
Electronic Publishing - How To Do It: GASNet

R Hagenouw

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Abstract

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With the rapid expansion of professional content on GASNet and the spectacular growth of Internet users in the mid and late 1990's, usage of GASNet soared over the years. In 1996 and 1997 mirrors were added throughout Europe and in Australia for faster access all over the world.

Though the structure and layout of the pages was modified over the years, GASNet initially stayed true to the original intent of the HTML₁ creators to restrict pages to content and generic markup suggestions, leaving it to the WWW client as to how to render those pages. This approach has the advantages of low overhead bandwidth requirements and leaves the user to free to configure their web client to view content in the manner he/she prefers.

The vast influx of Internet users that are not technology-oriented but were instead interested in the content itself shifted the character of web sites from making information available to presenting and conveying that information to users in a manner that entices them to read it. Although the printing industry had known for centuries that the presentation of content determined the probability that people would actually read it, this fact was initially strangely ignored on the web.

The GASNet editorial team decided in 1997 to overhaul the site, merge content from the Rotterdam and Brisbane servers and create a whole new site style honed to help users get to the information and present that information in a layout conducive to reading.

Although it took till January 1999 to develop, this approach was immediately successful. Usage of GASNet started increasing even faster than it had before. The more graphic design also proved to be far more cumbersome to maintain, however. Although a web-authoring program was initially used to generate the site, this still left dozens of details that had to be hand-edited for each and every page, thus making site style consistency hard to maintain. Additionally, the authoring program did not provide well for the inclusion of dynamic content. Because dynamic content was the fastest growing part of GASNet, pages were increasingly being hand-coded (again), but this time with the overhead of the graphic design.

As we were at the maximal extent of our possibilities to maintain GASNet it became clear that in order to foster further growth in both scope and depth we had to adopt a professional structure. The incorporation of GASNet in June 2000 enabled us to make funds available to create a completely new infrastructure. This new structure was put into place in April 2001. It is designed to minimize the work required to maintain all details of each page while keeping the site flexible, the site style consistent and putting emphasis on the scientific and editorial content. The current setup features a database that contains all details of the site structure and content sources. Server based scripts generate all pages according to the information in the database and take the content from XML or PHP (for dynamic pages) coded content. The same content sources may be used, using similar scripts, to generate pages for different platforms, such as PDA's.

The new structure has been in place for less than 6 months but has enabled us to put our energy into content development and platform diversification. Over the past few

months, several micro-sites with academic content have been added, with more in various stages of development.

This review was presented as lecture during the Annual Meeting of the Society for Computers in Anesthesia (SCIA)

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References

1. HyperText Markup Language, the language used to describe web pages. <http://www.w3.org/MarkUp/>

Author Information

René Hagenouw, MD

VP, CIO, GASNet Inc., Department of Anesthesiology, University Hospital Rotterdam