Tacoma Daily Index

Jun 16 2006

Firefox for Dummies

By Dana Greenlee, Technology Columnist
Last year was a breakout year for 20-year-old Blake Ross. He was on the cover of Wired magazine, nominated for Wired's Renegade of the Year and named Rolling Stone magazine's Hot List. This came six years after he started working at Netscape as a developer -- at age 14.

Ross co-founded the Firefox project and also co-founded SpreadFirefox.com. The browser has grown online and 'encouraged' Microsoft to upgrade its old Internet Explorer browser. Ross is currently author of the new book Firefox for Dummies.

DANA **GREENLEE**: You worked at Netscape many years ago. What was that like?

BLAKE ROSS

BLAKE ROSS: I started working at Netscape, and really the Mozilla project before that, when I was 14 years old. Because Netscape is based on this open source project, I was working with a lot of engineers who liked the work I was doing and offered me an internship during the summer. I'm not sure they realized how old I was at that point. I said I was a student -- I think they thought a college student -- but it became pretty clear when I got out there and my mother was dropping me off at work everyday. I worked at Netscape for two or three summers in Mountain View, California. To be honest with you, the first summer was a great first job for someone my age, but it kind of went down hill from there. I was at Netscape after the AOL takeover.

GREENLEE: What motivated you to create Firefox?

ROSS: If you've ever talked to someone who worked at Netscape during the "golden period," it was a very different time then. When I was there, it was managed by AOL. Netscape.com was kind of the focus of the company, this portal, and the Netscape browser was just this vehicle for driving traffic to the Netscape.com portal. We were trying to create a solid, end-user browser that my mother could configure very easily, get on the Web, get her work done without her having to think of browser settings, viruses and that sort of thing. It was very hard to realize that vision within Netscape since they were all about the portal and the bottom line.

GREENLEE: You started to create Firefox while at Netscape?

ROSS: It was strange because some people think Firefox was an attack on [Internet Explorer]. It really was just a response to our frustration trying to get the product we wanted to make made. So a couple of guys and myself started to work nights at Netscape on this separate fork of the code base called Firefox -- or it was called Phoenix at that point. We spent a lot of our time at the beginning just going to Denny's and blowing off steam and meeting online or going

to people's houses and just doing a lot of complaining. One day we decided it was time to stop complaining and time to start making a product -- that's the beauty of open source, that we could do that. It wasn't buy-in from Netscape. We were just basically working on Netscape during the day and our project at night. We started getting good reviews. We managed to boost the performance of the browser a lot by stripping away a lot of the unnecessary features that were inside of Netscape.

GREENLEE: How far into the process did you guys have to go before Netscape bought into what you're doing?

ROSS: They never really did buy into it. They kept going with their own line of products -- Netscape 6 and 7 suites which were kind of the whole kitchen. I'm sure you'll recall that those were not well received by the public or the critics. We did offer Firefox to Netscape, suggesting they ship our product, and they declined. Now, they are putting out Netscape 8 which is based on Firefox, so it's kind of going full circle. At that point, Netscape decided to exit the browser market and spun off Mozilla into a separate organization.

Next week, Blake explains the browser wars, the experience of switching to a different browser and the Wow feature in Firefox.
You can read Blake's blog at http://www.blakeross.com .