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#52 How to Challenge a Virtual Brontosaurus

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The World Wide Web has now left its first decade of existence well behind it, with the result that untold thousands of stabs in the virtual dark have been attempted. Most failed after consuming billions of dollars of venture capital. Out of those wildly disparate ventures (remember pet food on the Internet?), only a surprisingly small number of business models, social sites, and the like found traction, each emulated to a greater or lesser extent by countless imitators. In most cases, only one or a few of ultimately rose to the top.

Indeed, during these heady times it seemed the highly evolved ecosystem of bricks and morter commerce and human society had been annihilated by a technological meteor, opening up endless niches that could be populated by new, nimble on-line ventures and social spaces, each engaged in a frantic, Darwinian struggle rivaling the real-world competition that followed the Pre-Cambrian Extinction.

In due and rapid course, this fast-forwarding evolutionary process determined the virtual phyla that would be the survivors in the post-impact world – a process accelerated by a sudden, adverse economic change that ensured that only the very fittest would survive. After that shakeout, the New World order had been established, with some species very much at the top of the food chain: on line auctions (eBay) proved to be Boffo at the Internet boxoffice, as were book sellers (Amazon - after a prodigious outflow of investor dollars). So also cut-rate stock brokers (eTrade), illegal wagering (R.I.P. – not every species that flourishes at first sustains when the environment changes), and, of course, that modern-day Tyrannosaurus Rex of the Web – Search (Google).

Vegetarians, of course, also rebounded. Community sites sprang up like toad stools, large (Craigslist - slightly carniverous, actually) and small (countless open source projects, many flourishing at Sourceforge – the virtual world has islands with their own unique ecosystems, allowing species to flourish locally). With time, there also evolved a mighty Brontosaurus (a/k/a the Wikipedia), which flourishes, in various sizes, throughout the world and continues to extend its range.

Today it seems that all of the available niches are full, or nearly so, with each niche characteristically dominated by one Alpha species. Only at greater and greater intervals is a new phylum of Web-based potential discovered (when, after all, did the last YouTube explode?)

As a result, the glorious days of opportunity are largely ended – at least until the next technology-based meteor strikes.

Or so it would seem, until we take another evolutionary force into account: symbiosis, conjoined with a bit of incubation, perhaps, to protect the new species from the brutal realities of the real world until it has gained some strength. With a little help from an already dominant species, there may still be a way for a new contender species to grow and challenge the Internet incumbents after all.

Google, it appears, thinks that this may be the case, and it's willing to find out by challenging the Brontosaurus.

It all began with an inconspicuous **announcement** posted at the Google Web site on December 13, 2007, in which Google revealed that it was launching a non-public Beta of its own collaborative on-line encyclopedia project. The project would not, however, be simply a clone of the Wikipedia: significant differences would include single-author control for each entry, freedom for other authors to set up competing pages, bylines for page authors, reader ranking, and - oh yes - Google ads. That's where the symbiosis comes in: authors that wish to permit ads to be displayed at their Knols (GoogleSpeak for "a unit of knowledge") will be entitled to receive a "substantial" share of the resulting revenues.

Here's how Google introduced the concept:

The web contains an enormous amount of information, and Google has helped to make that information more easily accessible by providing pretty good search facilities. But not everything is written nor is everything well organized to make it easily discoverable. There are millions of people who possess useful knowledge that they would love to share, and there are billions of people who can benefit from it. We believe that many do not share that knowledge today simply because it is not easy enough to do that. The challenge posed to us by Larry, Sergey and Eric was to find a way to help people share their knowledge. This is our main goal.

The question is how successfully the Knol project will compete with the Wikipedia, both in attracting author input as well as readers.

And, of course, how it will compete in quality, a concern that Google may share, given that it has decided to incubate its fledgling competitor out of sight for now. According to an article published in the **New York Times** two days after the Google announcement, it is possible that the Knol project may never leave the nest, if early results are not encouraging. During the first phase, page authors will be admitted by invitation only - a smart move, as it will not only get the project off to a high quality start, but will also appeal to the egos of other authors that want to join an at least initially exclusive club.

That said, the sample Knol included in the announcement struck me as being rather intimidating for potential authors - and perhaps deliberately so, to discourage people from setting up anything less than a print encyclopedia style and quality entry. Whether Google has aimed too high in doing so will remain to be seen. That said, Google's announcement says that it will not exercise any editorial control over individual topic entries, and, as a result, "we cannot expect that all of them will be of high quality."

Google describes the roll out as follows:

Earlier this week, we started inviting a selected group of people to try a new, free tool that we are calling "knol".… Our goal is to encourage people who know a particular subject to write an authoritative article about it. The tool is still in development and this is just the first phase of testing. For now, using it is by invitation only. But we wanted to share with everyone the basic premises and goals behind this project.

The less rigid approach adopted by Google for the project is what I find to be most intriguing. In effect, the Knol platform resembles like Sourceforge more than the Wikipedia, since the tools provided will allow different, variously open cultures to evolve under specific topics, with some authors insisting on maintaining total control of their topic, and others acting as project managers, guiding the process in a manner more like an open source project. In short, the Knol project will be another island where new evolutionary experiments can play out. Here's how Google described this freedom:

Knols will include strong community tools. People will be able to submit comments, questions, edits, additional content, and so on. Anyone will be able to rate a knol or write a review of it. Knols will also include references and links to additional information. At the discretion of the author, a knol may include ads. If an author chooses to include ads, Google will provide the author with substantial revenue share from the proceeds of those ads.

Not only different models of collaboration would be possible, but different types of presentations and areas of focus, making the Knol a less uniform, but more interesting browse, at least in its pioneer phase; over time, a more uniform approach might organically evolve. Or, who knows, perhaps not - perhaps the island of the Knol might become more like a library than an encyclopedia, which could be very exciting indeed.

Assuminig that the Knol project is release from the incubator and the public is invited to participate, it will be quite interesting to see which pages become most popular when there are duplicates - the page written by (for example) a college professor including exclusively her own content, or a competing page constructed and constantly updated through a more Wikipedian process? The strictly objective essay, or the edgy, screenshot reflection of the sensibilities of the moment?

All that aside, the question remains: if Google gives a Knol, will authors in fact come?

Notwithstanding its huge success, it's worth noting that a comparatively small number of people out of the more than a billion potential authors with Internet access actually contribute the great majority of the Wikipedia's content. Still, it has been able to achieve an enormous breadth of articles, each striving for an objective presentation, based upon available third party material. Google evidently hopes that it's model will appeal to enough subject matter experts to compete, thereby populating an encyclopedia with thousands of entries.

Will that happen? In fact, I'm rather doubtful. The success of community-based projects has to date seemingly relied on a delicate, and thus far only partially understood set of dynamics. The factors involved include the power of viral information distribution, the appeal of psychic as compared to monetary rewards, on-line social mores, and equal opportunity balanced with merit-based authority. The Google plan is sufficiently different in many of these areas that its attraction therefore remains to be demonstrated.

The final way in which the project appeals to me from an experimental point of view is that it represents a potential solution for one of the more intractable issues that the evolution of the Web to date has posed. On the one hand, the Web gives anyone the potential to display their works of authorship and attract readers. On the other hand, it has hugely impacted the ability of writers to make a living from their craft, due to the explosion of high quality, interesting, and diverse content at a multiplicity of sites. Perhaps Google's willingness to share ad revenue to a more significant extent than in the past may provide sufficient life support to save at least one pre-Internet meteor species from the very brink of extinction.

Or, at least, so I hope. My day job is getting in the way of my writing.

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