THE EGRESS OF SPURL.NET

DAVID CARPE, *Clew, LLC*

A child of five would understand this. Send someone to fetch a child of five.

Groucho Marx

A while back, I wrote an article in SCIP.online (issue 53, March 23, 2004) about a web based bookmarking utility called Furl. As the weeks passed, I received emails regarding a site with a shockingly similar name and seemingly like features called Spurl.

If Furl is about building highly personalized resource collections to potentially share with others, Spurl (*www.spurl.net*) is about building highly collaborative resource collections with others to perhaps personally keep. Furl and Spurl are both maddeningly simple for viewers to comprehend, but this simplicity belies a much more sophisticated goal for their audiences. Each offers a unique feature set, certain distinct advantages, and quite different long-term plans as *going concerns*.

Given my unabashed dedication to equal-cynicism-for-all, I approached the founder of Spurl, Hjalmar Gislason, to discuss the state of internet research and what the Spurl site is all about.

Is there a simple explanation of Spurl.net?

Spurl.net helps users remember! It stores the useful and interesting things they come across while browsing. Once stored, these quality information sources are easily accessible again through full-text search. As thousands of users are using the same tool, Spurl can recommend things that you will be interested in and enable you to find related information that other Spurl users have come across. You can also easily share your findings with others or even work together in groups, collecting information on a given topic.

Can you tell me a little bit more about where Spurl came from and how you pay for food?

Spurl.net is funded by a small group of private investors. The original idea was a recommendations engine – somewhere that I and my friends could send in links that we found interesting and then at a convenient time check what was there and take a look, rather than bombing each other with emails and instant messages every time we came across something.

Then I started thinking about how this would scale and how one would — from a large number of users — make sure that you'd see the things you were most likely to find interesting. Around Christmas 2003 I found some free time and started coding what was released as Spurl.net in early February.

Is 'spurling' something that should exist at the major search engines?

I'm convinced that all of the big search engine and portal players will offer Spurl-like functionality within 12-18 months. It's a great service for their users and it's probably as direct a source of human information about the web as it can get.

This human information can be used to improve the search engines' website indexes, consequently improving the search results they return (for all users, not only the users of the Spurl-like features) Consider the paid editors at Yahoo! and the human intelligence used to calculate PageRank. There are also other clear indications that the search industry is looking in this direction.

Some analysts claim that Google's acquisition of Blogger was a way to tap into a huge source of human website information, as blogging is all about linking heavily to other sources and related information. The *advanced* features in the Google toolbar (displaying PageRank is one of them) also enables them to tap into human usage information for all websites visited with the Google Toolbar installed. But this does not say anything about whether they found the informaton on that page useful or why he or she was looking at it.

On the other hand, Spurling a page is a sure indication that the page was worth the visit. In addition the user categorizes the page, writes a description, a few keywords or highlights an important snip from the text on the page. All of this is highly valuable, humanly written, meta information about the page.

Despite all the talk about Google, I still believe that of the three big ones, Yahoo! is in the best position to tap into this kind of source. They have a much tighter relationship with their users and are providing much more than search. Providing a Spurl-like service would be a logical service addition for their users, while at the same time contributing to their all-but-dead search engine. It could be a way for them to start fighting back as they desperately need innovation to stand a chance against Google (and soon MSN) in the search space.

Who do you think offers a relevant competitive service?

I spend my time developing Spurl.net, listening to my users' feedback and following my own vision for the best bookmarking system. I also try to keep an elaborate balance between introducing new features, and making what is already there as user-friendly and straight-forward as possible. The vision is that when it comes to

maintaining a collection of online resources, whether it is for yourself only or to publish for others on the web, Spurl.net will be the tool of choice.

Some have suggested that Spurl has copied Furl.

There are similarities in the products. Some of them were introduced first in Spurl.net, others in Furl, but most of them are simply logical for a product of this nature and many have been floating around for years in different products, research projects and online discussions. As for the unfortunate similarities in the name, Spurl originally comes from a friend's idea: "Special URL(s)," but is not supposed to stand for that – it's just a name.

The main differences between Spurl.net and Furl are that the sidebar quickly becomes a favorite tool of the users that give the service a spin, the directories allow groups to work together on a subject, and users have complete anonymity even to the Spurl. net staff (you choose a username and password). Our goal is to be the best bookmark manager available. Using it is going to be free of charge, anonymous, and without any ads.

How will you make money with Spurl?

Our business model is analyzing the website information in our database and selling that unique source of human intelligence about the web to search engines, web filtering companies, web traffic analysts, and research firms. For example, search engines can use this data to improve their web page index database. While Google and other search engines have robot spiders harvesting information about the web, Spurl.net's thousands of users are doing the same by hand. Such human information (based on a human taking the time to actually read and review a page) is much more valuable than any automatically gathered data. (Note: The information Spurl.net gathers and sells is anonymous information about the websites – not about individual users. Beyond choosing a username and

password, Spurl.net users do not have to provide any personal info and Spurl. net will not share any such information with a third party.)

Two major stepping stones in the history of web search are based on humanly gathered information: early Yahoo's directories with their paid human editors, and Google's PageRank, largely based on counting human created links to a page as a sign that the page had something to do with the words in the link and surrounding text.

To make this a reality I decided to turn Spurl.net into the best online bookmarking service out there. The full-text search, the Spurl bar and cross-browser, and OS compatibility did a lot to help with that. The social aspects and the syndication options were already there.

When you look at the world of search and meta-search, who is offering the most innovative advancements for users?

Google. But recently there are others doing very interesting things: blog and feed searching with Technorati, Daypop, Feedster and the like. A9's search query backlog is an example of something very simple that is a big improvement. Personalized search is interesting, but extremely tricky. Eurekster has some of the more innovative things coming out of that space. Clustered search results (a la Vivisimo) will be more common but needs to improve first.

If you could order the major search engines to change, what might your dictum sound like?

I think some of the big opportunities are in tapping into the way users are using the search engines already and analyze that to improve the search results. I have never understood why the search engines are not counting the clicks that a link gets in the returned search results. This applies especially for very broad term searches. If one of the result items in a search for a term like *music* is very seldom clicked, it is probably not a good result and should

be replaced with another better one. In a similar way if a result that appears as number 15 in a result list is clicked more often than the law of averages says it should be, it is probably a good one and should be moved up.

The competition is all about the first 10 items in the search results. Most users never browse past that and will give up or turn to another source (or try another search) if the first 10 don't turn up anything useful.

Another thing of a similar nature is *listening in* on how the best searchers dig up information. You can learn a lot about how to improve your search engine if you can take a look at and analyze a whole 5-10 minute searching session of an advanced user, using maybe a dozen queries and carefully selected search conjunctions and modifiers.

What's on the near term horizon for Spurl?

We're constantly improving, and many of the latest improvements involve group-spurling or what we call *Spurl directories*. They allow users to work together on research on a specific subject and share their findings with one another or publish it on the web (or just as a convenient form for an individual to publish his links).

We're working on an improved version of the directories and we have high hopes for that part of the service. For example users of such features could include corporate departments (programming groups), friend groups, organizations, group bloggers, any group who could benefit from each other's online findings.

David Carpe is the principal and Founder of Clew, LLC, a competitive intelligence consulting firm serving several of the world's most formidable organizations. He is also the founder of PassingNotes.com, a research community. He may be reached at david@clew.us. ●