

Minutes of SCC Meeting of August 16, 2006

Hopper Conference Room, 6:30–8:00

Submitted by Nadia Ilyin

Attending

Kathe Gust

Philip Gust

Gardner Hendrie

Nadia Ilyin

Al Kossow

Jim McClure

Paul McJones

Paula Newman

Bernard Peuto, Chair

Michael Powell

Len Shustek

Dick Toepfer

Jim Wheeler

Presentations and Discussions

Coming Changes to the Web Site: Michael Powell

Michael Powell gave a slide presentation detailing changes that will be implemented in the SCC Web site soon. (Please see his slides.) The purposes are to encourage collaboration, host collecting activity, and add features for better communication. The server will be upgraded and some policies will change.

In new features, the site will support discussion forums, blogs, and a wiki. There will be new categories of users: public (can view published documents only), poster (can post or comment with a valid email address), member (can create or publish content), and admin.

Michael detailed how each of the new features works and what it can do. He showed several screen shots of the each feature (forum, blog, wiki) on the site. (These are best appreciated by reviewing his slides.)

Content creation is normal for Plone, on which the site is based. One can use raw text, a Kupu browser-based WYSIWYG editor, HTML, or an external HTML editor. One can also upload pages created elsewhere. Michael showed several screen shots of the Kupu editor's functionality.

In summary, many types of input are supported. Michael offered help to anyone who wants to get started. The plan is to implement a prototype, incorporate feedback, and then open the site to new users.

Bernard commented that Plone takes care of a lot of the required mechanisms for information control. We want to let people contribute to SCC and at the same time protect the museum and its own site also.

DickToepfer asked whether anyone else in the museum uses such a wiki. Bernard answered that the PDP-1 group has one. The museum itself doesn't really use a wiki.

Bernard had originally thought there would be several of the SIGs within the larger museum community using Plone for their web sites, but these are just beginning to develop.

Paula Newman asked how backup is done. Mike has been told that the museum would do the backup; but he also backs it up at home. Bernard said that this gives us control over the backup. Mike will look into a scheme for backup as part of his project. Currently the size is about 2 GB, or half of that when compressed. Plone has an undo command. It stores commands in a log database, and you can roll back.

Bernard recommended that the group start using the wiki, especially the CTOS project. Phil Gust asked how people get permission on the site. Mike said that you can register yourself and ask for permission, and he gives it. The new changes could easily go live within a month.

Bernard has been running a sendmail list to which he usually admits all requesters. Eventually he plans to kill that list and move it over to the wiki, but not immediately.

Len Shustek noted that there is currently no advice as to how to go about using the site. Bernard agreed that we need a FAQ that explains how to get started. We need people to write white-papers and a how-to FAQ. We might organize a special meeting for those who want to get started.

Paul McJones commented on the various communication media and their potential roles in starting and continuing a collection:

-- A wiki is a good way to start evolving an information structure with often a high contribution rate at the beginning; but after a while it stabilizes with a smaller contribution rate. The descriptive material about the evolving collection itself is more of a match for the wiki medium.

-- A threaded discussion list is for people in the middle of a project.

-- A blog is great as a journal in one or multiple voices when trying to get something going. It's a soapbox—for example, he suggested that the CTOS group might want to blog about what was really great about Convergent Technologies, what they learned there, and so on. Or—to describe how they are going about the project.

The CTOS group said that it will initiate a meeting to start this how-to project. Bernard offered to meet with them and suggested that they contact Mike Cheponis of the PDP-1 group.

Software Repository and Other Challenges: Bernard Peuto

Bernard Peuto presented slides summarizing his thoughts on the current state of the SCC and some challenges we face. (Please see his slides, “Software Repository and Other Challenges.”)

In his first slide he discussed SCC accomplishments:

- We now DO collect software, rather than allowing it to be lost.

- We have a small community.

- We have several tangible results: Web sites on various topics, book project.

He then pointed out what is missing:

- Our collection efforts are not really scalable: a project takes 18 months to two years.

- Our Web presence is weak: we are working on fixing that.

- Our ties with other communities or sites are weak.

- Software is still being lost daily.

- Finding volunteers is hard. Some do walk in. Bernard has recruited some, but most of them have not continued, although sometimes they come back later.

Bernard’s suggestions:

- Refocus on the repository.

- Deliver improved Web site and tools.

- Rename the community. He feels that the name SCC does not help us market ourselves.

- Motivate and find volunteers.

- Commit to two or three *community* projects linking us to others who are already collecting and have sites.

He then took up each suggestion in turn.

The repository:

Our early idea or goal was to create an environment in which people can store software artifacts of almost any kind, so they are not lost. A second, more selective site would take collectible information from the first one and curate it.

Over time, our goal has quietly shifted toward doing perfect projects, rather than saving as much as we can from being lost. This is unfortunate, because meanwhile, information is being lost outside these projects.

We must have a place for people to put software items where they are confident that the items will be kept and never lost, and that their donation will be remembered. It is not enough to have a simple file system. We need an underlying repository. We need Web tools and IT support.

We need volunteer coordinators. Someone must answer emails from the public. Note that this job doesn’t require physical presence.

Paula Newman recounted that someone had asked her whether the SCC had a working card reader that writes on other media. This person thought this would be a good service for the museum to offer for a fee.

Len Shustek responded that there are other places that do that. Kathe suggested that we should point to some of those. Bernard offered the view that we would like to be a lab in which you could read media that you can't read elsewhere.

A new name:

We should try to understand essence of what we do, then pick a name. Are we a software preservation community? Maybe at the next meeting we should brainstorm.

Motivate and find volunteers:

The PDP-1 group has a spirit of community. To get this spirit, one must have a team project that focusses on a desired result. The project should have incremental, measurable progress. Progress gives positive emotional feedback to the participants as they go. Milestones and visible recognition are part of the PDP project: members will become docents for the running machine.

Paula Newman asked whether there is a way to display the history of software. How do you do for software history what the museum has done for the chess software exhibit?

Gardner Hendrie said that the chess exhibit was the outcome of long-term work by a committee. They had to pick a theme out of the whole pile of information. The museum has a software exhibits committee.

Bernard pointed out that a sense of posterity is important: the PDP-1 team feels that 20 years from now the PDP-1 will still be running. It is saved.

Len commented that the PDP-1 effort is successful because it is cohesive around their team even more than around the machines.

Bernard asked if there is a way for us to use that mode for other projects, rather than just functioning as individual collectors. He thought that endorsement from the museum was important.

Paul McJones interpreted Bernard as asking: Would the same kind of community spirit that the PDP-1 has also happen around NLS when it's ready?

Bernard said that we need to create a better environment. He suggested software for the timeline as a possible major community collecting project with many contributors.

Other proposed community projects:

The repository

A Wikipedia tie-in. Bernard has corresponded with Ward Cunningham about it.

Al Kossow suggested putting the museum link on the Wikipedia site. Phil said that

perhaps, instead of doing our own wiki, we could put ours under theirs and “brand” our part. Jim McClure noted that there is such a sub-wiki, for a chemistry group. Even somewhat mediated, “it still has quite a bit of dreck in it,” he said.

Len suggested another project: accumulating and protecting all the existing excellent Web sites that already exist. Phil asked if he meant mirroring into a Plone repository. Len said that it is hard, but it could be done with the cooperation of those who wrote the Web sites. It could also be a part of the repository. Bernard commented that it would require a lot of IT support. There was a brief further discussion of how to do it.

Short Reports

Al Kossow:

The last month was spent mostly on tape recovery. He can do about 20 tapes a day. Dehydration is the key: dry them for a couple of days and then you can read them. He has done about 200 of his own tapes. He is also getting scanners online. All are 9-track, mostly from the mid-80s.

Dick Toepfer:

Dick had previously sent several questions to Bernard about process for conducting the CTOS/CT collection and how to transfer it to the museum. Bernard had asked him to take these questions up in this meeting.

As we collect, who is museum contact?—Alison Akbay.

Bernard said that it works better to give a collection rather than one item at a time. Also the museum will provide deed of gift paperwork back to the original donors, in case they want to take a tax deduction, etc. So Dick should keep track of who the original donors are in case they want their own deed of gift – see Alison for details of this process. It is important to get as much written down as possible about the items beforehand and justify each piece.

Space allocation? When you give, give the museum an idea of how much volume there is.

Bernard added that it is important to think about how much of the project focus is on restoration versus simply a contribution.

Is there a general museum-approved outline for a company history?

There is a contact at mac@wireless.com for PDP-1. [Mike Cheponis] Also, an Alto project exists. (No contact was given.)

Len Shustek said that software has been developed for accumulating corporate histories. It is online, and Len can supply the url to it.

Bernard said that Bill Selmeier may also be able to give ideas. He noted that a Snobol project is also starting.

Paula Newman:

Paula gave a quick update on the book project. (See her slides.)

Briefly, the books need to be organized in a database, she said. Classification is needed. The Library of Congress has subject codes, but for many books, there is no single satisfactory primary subject.

Kathe Gust and Jim McClure noted at this point that the Library of Congress classification does allow for multiple subjects to be assigned to one book.

Paula proposed another schema for the book database in which a particular node can have multiple parents. She plans to test this schema: what it means for presentation and search facilities, how to connect it with the Plone site, and so on.

The balance of the agenda was deferred for lack of time.

Action items from this meeting:

Meeting with CT group: Nadia to follow up.

Meeting to discuss the repository: Bernard to follow up.