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June 26, 2001

Serfs on the Web

By WALT CROWLEY

SEATTLE — But how do you make any money?" This is the automatic response of virtually everyone upon learning that I run a nonprofit Web site — a dot-org — devoted to local history.

The question is usually posed in quizzical but sympathetic tones, as if addressed to someone who poses a potential danger to himself, if not others. "We make money the old-fashioned way," I reply. "We beg for it." This satisfies no one, but it's the truth.

Things have not improved since the dot-com meltdown. People assume anyone left on the Internet has gone from riches to rags and been reduced to selling off vintage pinball machines to pay the mortgage. But those of us in the domain of the dot-orgs, the gentle realm of "venture socialists" who measure success in community service and usefulness, haven't experienced that change of fortune.

Dot-orgdom was the first civilian settlement in cyberspace after its invention by the military-industrial-academic complex. The dot-coms arrived later, building a tangled Web of virtual strip malls. Now their skydiving fortunes threaten to take the Web, or at least its credibility, with them. Fortunately, there is a safety net (sorry): the dot-orgs, dot-govs, and dot-edus that happily provide free data without having to post losses on the Nasdaq.

But just as many venture capitalists have discovered that the same basic economic rules apply in cyberspace as in the real world, so it is with public service. I have learned this the hard way in developing HistoryLink.org, a community history site for the Pacific Northwest written for the Internet, offering the electronic equivalent of 12,000 printed pages.

This project is not an inexpensive undertaking, when you take the radical step of paying historians, writers, designers and editors a living wage instead of stock options. At first, I naïvely assumed that this resource would appeal to local sponsors motivated by community pride.

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I soon discovered that globalization had severed ties many corporations had to their local communities. Most traditional foundations also proved skeptical, if not openly suspicious, of the Internet, while younger cyber-riche philanthropists were already bored with it.

The project would have died early but for local governments and a few progressive donors who recognized its value in promoting history education and citizen debate. Still, fund- raising remains a daily struggle, and in this, a dot-org is no different from any other nonprofit group. Practicing venture socialism may not make you rich, but it's more honest than a lot of defunct dot-com business plans.

Walt Crowley writes frequently on Pacific Northwest history and is the author of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's guide to Seattle.

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