

Spectacle - Movement - Futures

**VirtualMaine.net – The Website
Development Proposal
Internet Complement to
the “Countercoup Maine”
Media Campaign Project**

About this document

Available online at: <http://www.nancho.net/cc2002/>

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Arrangement

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1 Summary

The VirtualMaine project intends to establish an inter-related suite of web-based services and resources to expose the corporate coup, create new community networks and inter-issue group coalitions powerful enough to challenge it, revitalize local democracy, and promote the best post-corporate social, economic, and political models now rising from the grassroots in Maine and beyond.

Primary organization and management of the project is being handled through Big Medicine, a Maine-based 501(c)(3) research and education institute, while the architecture and technical implementation is being coordinated by GENEVAR (General Evolution Advocacy & Research), the Australian-based technology provider.

1.1 Executive vision

This project presumes unprecedented and escalating corporate power over the executive, legislative and regulatory offices of our state and national government. This takeover is threatening our democracy, preempting our media, imperiling our environment, and impeding the evolution of sustainable socio-economic alternatives in the fields of health, agriculture, energy, transport, trade, manufacturing, etc.

Over the course of 2002, it proposes to address this coup d'état with the following three-fold strategy:

- 1) A media education campaign to raise public awareness of the truth, nature and harmful effects of corporate rule and realistic available alternatives.

Ways & Means

- **FILM:** Production of a cinematic political docudrama - a feature-length digital movie on a fictional (but extremely noisy) gubernatorial campaign in Maine showing what non-corporate candidates could say, and how citizens might respond to their revelations;
- **TELEVISION:** Development of a non-corporate TV news service - a weekly news program (initially spun off from the fictional campaign noted above) to be distributed state-wide on Maine public access cable stations and nationally via the Free Speech TV satellite;
- **PRINT:** Publication of a regular 4-page insert to be distributed with the Maine Independent Media Center's new state-wide free bimonthly newspaper, The Maine Commons;
- **INTERNET:** Creation of a VirtualMaine website with print and AV capabilities to publicize and interactively feed the Countercoup campaign noted above;

- 2) Community organizing & network development to build coalitions to challenge corporate rule.

Ways & Means

- **MINI CHAUTAUQUAS:** Teach-ins and house parties around the state to attract and organize citizens interested in some or all of the problems caused by corporate rule (social, political, economic, environmental, educational, etc.);
- **INTERNET:** Creation of a VirtualMaine website with sophisticated communication and networking functions that facilitate citizen interaction in regional, issue-specific or inter-issue discussions and campaigns;

- 3) Collation/distribution of resources, tools, and "best practice" models to nurture post-corporate political, social and economic alternatives.

Ways & Means

- **RECREATING DEMOCRACY:** Promotion of the most radical, effective and proven experiments in Consensual (local) Democracy and Swiss-style (state/national) Democracy with publications, workshops and multimedia presentations;

- **INTERNET:** Creation of a VirtualMaine website offering an active database of the most promising tools, resources and paradigms for building healthy, democratic and sustainable communities;

1.2 Driving factors: what's the problem online?

The current range of online communities and resources spans a broad spectrum of technical and organizational factors, yet there are significant inefficiencies in the application of internet-based tools to the problem of empowering social change.

Despite the current popularity of "portals" (thematically organized gateways to external resources), much of today's internet development is still facing basic challenges such as efficient online content management, user profiling, and adoption of distributed decision support tools.

To a large extent, these efforts are compartmentalized within individual organization sponsorship, resulting in a "balkanization" of the online milieu to an extent that there is a high duplication of effort in core areas, while extended opportunities are either ignored or fail to attract popular participation.

For example, there are an endless number of "community directories" which range from simple one-page lists of names and phone numbers, to online databases and networked directories. Although they cover essentially the same territory, these directories are almost universally incompatible with one another, leaving the user to wander from site to site wondering which is the most recent, or most authoritative listing, and with few clues about how a particular organization fits into the larger context of the user's particular worldview.

To be fair, the problem of creating a contextualized, distributed directory resource is a big hurdle, and the development of the "semantic web" is still in its early days.

Nonetheless, we see that there are immediate opportunities for integration and interoperation which could inspire a significant improvement in the utility of the web as a common-consciousness medium.

The VirtualMaine project seeks to make a constructive contribution in this area by taking a few discrete aspects of the challenge and teasing them out within the arena of state-based issues. The choice of Maine as a starting point is justified by the state's progressive legislative and referendum record, its relatively high level of citizen activism, and its communities' economic victimization by NAFTA, run-away shops and national corporate discount chains. With Maine as a successful test bed, the solution we develop could be replicated to other states as conditions become favorable.

In short, the VirtualMaine project addresses:

- The need to foster "just in time communities", or effective alliances around specific issues
- Connecting these issue movements to the bigger, underlying dynamics of corporate rule
- Amplifying and leveraging the existing efforts of groups working in these areas

1.3 The objectives

1.3.1 Many paths to one heaven

To establish a robust web-based technical environment that supports the three project initiatives that define VirtualMaine:

- **Spectacle:** Campaign site for a cinematic gubernatorial candidacy and associated video series set against the backdrop of the nation's first public funded Clean Election, provide a fact/fiction media space, and lay the groundwork for a new statewide alternative news "network";
- **Movement:** A directory and issues driven environment where networking and discussion mechanisms encourage real-life change, especially the weaving of discrete local issues into a comprehensive countercoup movement against corporate rule;

- **Futures:** A resource/best-practice library to showcase possibilities and proven solutions

The three sites will have their own administrative boundaries, but will share technical resources. This approach allows accounting/fundraising, branding, and management load to be partitioned to best suit each area, while only a single technical toolset is required for the whole facility.

1.3.2 Media-melding for maximal relevance

The idea here is to use the websites as convenient tools to amplify public opinion and process. This implies a fluid relationship between the web environment and traditional media channels.

The websites are designed to absorb traditional media inputs easily and efficiently. Likewise, there will be technical channels provided to output web media back to the traditional environment.

For example, we will develop an input service that enables local newspaper headlines to appear on the site. If links to the whole article can be included (i.e., if the article is online somewhere), users will have a sense of context that transcends the web.

Likewise, opinions, polling results, and positions generated through the web facility will be broadcast in a range of formats to newspapers, radio, TV, and relevant websites.

1.3.3 Community partnering

The objective is to advance each area in partnership with external groups so that their own agendas are empowered in the process of growing the VirtualMaine site.

Each of the three main areas connect to at least three external partners:

- **Spectacle – The “Countercoup Maine” Gubernatorial Campaign** will be co-produced with the Indy Media Center, Portland Public Access Center, & Maine’s Community TV Association;
- **Movement:** connects with Maine IndyMedia and ROSC projects for community interaction while using the Chaordic Community paradigms as a structural model;
- **Futures:** connects with case study collections and reference libraries such as the New Way USA project with Eleanor Lecain; the Good Life/Consensual Democracy initiative with Ellen LaConte, and the National Democracy Initiative led by Sen. Mike Gravel

There are a wide range of existing groups and movements already tuned to these areas, and this project will provide unification environment for efficiently exposing those efforts to allies and supporters.

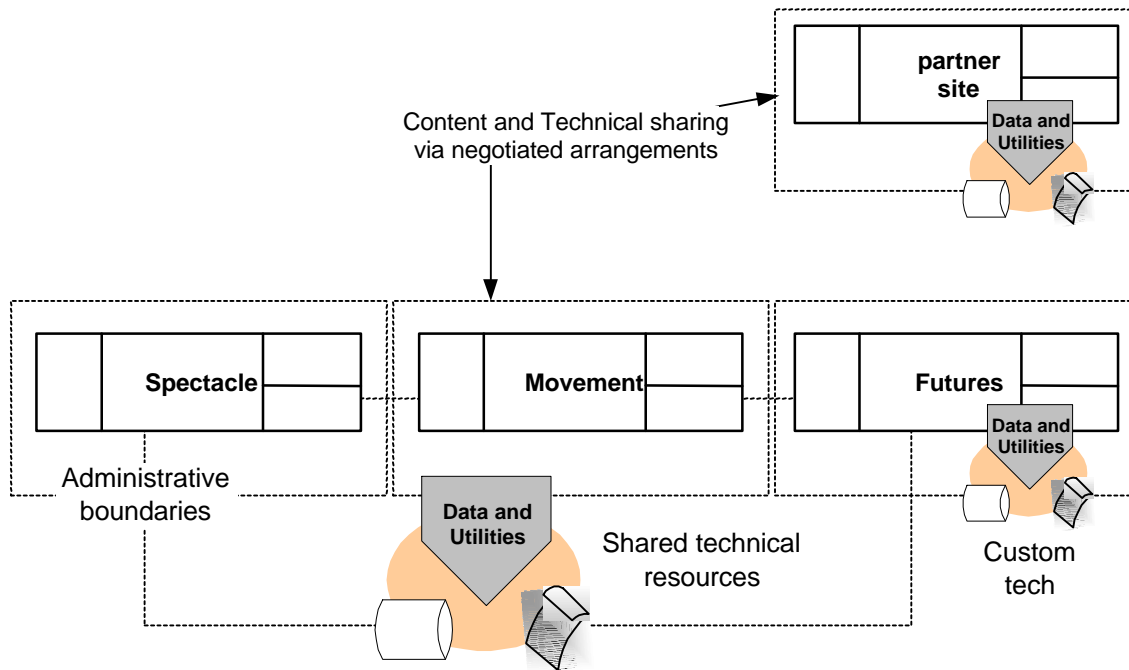
1.4 The methods

1.4.1 General architecture

The three interlocking sites will share as much common technical infrastructure as possible. Each site is bounded by its own administrative wrapper, allowing policy, development, and maintenance to be logically and opportunistically devolved to workable dimensions.

Connections between the sites and with external sites can be facilitated through negotiated connections and agreements that are implemented at a technical level with open APIs (application programming interfaces) that are provided in toolkit form for easy deployment.

Management schematic



The administrative boundaries imply a distinct allocation of responsibilities and policy control, as well as financial management. Volunteer organizers would take on the job of keeping each of the sites updated, active, and useful.

The technical resources are largely shared, although some tech might be needed within a particular site in order to deliver a non-generic function.

Links to partner sites should be as robust (i.e. highly functional and automated) as possible. This is achieved first through managerial negotiation and then implemented technically by APIs.

1.4.2 Administration and maintenance

Each aspect of the three sites will be designed with specific management characteristics, often including:

- **Public interface:** not logged in (no profile)
- **Privileged User:** user is logged in (has a profile)
- **Group Manager:** administers some aspects of facility configuration & Privileged User profiles
- **Super User:** can set facility-wide configurations and create/edit Group Managers
- **Technician:** can install/remove software and create/edit management characteristics.

1.4.3 Funding and accounting

The entire system will be supported through grants and donations. We intend to capitalize on the Wells Accounting Method of Prescribed User Mandates (WAMPUM). WAMPUM exposes the line item detail of each site's operations to allow donors the option of supporting specific activities, thus democratizing the financial connections between donors and program development.

Online donations can be accepted through the general ecommerce facility established by Big Medicine. We shall establish a central accounting clearinghouse to minimize the administrative overhead.

This online donation interface can be customized to support any number of initiatives, so the single installation can be re-used outside of the VirtualMaine context to empower allied organizations. For

instance, an online donation centre can be set up to support the *Changing Maine* directory through online sales and donations to the parent organization, ROSC (Resources for Organizing and Social Change). They could pay a small admin fee per transaction and benefit from having a secure, credit-card capable interface for a tiny fraction of what it would cost to set one up on their own.

Generally, this is an important aspect of the project that could grow significantly in its own right. Too often people have good intentions with their donations, but are unable to target them to the specific issues and organizations that most affect them. With the WAMPUM system online and connected to the alternative organizations around the state, people would be encouraged to make numerous donations where they count the most.

1.5 Plan B and priorities

This proposal outlines a plan to develop a world-class facility and technical toolkit with a staggering range of extensibility options. The project is described as a whole, and would benefit from reasonable stability over a 4-6 month period when the foundation layers of technical development will be designed and implemented. This scenario requires substantial organizational and financial commitment from the beginning of the project, and continuing through to launch, promotion, and maintenance. We would prefer to have full funding and support guaranteed in the beginning so that we have a known set of inputs to work with during development.

However, the world is known for its ability to surprise, few things - including the best planned projects - can ever be guaranteed. From a practical point of view, it's a good idea to have a "Plan B" which is less specific and more modular.

Modularity in this sense means the capacity to take small, self-contained steps toward reaching a larger goal. This gives us the freedom to be opportunistic, taking advantage of specific situations as circumstances present themselves, and more organic in terms of an overall project specification.

Within this context, or this appreciation for flexibility, we would recommend a rough priority order for development as follows:

- **Discussion and mailing lists:** The first step in launching the project is creation of communications channels that can be used by the developers and sponsors to guide and refine. If the project stopped at this point, the discussion tools could be used to support the public Big Medicine facility, thus providing a tangible benefit from day one.
- **Online Directory:** The next most valuable legacy would be the creation of an electronic companion to the Changing Maine print-based directory.
- **Resources library:** A significant outcome would be the establishment of a public resources library, or online catalogue. This would support the concept of a "best practice/case study reference centre" as well as being a general-purpose links directory. The facility would allow file uploads as well, making it more than a catalogue, but a document repository as well. It would require a robust description framework (metadata) which would provide users with controlled vocabularies to classify and categorize their input. This metadata is the "normalized" information that is re-presented to users in the course of their search and browse activities.
- **Gateway search:** Extending from this would be the ability to gateway searches to external sites. This project does not seek to centralize or replace existing facilities, so it is imperative that the ability to search other sites is included at an appropriate point.
- **User Profiling:** This is an essential security layer that enables all of the rules-driven facilities to share a single login. Before this layer is implemented, users will need to log in to each feature separately, and there will be minimal opportunities to provide meta logic between features.
- **Issues positions and polling:** This is an adventurous bit of kit that seeks to testbed a direct democracy concept. The design we suggest here is simple enough to implement within the scale

of this project, and yet is sophisticated enough to serve as a useful experiential reference point for full online/direct democracy projects being contemplated for mass participation. It can be staged logically: functionality is modularized to allow the facility to elaborate itself in response to demand and opportunity.

- **Syndication and media crosslinks (Media Melding):** Creating strong crosslinks with the traditional media will be a critical factor in the success of this project. Web-based syndication works along the same lines as newspaper syndication: a content provider arranges relationships with "subscribers" to take a content feed and distribute through their media channels. We recommend implementation of simple syndication technology. This must be supported by coordination and interaction at a human level, but could yield some of the biggest credibility gains possible.

2 Spectacle: Promotion Site for Countercoup Maine – The Movie

This section describes the form and function of the virtual Chute/Kubiak gubernatorial campaign site.

2.1 Overview

Designed as a faux movie companion site, (e.g.: <http://harrypotter.warnerbros.com/home.html> - a useful example of structure and content), the campaign site provides the typical promotional functions, including:

- Introductions to the candidates, their shadow cabinet and static platform blurbs on policy
- Email announcement list (subscribe/unsubscribe)
- Schedule of campaign activities
- Press & media section
- Discussion lists (subscribe/unsubscribe)
- Etc: see facilities summary at References

2.2 The Candidates

- Simple set of pages (maybe 1-3 in total)
- Bio and background publishing
- Links to Issues (candidate position statements)

2.3 Shadow Cabinet bios

- Simple set of pages (maybe 1-3 per post or position)
- Minimum of 2 nominees for each post - one Maine expert and one with national vision
- Issues connections (statements of position by the candidates)

2.4 The Movie

- QuickTime/AVI clips of visually arresting campaign footage
- Partner with WERU or WMPG (for instance) to carry all speeches as web radio shows
- Feedback loop: Use internet chat dialogues as sub-text scroller in video, or use live webcasts as companion to call-back programs

2.5 Campaign Platform

- Simple content publishing
- Clear links to Issues

2.6 Media Centre

- Access to news releases, headlines, and other re-publishable materials
- Interface for syndication control panel
- Interface for submissions, eg news clippings

2.7 Discussion areas

- Titled on the same scheme as the platform planks
- Opens with candidate statements and then allows for public discussion

2.8 Campaign "extranet"

- Secure area for core management team
- Meta-space to support the group process
- Storage and retrieval of private docs

3 Movement: Virtual Maine Issues & Directory Site

This section describes the form and function of the Movement site

3.1 Overview

This promises to be the heart of the challenge: providing a space where people are encouraged to conceive of issues in relatively bounded terms. We intend to begin with the work of NI4D (National Institute for Democracy) as an architectural solution template. NI4D have described a process for instantiation of popular initiatives and refining those objects through debate, amendment and polling. This is the same raw plan as for the VirtualMaine Issues process.

Our focus will be on the mechanics and specifics of implementing a free-flowing facility whose internal self-regulation makes it as free from meta-management as possible. After all, the whole point of this is to create a space where people's natural desire for healthy community can be expressed in surprising and energetic ways: it cannot be deeply meta-managed or the process loses its power to invent truly novel strategies.

This site has two main areas:

- **Local Issues:** This section is the complex core of local empowerment and effective alliances. Participants can be individuals or groups, who must register with the system before they can publish. Initially, the participant users will be invited from New Chautauqua sponsors and the Changing Maine directory. Users are expected to register their relation to specific issues and search for allies based on a weighted thematic positioning system.
- **The Three Coupbusters:** Rewriting Maine's Corporate Code, Revoking Corporate Personhood, and Strengthening Direct Democracy are the big enabling points that weave together many of the local issues. This area is much leaner in participatory framework and encourages people to rethink their local challenges in mutually supportive ways.

There will be strong linkages between the local issues section which encourages people to see their common connection with the three coupbusters. This may foster unexpected alliances and sudden power peaks as various issue-focused movements realize they are in league against a common foe. This is the essence of the countercoup strategy: uniting public energy and directing it toward structural change.

The following sections following look variously at the site features from a technical and user's perspective to provide an overall vision of why and how the site can function.

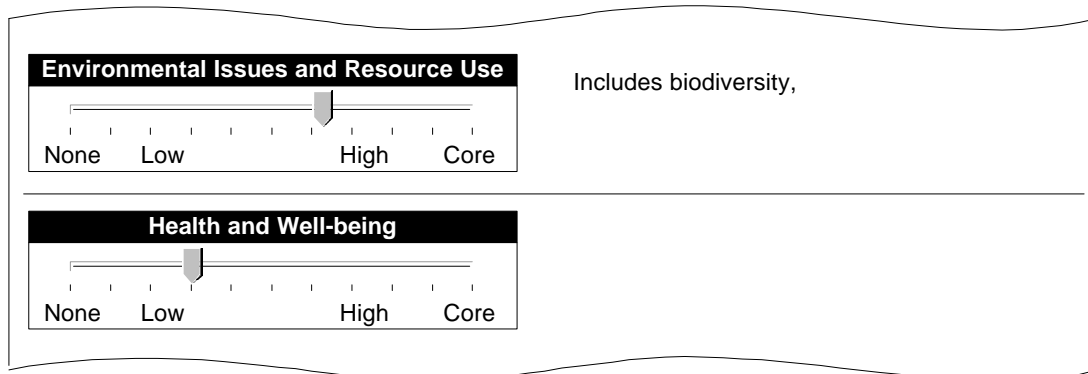
3.2 Thematic User registration

A central feature of Movement is the ability to capture a group or individual's energy focus in along a set of fundamental themes. This gives other users the ability to form searches around their particular interests, and find related organizations with a higher degree of accuracy than simple keyword searches can provide.

The "focus profiler" is conceived as a relative weighting device that reveals a user's "energy quotient" along each thematic axis. It asks the registrant to allocate units of focus to each of the fundamental themes so that a rough picture of their active energies can be seen.

An initial design for this interface may help explain the idea more clearly:

Sample Thematic positioning interface



The user is introduced to this interface with explanatory copy and samples. They will set each slider to a relative position. All themes are initially set to null.

There will be a totaliser based on the 80/20 rule and assigns value for any themes where the position exceeds the midpoint. Basically, our assumption is that 80% of the energy will be focussed on 20% of the themes in any organization. So if the user sets all sliders to High, we can feedback with a message to adjust more realistically (no one can do all things all the time!). This feedback could be tied to the sliders in real time through an applet, which would be a very nice touch.

Although this energy quotient is really a graphical extension of keyword searching (i.e., it uses a numerical identifier to find exact or near "terms"), the very fact that it is presented in a this mappable format makes it a uniquely valuable addition to search interface concepts.

The importance of this profiling tool is fairly high. It's an effective mesh to filter words into a machine-parsable format, which is an essential adjunct to the directory search.

Of course, organizations change over time, but for our purposes here, it should be sufficient to assume that the rate of profile change is less than the rate of alliance formation.

3.2.1 Themes: the master keys

One of the characteristics of any machine-based solution that can be achieved with today's technology is the establishment of some "keys" that the system uses in the same way across different applications. These keys dissolve the problem of infinite scope, and establish a level of shared meaning between the various components of a machine system.

In this particular case, we want to choose a handful of thematic terms that cover the conceptual territory of civic debate within the context of the majority of social change organizations.

One such list is suggested by the New Chautauqua experiment:

- Peace, Social Justice & Security
- Labor, Business and Employment
- Health & Medicine
- Environment & Resources
- Media, Education & Consciousness
- Democracy & Social Evolution

Settling on the fundamental themes will be a fraught process, but we assert that the choices are not so important in a literal sense as they are in providing a fertile framework for imaginative extension by the people using the system to create real-world alliances and solution strategies.

3.2.2 Themes vs. Issues

Themes are the base set of broad descriptions. Issues are specific things that attract specific activities such as an organization might champion. E.g., Greenpeace is strongly committed to the environmental theme and focuses its activities on specific issues related to that theme.

3.2.3 Who's a user?

A user can be an organization (as a single entity) or an individual. There is a leveling mechanism based on "absolute power" that can be used when it's important to estimate total strength. The leveler is a bias number.

3.3 Directory search

@@Spatial searches: concept map and physical map

@@Sample search/results use cases

3.4 Issues: a subjective object

Although it is obvious that "issues" are rarely bounded by sharp, convenient edges, and all things blur and merge at their boundaries, we must give the machines some container rules so that their power can be brought to bear. The science of complex systems (particularly in areas that deal with human perception and behavior) is in its infancy. At the best, we hope to set up the right sort of boundary rules so that the machine's approximations give us enough insight to improve our choices.

3.4.1 Creation and refinement

New issues could be nominated by any registered user. It could be interesting to ask that some sort of supporting mass be demonstrated before an issue could be lodged, e.g., by citing co-lodgers or popular petition. This is discussed in the NI4D model, and we could construct analogous mechanisms here.

3.4.2 Alignment

After an issue object has been created, its power profile is used as a filtered search to find organizations that are thematically (or geographically) related to the issue. A dedicated announcement mailing list could support this.

Position statements

Users are expected to relate themselves or their organizations to specific issues by publishing position statements. These are seen as largely static content pages, though they can be edited at any time by the user to account for changes, e.g., as a result of forming an effective alliance.

Discussion Boards

The active process of working through an issue, or lobbying for a particular polling outcome is expected to take place on the discussion boards.

Powered by open-source DISCUS software, the board features rich web-based interactivity, and integration with email.

3.4.3 Online polling

This function can be used to actually decide organizational or alliance policies among registered members or simply for public opinion pulse-taking among all system visitors and users.

3.5 Organisational feedback loops

3.5.1 Position tuning

Because individuals register their memberships with various orgs, a filter on those connections reveals the personal alignment of an org's membership. The org management can use these results to better understand the values of its own members.

For example, if Alex comes to the site and registers as an individual, he has the opportunity to set his personal alignment in the profiler. So does Alice. Alex and Alice are both members of Greenpeace and indicate this in their registration form. Greenpeace at some point can do a search for all its members on the site, compile the profiles and voila, they discover that 70% of their members are focussed on employment issues as a primary concern.

This is marginally useful on the core themes, but particularly interesting on an issue level.

3.5.2 Demographic analyses

Power profiling of the issues and the people driving them.

Like the Maine People's Alliance's Community Power Profile, this method helps users visualize the overall dynamic between contending forces on any issue, including allies\opponents' respective numbers, budgets, resources (significant info when pro\con forces include large or well-funded organizations) as well as strategic placement (as when a single person happens to be a Senator)

3.6 Directory self-management

Password entry to directory maintenance area

Automated reminders to review and update

3.7 Directory integration

Linkage with the print product, management and process

3.7.1 Publisher's interface

Can be used as a tool to master the print version

Database upload or remote update request

3.7.2 Co-publication

Express master database as print, CD-ROM, or web

3.7.3 Subscription service

Offer frequent electronic updates to print directory as a value-add service

3.8 Countercoup Themes (The Three Coupbusters)

@@content publishing

@@discussion boards support

@@resource links

@@issue links

3.8.1 Corporate Code Re-write

@@specific linkages?

3.8.2 Corporate Personhood Revocation

@@specific linkages?

3.8.3 Direct Democracy Enhancement

@@specific linkages?

3.9 Targets: who's in the crosshairs?

An interesting spin on the directory and issues concept is to use it as a Rogue's Gallery device to collect information related to specific corporate entities. In other words, position statements, discussion boards, and directory listings can support a movement against an individual corporation (e.g., Irving Corp or International Paper) as if it were an entire "issue" unto itself.

The targeting of individual corporations is a matter of convenience: we can do it if it looks productive. It can be seen as a specific analogue of the theme/issue relationship. Whereas corporate domination is the major theme, it may turn out that specific corporations play a determining role in a whole range of problems. By making them an issue in and of themselves, effective alliances can form to exert widespread pressure on their behavior. In the case of the forestry industry, for example, radical reforms in one or two major companies could alleviate a host of issues spread across multiple themes.

4 Futures: Post-corporate Community-Building Resources Site

This section describes the form and function of the Futures site

4.1 Overview

Characterize as a centre for facilitated research (rather than campaign or issues resolution)

4.2 Library concept

4.2.1 Publishing a reference

4.2.2 Document registry

Native formats

Automated conversions

4.3 Metadata

4.3.1 Shared vs custom vocabularies

4.3.2 Online tools

4.3.3 Expert review

4.4 Advanced search

4.5 Automatic internal linkages

4.6 External linkages

5 Technical toolkit

This section looks more closely at the technical specifics of the project.

5.1 Discussion groups

DISCUS board

5.2 User registration

Input form and profiling interface

5.3 Directory

Database around directory format (user objects)

5.4 Issues database

Relational database around issues objects

5.5 Syndication

RSS toolkit

5.6 MSWord conversions

Automated lodgment of docs and conversion to clean html

5.7 Speech-to-text

Wishful thinking, but a core need. Lots of activity will be in the human dimension: how to digitize \ publish it on the network is a central challenge for maintaining relevance and sync between the web and the real.

5.8 Events web-casting

Piggyback on an existing provider

5.9 Database integration

Lightweight ambitions in this project, but try to identify prime opportunities

5.10 Gateway searches

Bringing others into the loop with standard APIs

Custom integration for major partners

Distributed search window

5.11 Technical support

FAQ / self-help publisher

Bug report manager

5.12 Geospatial tools

Pervasive localization descriptors applied to all core objects (people, orgs, issues, resources)

Minimize automated regionalization, but provide tools for user-based normalizing

6 Risks and concerns

This section considers some of the important threats to the project's success.

6.1 Process Integrity

How can we be sure of the "reality" that is expressed on the site?

6.1.1 One person/one identity

- Suitability of the core object: implications of changing this during build
- Registration barrier filters nuisance listings

6.1.2 Credibility through associations

@@If you're a friend of theirs, you're a friend of ours

6.1.3 Strategy: run fast and believe in people's good side?

A good system will encourage amplification of the signal-to-noise ratio to the point where most people can derive a useful experience despite some level of local turbulence.

6.2 Recursion and relevance snarls

Since the overarching purpose of this project is to foster effective community action, it is natural to assume the participating community will reform itself dynamically to form super-groups. In fact, the formation and dissolution of organizations is a naturally occurring factor in these waters, and it is expected that over time the architecture of the facility will be tested with any number issues arising from complex inter-relationships and the handling of legacy content.

Generally, these sorts of pressures are difficult to manage from both a technical and human perspective. There are a few coping strategies we can employ, and from there on the road is remarkably pitted with the same sort of confusion that reigns in everyday life. Many organizations have enough trouble managing the contents of a four-drawer filing cabinet, and anyone who has tried to get the transcript of a particular speech from an organization, whether it's the Department of Forestry or Friends of the Earth, will appreciate how quickly the limits of a well-ordered universe can be reached.

We will use dynamic lookups and searches wherever possible so that latency is reduced. For instance, within a particular organization, the [For more information, please contact: xxxx] link is one of the more troublesome items to maintain as people come and go while an issue simmers on. We would make this link a dynamic look-up to a role-based listing for the organization so that they need only maintain the current contact information in one place and all the referring pages pick up the directory listing on the fly when the page is requested.

Managing group identity can be a very time-consuming and complex process. Generally, we will seek to minimize this complication by encouraging a lightweight and uniform approach to the page templates that users control. They can have a logo on the pages that they publish, and will have some control over their classification vocabularies, but we would encourage having a single tier of organizational definition.

This strategy leaves plenty of room for shared agendas (e.g., two orgs can have identical position statements on the same issue), as well as web-ring style affiliation navigation (e.g., orgs can share an affiliation link-string so users can cross-navigate to allied orgs easily).

The situation is much more complex with issues, as there is a constant tension between expansion to archetypes and reduction to components. Because each issue nomination is expected to go through a review process, it is expected that the most obvious mischaracterizations can be filtered before they are registered with the system.

The project could be an interesting testbed for the NI4D concepts where an "initiative process" is proposed to be guided through one of three instantiation methods:

- Legislative resolution
- Citizen petition
- Public opinion poll

Initiatives are then reviewed and revised through a public hearing and a deliberative committee before being passed up to a voting group. This process provides some opportunity to cross-link initiatives or position them in relation to sub or super initiatives.

We expect that the most efficient and representative system for VirtualMaine will evolve over the course of initial inspiration and incremental experience.

6.3 Providing fuel to the "enemy"

There may be some concern that the VirtualMaine facilities can be used as weapons against the community forces that we seek to enable. It would be impossible to prevent some forms of abuse.

In the bigger scale of things, it may not be a critical issue: if Big Bodies learn to understand and master the tools of democratic process, it may just turn out that we're inserting a sort of Trojan horse or paradigm virus that eventually helps turn the Big Bodies themselves into more democratic creatures.

6.4 Universal access

Site to be very simple at the interface; has to be fast for backwoods Maine dialup connections.

6.5 Ownership and branding

Potential for marquee bickering

6.6 Privacy

Use of handles introduces technical complexity and runs counter to both free access to info and accountability for actions

6.7 Competency and access

VirtualMaine is a big canvas. Needs to be supported by a guide service to help people locate themselves and participate. Need to recruit existing facilitation network to partner with.

6.8 Discussion board management

Will need some degree of moderation, facilitation and/or oversight.

6.9 User enquiries and support

Will need some online feedback/support mechanism and service attention.

7 Costing and timings

This section outlines estimated costs and proposes a project calendar.

7.1 Licensing

Search tools: harvesting and classification

Proprietary format converters

Spatial search tool

Address-to-geo database

Publishing tool

Server and bandwidth

7.2 Labor

Volunteer talent

Hired talent

7.3 Timing

6 month build. Stage to support Spectacle within first month, and directory second month, with the Discus board powering the bootstraps in both.

8 References

This section provides extended discussion and links to relevant materials.

8.1 Feature Summary

See attached spreadsheet.

8.2 Site plan

The site plan can be reviewed at: <http://nancho.net/p3test/>

8.3 Thematic Search details

A tricky area but potentially very useful at a generic level.

Includes a lot of fuzzy thinking, and should be road tested to vett the basic concepts

Weak points:

- Single position per plume
- Approximated relationships between themes
- Complex search and display
- High barrier to comprehension
- Dependency on strong thematic hierarchy

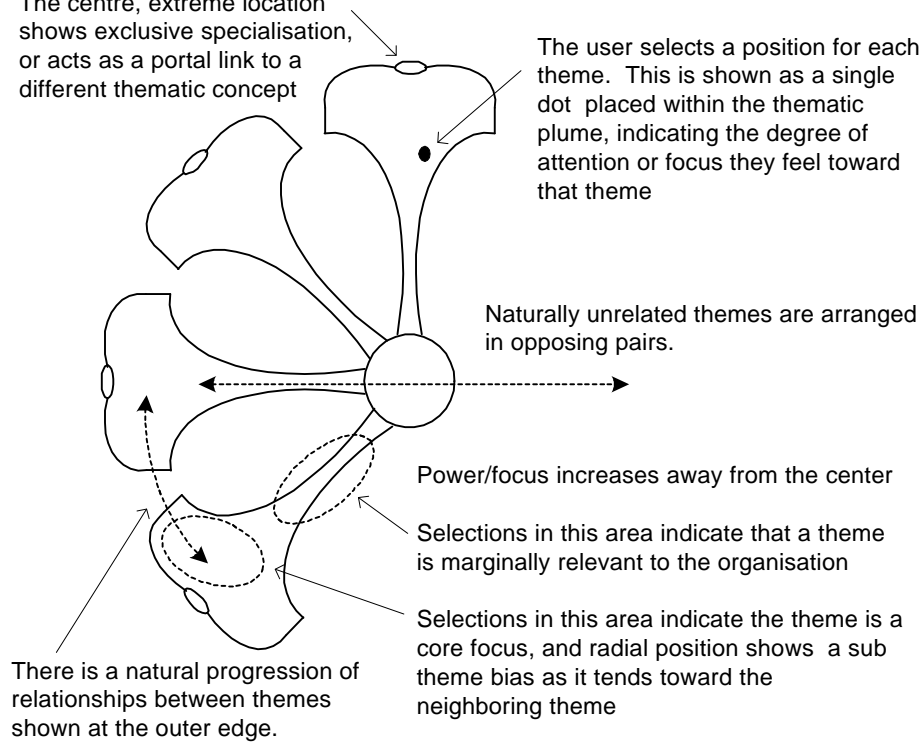
Advantages:

- Could provide very concise positioning for machine analysis
- Provides some comparability between organizations
- Is relative to the organization, i.e., large or small can use in same scale

Sample concept topography

The centre, extreme location shows exclusive specialisation, or acts as a portal link to a different thematic concept

The user selects a position for each theme. This is shown as a single dot placed within the thematic plume, indicating the degree of attention or focus they feel toward that theme



Sample arrangement for 6 themes



8.4 UML design

@@include usecases and sequence diagrams

8.4.1 Browsing the site

8.4.2 Registration of group or individual

8.4.3 Publishing content

8.4.4 Publishing to discussion board

8.4.5 @@

8.5 Team roles

@@include team bios

8.6 Technical partners and allies

(See also Sponsor, Advisor and Collaborator lists in Countercoup 2002 umbrella proposal.)

8.6.1 ROSC (Resources for Organizing & Social Change)

<http://www.abilitymaine.org/>

Publisher of the *Changing Maine* directory, which is foundation content for the Movement site.

8.6.2 Maine Independent Media

<http://maineindymedia.org>

Key content and distribution partners

Featured links to their calendar, discussions and announcements

8.6.3 General Evolution Advocacy and Research

<http://www.genevar.com.au>

Technology consultant and project manager

8.7 Thematic content partners

8.7.1 Corporate Code Revision

Robert Hinkley, RCHINKLEY@compuserve.com

Lead organizer of Code Revision Initiative

8.7.2 Personhood Revocation

Women's International League for Peace & Freedom <http://www.wilpf.org/>

Program on Corporations, Law and Democracy <http://www.poclad.org/>

Alliance for Democracy <http://afd-online.org/>

8.7.3 Democratic Remasculation (Direct Democracy Initiatives)

National Initiative for Democracy <http://www.ni4d.org/>

Center for Consensual Democracy <http://www.consensualdemocracy.org/>

Co-Intelligence Institute <http://www.democracyinnovations.org/>

8.8 Similar sites and research resources

These sites have information about e-Democracy, community building, and the role of online tools in the support of civic processes.

The references are arranged roughly in order of their relation to the three axes of the VirtualMaine project (Spectacle / Movement / Futures)

8.8.1 Spectacle

Warner Bros <http://www.warnerbros.com/>

<http://www.warnerbros.com/>

Follow links to movies > Harry Potter Left hand menu is a good summary of the archetypal functions the campaign site should implement

Paramount Pictures <http://www.paramount.com/>

Compact and content rich front page. Could be an good way to handle frontpage design: instead of modeling on an individual movie, segment the Countercoup movie into scenes, and give each a bit of surround as if they were individual movie titles. Allows for immediate publication without having to have the whole picture put together sensibly at the start.

8.8.2 Movement

NetAction

<http://www.netaction.org/bollier/index.html>

This article provides some high-level context for our project, and is useful as an architectural touchstone for e-Democracy experimentation.

Minnesota e-Democracy

<http://www.e-democracy.org/>

This site is attempting roughly the same idea as Movement, but without the directory and profiling aspects.

Largely based on mailing list forums, the site has a number of well-considered features and policies which could make good templates for VirtualMaine.

Note how the anarchic, first-come, first-served nature of internet domain assignment allows a US, state-centric organization to grab a global name: "e-democracy.org" !

The Hansard Society

<http://www.hansard-society.org.uk/eDemocracy.htm>

A UK-based foundation that looks carefully at the connections between people and parliament. Mostly concerned with channeling public participation into existing government processes.

Extract:

The concept of e-democracy is associated with efforts to broaden political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their representatives via new information and communication technologies (ICTs.) Hague and Loader, in their introduction to *Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision-Making in the Information Age*, explain their idea of e-democracy:

'Strong democracy' requires strong and interactive links between the state and civil society, between government and the governed ... we have the prospect of national and local governments interacting with citizens via web sites, e-mail addresses and public information kiosks. We also have experiments with electronic voting, electronic voter guides, citizen juries and the like. (p.13)

The Hansard Society published an excellent report on their experiment: *Building Digital Bridges: Creating Inclusive Online Parliamentary Consultations* which touches on many of the practical issues the VirtualMaine project will confront.

<http://www.hansard-society.org.uk/DigitalBridges.pdf>

Publicus.Net

<http://www.publicus.net/>

Good research info and theory by Steven Clift, a consultant to the Markle Foundation.

- Long white paper on all aspects of e-democracy: <http://www.publicus.net/ebook/>
- Interesting policy adjustments to its main political forums policies (good template for us): <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/do-wire/message/174>

Daughters of the American Republic: Links

<http://www.dar.cam.ac.uk/e-demos.1.html>

Good collection of more links to projects and resources.

Project VoteSmart

<http://www.vote-smart.org/index.phtml>

Promising gateway to all sorts of information. Heaps of basic info like addresses to reps, etc.

ISSY Conference on e-Democracy

<http://www.issy.com/e-democracy/>

Not much real info, but lots of very high-flying people references and some interesting position statements.

8.8.3 Futures**CivicNet**

<http://civic.net/>

Great site with plenty to learn from. They had a couple of good projects and some links that are still worth checking out:

- **Cambridge Elections site:** Dating from 1995, this excellent analogue includes an issues discussion complete with candidate statements and a public response feature at http://civic.net/cambridge_civic_network/ed/issues.html

- **Neighborhoods Online:** Both a community hosting service and provides access to community toolkit utilities
- **Neighborhood Link:** Massive AT&T project that seems to be a national neighborhood shell portal. Thousands of areas apparently have their own home pages, e.g.: www.neighborhoodlink.com/ftbend/bzlanding . Very sterile in appearance: looks like a feeder structure for localized, banner-ad driven information kiosks to be delivered to users in, say, the set-top box or PDA crowd. Also could be a value-add that ATT markets to developers as part of their "neighborhood-making". Reeks of dot.com, but impressive in terms of raw infrastructure.

Community Action Partnership

<http://nacaa.iracorp.com/research/default.asp>

The National Association of Community Action Agencies (NACAA) is the national association representing the interests of the 1,000 Community Action Agencies (CAAs) organized to fight poverty at the local level.

Their site contains a flat page "database" of projects that could be searched logically as in a best-practice library. Lots of community development info.

Local Initiatives Support Corporation

Could be a backdoor for developers, but it sounds good:

LISC provides grants, loans and equity investments to CDCs for neighborhood redevelopment. When LISC begins a new program, National LISC matches locally-raised funds and gives that much more to the community for renovation. The CDC then designates the funds to a variety of projects that will best suit the neighborhood, and the renovation begins.

Impressive library of management-speak resources, <http://www.liscnet.org/resources/> which might make good reading if this were your livelihood.

Center for Community Futures

<http://www.cencomfut.com/>

Appears to be a supplier to the community-building community, and as such has a staggering array of buzzword-rich offerings. Contains an interesting "How to . . ." catalogue of guidebooks, eg How to Start and Run a Farmer's Market (\$95): http://www.cencomfut.com/Farmers_Market.htm

Could be commercial outlet if this project spins off something that wants to be sold instead of given away freely.

8.9 Technical references

8.9.1 Semantic Web

"The Semantic Web is an extension of the current web in which information is given well-defined meaning, better enabling computers and people to work in cooperation." -- Tim Berners-Lee, James Hendler, Ora Lassila, *The Semantic Web*

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/2001/0501issue/0501berners-lee.html>

Extract:

For the semantic web to function, computers must have access to structured collections of information and sets of inference rules that they can use to conduct automated reasoning. Artificial-intelligence researchers have studied such systems since long before the Web was developed. Knowledge representation, as this technology is often called, is currently in a state comparable to that of hypertext before the advent of the

Web: it is clearly a good idea, and some very nice demonstrations exist, but it has not yet changed the world. It contains the seeds of important applications, but to realize its full potential it must be linked into a single global system.

Traditional knowledge-representation systems typically have been centralized, requiring everyone to share exactly the same definition of common concepts such as "parent" or "vehicle." But central control is stifling, and increasing the size and scope of such a system rapidly becomes unmanageable.

Moreover, these systems usually carefully limit the questions that can be asked so that the computer can answer reliably—or answer at all. The problem is reminiscent of Gödel's theorem from mathematics: any system that is complex enough to be useful also encompasses unanswerable questions, much like sophisticated versions of the basic paradox "This sentence is false." To avoid such problems, traditional knowledge-representation systems generally each had their own narrow and idiosyncratic set of rules for making inferences about their data. For example, a genealogy system, acting on a database of family trees, might include the rule "a wife of an uncle is an aunt." Even if the data could be transferred from one system to another, the rules, existing in a completely different form, usually could not.

Semantic Web researchers, in contrast, accept that paradoxes and unanswerable questions are a price that must be paid to achieve versatility. We make the language for the rules as expressive as needed to allow the Web to reason as widely as desired. This philosophy is similar to that of the conventional Web: early in the Web's development, detractors pointed out that it could never be a well-organized library; without a central database and tree structure, one would never be sure of finding everything. They were right. But the expressive power of the system made vast amounts of information available, and search engines (which would have seemed quite impractical a decade ago) now produce remarkably complete indices of a lot of the material out there. The challenge of the Semantic Web, therefore, is to provide a language that expresses both data and rules for reasoning about the data and that allows rules from any existing knowledge-representation system to be exported onto the Web.

Adding logic to the Web—the means to use rules to make inferences, choose courses of action and answer questions—is the task before the Semantic Web community at the moment. A mixture of mathematical and engineering decisions complicate this task. The logic must be powerful enough to describe complex properties of objects but not so powerful that agents can be tricked by being along the lines of "a hex-head bolt is a type of machine bolt," which is readily written in existing languages with a little extra vocabulary.