Bubble City: Chapter 3

November 3, 2007

The next day was a Saturday but by the following Monday things had calmed down and Jason could finally begin real work.

He began, as he always did, by trying to figure out the system. You couldn't really work on something until you really *grokked* it: understood all the pieces and how they interacted and why they were there. If you didn't get that, then you could spend days trying to fix one piece, only to discover all your effort was wasted because your fixes would be ineffective as long as another part was in place.

He first checked out a copy of the code, staring at the list of thousands of files on his screen, trying to figure out where to start. As usual, nobody had bothered to write down anything explaining things. So he began opening pieces up, finding that they referenced other sections and bouncing from section to section until the big picture became clearer.

By the end of the day, he felt he had a pretty solid understanding of how the whole thing worked. Not how people *thought* it worked, but how it actually did — what the code that actually ran the system said.

"What the hell were they thinking?" Sarah thought, as she sat staring at yet another of the braindead interfaces the programmers had come up with. She knew they had no contact with other humans but honestly sometimes she didn't understand why they couldn't even figure out basic principles of decent design.

She started, as she always did, by trying to figure out the system. She looked at the various pieces of the interface and tried to figure out the different concepts they were manipulating. Programmers always thought of it in terms of how the system was built, but the users had no idea how the system was built and couldn't cares.

You had to think of it from their perspective: what was it they wanted to do, what were the things they encountered along the way, and how could you make sure they felt like they were in control of those things?

And then, once you figured all that out, how did you beat it through the heads of the programmers?

Trent's calendar warned him of an impending VC meeting. Running an office like this — servers, employees, big looming screens overhead — wasn't cheap. And since the site didn't run ads or have a revenue stream, the only way to keep the lights on was to trot back to the VCs every six months with some impressive charts and some pleas for cash.

He looked through the names of the people he was meeting with and then jumped over to scan their blogs. To pitch to people you really had to understand them. Figure out what made them tick. Everyone required a different pitch and Trent knew exactly how to reshape it for them, just as Newsflip reshaped a series of links to meet the reader's desires.

He remembered what companies they'd previously invested on, which ones had done well, what they'd mentioned their kids were into, what gadgets they enjoyed, and — most importantly — how Trent had cut them favors in the past. This town ran on that sort of thing.

High above the Newsflip offices loomed a series of big screens with a rapidly-scrolling list of links. The lists were generated by a series of crawlers which ran, 24/7, around various weblogs and social bookmarking sites. Every time someone posted a new link to their blog, or bookmarked something on del.icio.us, or voted for it on Digg, it saw it and noted it. Then another program took these triples (jon, del.icio.us bookmarked, lessig.org) and scoured them for patterns. Were a group of people all bookmarking lessig.org today? Are a dozen blogs all linking to a particular YouTube video?

It then used these patterns to cluster users into groups. Jon, Jim, and Jill all like YouTube videos about cats. Sal, Sue, and Sam all like newspaper articles about copyright.

And that way, when it saw a new YouTube video about cats, or a new newspaper article about copyright, it could make a guess at who would like it. And that combination of guesses made up the Newsflip front page.

When you visited Newsflip for the first time, it'd show you a bunch of things that were widely liked by different groups of people. Maybe the top link today about music and sports and technology and business. And when you clicked the one you liked the most — let's say music — it'd show you ten more stories from the various subgroups of music. In just a couple clicks — music, pop, indie, guitar-based — it'd have you figured out and know a great deal more about which kind of links to send your way.

From then on, every time you visited the site it would use this knowledge to send you links it thought you might like. It would also show you a few random popular links as well, just to make sure it wasn't missing out on any other odd tastes you had. So every time you visited Newsflip it served you up a couple

dozen stories it thought that you would like. (Of course, it also noted down which stories you clicked on and said you liked, right along with the links and bookmarks.)

At the heart of it was the pattern-finding system that noticed when groups of people seemed to be doing something. It was based on a system called Notated News Analysis (NNA) which had been invented ages ago by some old guy who turned it into a public standard. Now dozens of sites, including Newsflip, used it to try to generate the best recommendations about what to see on the Internet.

Samuel scrolled through his notes one last time before the meeting. Soon people would be filing into the conference room and he couldn't afford to seem unprepared in front of them. He visualized himself standing in front of the room, walking through the bullet points, smoothly ordering the meeting, parrying questions, parceling out action items, dodging barbs. He was ready.

People filed in, pulled out their laptops, and engaged in the pre-meeting chit-chat; the final moment of levity before the meeting's dreadfully boring waste of time. Finally, he tapped on the table for order.

"Hey everyone, welcome back to the monday morning evangelism team coordination meeting. As usual, we'll go around the table and have each team bring us up to date on their activities. I'll start."

"So this week I gave a keynote at OSCON and encouraged developers to use Google Platform to host their apps. My main points were: 1) that this was a new era of openness here at Google, where we were handing control of our computers to the community; 2) that we had by far the most powerful and scalable system for deployment; and 3) that we were always on the lookout for the developers of the next hot application and that users of Google Platform would be fast-tracked with the acquisition team."

"Alright, HR?"

"So this week we did a booth at the Ubuntu conference. These things continue to be an amazing value for us. The booth costs a pittance, we managed to snag four top developers out of it (gave them the usual bullshit about the Goog's commitment to open source), and we lined them up in job slots that are definitely going to take them out of the open source world for a while."

"Great work! Standards?"

"Well, the big news continues to be NNA. Newsflip, a small startup up in San Francisco, was trying to switch away from it but, of all things, *Wayne Darnus* turned the firehose on them and managed to talk them out of it. So now—"

"Wait, Wayne Darnus?" "Yup!" "What's his angle?" "Well, you know, he says he invented NNA so anything that takes attention away from it just makes

him less important." Samuel broke out laughing. "Oh god, that's perfect. So what did he do?" "Oh, you know, the usual. Did a piece on how he was oh-so-concerned about all the poor users who would be hurt by the switch." Samuel couldn't stop giggling. "Oh my god," he said. "This is just too perfect." "Yeah, the guy's basically doing our job for us."

"Yeah, exactly. Hey, that gives me an idea. Do you have Wayne's number?" "His phone number?" "Yeah." "Uh, sure, I've got it here somewhere. OK, 510-555-2414." Samuel picked up the phone and dialed it, repeating the numbers back as he did. He made a shushing sound and set it on speakerphone.

"Hello?" came the gruff voice at the other end. "Wayne! Good to hear you. Hey, this is Samuel Boxton over at Google Evangelism." "Google? Hey, I didn't say *anything* about Google on today's show. That stuff I said wasn't targeted you at all."

"No, no, Wayne, I'm not calling to *complain*; I'm calling to *congratulate*." "Congratulate? Congratulate what?" "Congratulate *you*, silly. On the great job you did with Newsflip. That was a real act of generous diplomacy you did there." "Oh, uh, well, I guess it was. Thanks. But why does Google care about something like that?"

"Don't be silly, Wayne. At Google we're just like you — looking out for the users. Trying to make the best Web experience for everyone. We're really 100% on the same page there." "Um, yeah then, I suppose we are." "You know, it's a shame that we've never managed to collaborate before. Our interests are so aligned that it would really be great if we could figure out some way to work together." "What do you mean? Do you have some kind of joint project in mind?"

"No, not exactly, Wayne. I was thinking more some kind of funding arrangement." "Funding arrangement," Wayne repeated. "Yes. Now hear me out: what if we funded The Wayne Darnus Center for User Priorities?" "The Wayne Darnus Center for User Priorities. I like the sound of that." "I thought you would. Now we'll give you a startup grant to help you establish and operate the center, which will keep on doing the good work you're doing to promote NNA." "Um, OK." "To start with, I was thinking of an initial grant of around three million dollars." Wayne coughed suddenly but soon regained his composure. "Um, yes, well, I think that should be able to cover our initial operations."

"Perfect. There's just one more catch." "Oh," Wayne said, his voice falling a bit. "What?" "Well, here at Google we don't want to make a big show about how we're helping the Web. So it's essential our donation remain anonymous." "Anonymous?" "Yeah, you know how whenever you go to a museum or something like that it always says 'Generous donations by anonymous'? That's just how it works in philanthropy." "Oh, I see," Wayne said.

"So we'll be doing it exactly like that. The actual money will be donated to you by a shell corporation called Rinaldi Tile, Inc. which we use for these

kinds of special projects and we'll have you sign a confidentiality agreement prohibiting you from disclosing the real source. You know, all the usual stuff." "Uh huh," Wayne said, a bit skeptically. "And then we'll send you the three million dollars." "Sounds great!" Wayne said quickly "Where do I sign?" "I'll have my assistant send over the papers in just a little bit." "Perfect." "Been a pleasure working with you. See you later." "Bye."

Samuel hung up the phone and saw smiling faces around the conference table. He smiled back and got up to take a mock bow. The room applauded.

Tomorrow: Chapter Four