

FINDING A PATHWAY TO LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

DAVID MAIDA REPORTS ON A HUGE ONLINE UNDERTAKING THAT ASKED SERIOUS QUESTIONS OF THE DESIGNERS - BUT HAS ALL THE ANSWERS FOR ITS USERS.

I'm reminded of the Woody Allen movie, except instead of sex it's 'everything you always wanted to know about New Zealand'.

Te Ara is its name, which literally means "the pathway". Launched earlier this year, the website's goal is to put as much information about New Zealand as possible in one online encyclopaedia - www.teara.govt.nz/

"Te Ara takes you on a journey of discovery," boasts the site. "Beginning with the theme of New Zealanders, it will eventually present a comprehensive guide to New Zealand - its natural environment, history, culture, economics and government."

In fact, it will eventually hold about three million words, with 30,000 pieces of media including more than 1,000 moving image clips, maps, diagrams, photos and audio clips.

Such a huge undertaking, of course, begged some serious design questions: Where to begin? How to conceive and build the site? What sort of platform should it sit on?

Then there's the audience. It includes everyone from locals to overseas visitors; they all have to be able to easily find the information they're looking for, as well as be entertained by just browsing.

With funding from the Ministry for Culture and Heritage - \$1.2 million per year - Te Ara brought in outside Web developers and designers from Optimisation and Shift.

Shift's creative director Brian Smith knew the site's navigation had to be flawless.

"We needed a very intuitive browsing mechanism and also a very simple-to-use search system," he said. "We have provided multiple pathways to things; so there is no one

way of getting to content. There's always at least two and often five or six ways of getting to any single piece of content."

This is one of the first sites of its kind - so, anything goes. The project uses Microsoft's Content Management system to translate XML files into HTML. This allows the whole look and feel of the website to be changed long after old Web pages are put in.

"It's a very fascinating system. It's one of the few sites where all the data is created as XML files, which is really unique these days. It's what everyone is talking about doing but very few people actually are."

This system means the same data can be used and presented differently years down the track.

"We're just putting a different style sheet over the top of it to change the look of it," explained Smith. "And in the future it would be possible to do things like have a completely different style sheet for mobile devices. Without touching the HTML, you could put a different style sheet across, and it would be reduced down to be readable on cellphones or Palm Pilot-size devices."

Just how people would use the existing site is the responsibility of Shift's interaction designer, Alex Smith. Te Ara was put through test after test - with students chosen as the sample audience.

"We took all the proposed content and did a user testing technique called 'card sorting'," he said.

"We basically loaded the planned content into the card sorting software and then took it out to schools.

"The result was a good insight into mental models of the students, which allowed us to make sure the content was structured from their perspective rather than the team's."

The testing dictated how further development would proceed.

"Each one of the techniques we used at that certain point in the process definitely informed the next steps in the future direction. We would advocate doing small discreet bits of user testing throughout the entire process as opposed to waiting till the end to find out."

In August, the site received 58,000 hits, and 22.3 GB of material - which appears in English and Maori - was downloaded.

With the enormous amount of content to be loaded into Te Ara - currently 4 GB and counting - a full-time team of content producers has taken on the challenge.

"One of the things we decided to do was to develop each entry progressively," said general editor Jock Phillips, "then put it up on the Web, and send it out to contributors to review."

Te Ara is pulling in content from all over the country to represent every aspect of New Zealand life.

"We got together a team of 16, who range from people who are writing and checking content, to turn it into something that's going to work on the Web. We have a team of four people who scour the archives and museums of the country. And we've had great co-operation from TVNZ and Natural History New Zealand."

Te Ara is expected to be a 10-year project. And with the XML database, it can evolve and change its look all along the way. After that? We'll have to wait and see. ■

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