major contribution to the CWIS project has been performing quality assurance (QA) testing as part of the software development process. "A librarian is actually very good at doing QA (bug) testing. It's a very librarian-like skill. Every time something changes, you have to go through the entire software package again and again, but it's not a rote process. You have to be able to think about the implications of changing the format of the data, or all the variants of how someone might use this package. You also have to consider the workflow process. All these ideas have to be running through your head as you're testing."

I asked if he had a background in this prior to joining the Scout Project. "No. Cataloging was comfortable. I had done that. QA testing was totally new to me, especially on this level with the importance that's placed on it. There was a sharp learning curve, an apprenticeship during which the software engineers helped. I'm not a programmer by training but even though this is very technical, soft skills are important. It helps to under-

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stand how the creators think and getting to know them as people is a big part of that.”

Cataloging the Internet

During a presentation to a library school cataloging class, Sleasman was once asked, “Are you a normal librarian?” His reply was, “Yes, very normal, very traditional, but it took a leap of faith that my skills were indeed applicable here in this environment. Cataloging the Internet is a leap of faith, especially when you know that whatever you do is now going to be viewable by not only by your entire readership, and anyone that comes to your Web page, but also anyone [who] uses Google. We estimate that with subscribers and Web hits, the Scout Report has about 350,000 readers a week.”

I asked about his role in cataloging the resources featured in the free weekly Scout Reports. “When everything is purring along, I oversee the cataloging. Usually we have a project assistantship position, filled by a second-year library school student with cataloging experience. We use LCSH, but a highly untraditional application. We break apart the subdivisions and use it as a browsing hierarchy. Being a librarian and tradition-bound, at first I was highly skeptical that this would work, but it solves several problems. It’s a widely used vocabulary and it permits us to exchange data with other projects.”

Sleasman is also responsible for the Scout Archives. “The Archives houses all of the annotations and descriptions from the previous years of all of our publications. They are given controlled names, classified, and are put into a database that is both browseable and searchable. The original archives, which was then called Signpost, was just a demonstration project that had been pieced together using hardware and software that were never intended to last very long.

When I first arrived, that system was still in place but it was unworkable. We needed something more stable and that involved far less human labor in terms of cataloging and maintaining. I worked with the software engineers on a tool that became the basis of the Scout Portal Toolkit (SPT). Once we had a stable software package for SPT, we began applying that to our own site. Now, our site is completely run by our own software.

Every time we put out a new version or enhanced features to SPT or CWIS we can just automatically update the software. Along the way, I’ve improved the cataloging and made it all consistent. Because of those things it’s more usable in terms of sharing data. We’ve come a very long way.”

Can you morph?

Sleasman reflected that his job at Scout has changed a lot over time, in part because of the small staff. “There are only four full-time staff people: myself, two programmers, and another librarian. We’re grant-funded so we have to be very flexible about our roles. If one of us can fulfill a certain niche, we’ll move into that, so over time the job slowly morphs into something completely different. Because we have to generate our own revenue, we

constantly have to think about grant writing and developing digital library projects that fit our strengths.” Another difference he mentioned was the lack of hierarchy. “It’s very free form here. There’s not a hierarchy that would exist in a traditional library. For ex-

ample, software work-flow is really up to us. You have to be a self-starter, be very motivated, and be able to keep priorities in your head in relationship to other deadlines that are coming up. So that is a real challenge. My expectation of the rate of change has been greatly altered by working here. The library profession, in the aggregate, is tradition bound and slowly evolving whereas this job is always, ‘Next!’”

Keep those e-mails and links coming

Sleasman mused about the challenges and rewards of Web publication. “When we send out our publications, it sort of goes into the void. You wonder, is anybody there, does anybody care? But we get lots of great e-mail feedback and that’s very rewarding. It’s also interesting to see how the Internet as a whole responds to us. We’re this tiny little project, but Google, which is this all-powerful search engine, ranks us pretty highly in its results. That’s rewarding because it opens up our resources to a whole new audience.” Let’s hope the Scout Project continues to deliver its weekly Web gems for a long time to come. ■

Metadata and cataloging coordinator

What:

The Scout Project

Where:

Computer Sciences Department of the University of Wisconsin-Madison

For more information, visit: www.scout.cs.wisc.edu/