

LITRE Project Mid-Term Report

Background

In 2005 a LITRE proposal was submitted for \$35,000 for equipment and labor. The original plan was to fund a deployment for LiveJournal for community based blogging and allow student writing project interaction well beyond standard blogs, due to it's integral "friends" affinity metaphor.

The second part of the proposal was to deploy a small study of Movable Type as an "business class" blogging environment for faculty and departmental use, offering a great deal of end-user customization. This project was based on experience that ITD had with Agriculture Communication's use of Movable Type to deliver their "Economic Forecast" podcast.

The original proposal was reduced to \$5,000 per year, half from LITRE, half contributed by ITD. Labor would be provided gratis by ITD's system's staff, and we would only deploy LiveJournal.

A number of setbacks prevented us from meeting our deadline; staffing shortages including the primary systems programmer responsible for the project's systems deployment leaving ITD at a critical time. However, Daniel Henninger and Tom Karches both stepped in to help, and we were able to come in quite a bit under budget; in the end there was \$5k left after purchasing all necessary hardware for the deployment of LiveJournal.

Current Status

The livejournal server cluster has now been online for 4 months, and it available at:

<http://lj.ncsu.edu>

We are now ready to let faculty use this for coursework. Our target for initial use is three courses and additional support people (100 users). We have already begun contacting faculty who would like to make use this writing environment. LiveJournal's ability to allow writers to have control over who can see their content makes it particularly relevant for privacy issues as outlined in FERPA. Since we are not using the University's WRAP environment for authentication, we can accommodate pan-academic writing communities quite easily, which will be particularly useful for faculty who want to use this resource to allow non-NCSU affiliated writers to contribute (which is indeed what one faculty member we are talking with wants to do). The only current work that needs to be done on lj.ncsu.edu is aesthetics; wrapping the front page in the University's visual identity.

In revisiting the original proposal, the suggestion was made that we could do an additional portion of what was originally proposed, a small deployment of Movable Type

for "business class" blogging. Twenty licenses for non-profit use were purchased with a small portion of the resulting grant money. We will use the same servers that house LiveJournal's back end MySQL server to provide MySQL services for Movable Type.

The model we will be pursuing is not a dynamic publishing model; content will be created in Movable Type and published through our production web space as static web pages. This allows us to offer a very high level of availability, but in addition a flexible environment that potential users can experiment in, with an "exit strategy", for their content will not be held hostage in a proprietary system.

Movable Type benefits from being both a commercially supported environment (we have one year of technical support as part of our licensing) and a very dynamic developer community, through which is available a myriad of options for customization and expansion. This is an important difference to existing blogging environments that are available; the end user has a great deal of control over layout and functionality of the publication environment. This could mean, as an example, that a department could use this tool to publish updated news stories related to the college, wrapped in a framework of the existing college's web presence, very much in line with the upcoming rollout of the University's website redesign.

We already have been talking with potential partners who would like to make use of Movable Type for work. This includes the Contemporary Art Museum, who will use Movable Type for an event calendar, patron blog and artist's pages. A faculty member in the College of Natural Resources, and another in College of Design, will be using Movable Type for coursework. Creative Services wants to evaluate how they could use Movable Type as a complimentary tool to their other publication methods for their clients. We are interested in other potential partners, including departments that need a simplified and customizable tool for specific functions.

WolfCast

Wolfcast embodies many of the goals set out in the original proposal; making potential content creators autonomous, simplifying publication of digital media for a variety of uses. The problem with Wolfcast was that it was hastily put together, but has been successful despite that, with the number of podcast authors spiking this last semester. Clearly, it needed to grow, expand in functionality and storage space, but as it stood, those resources would be difficult to come by internally. Or perhaps not.

Why not iTunes U?

NCSU has entered into an agreement with Apple to deploy iTunes U for campus use. After a protracted delay, authentication issues that allow potential users of iTunes U to utilize their Unity account information to authenticate have been resolved, and we are at the point now where this summer will be spent creating feeds for those that want them.

However, there is growing concern on campus that use of non-NCSU services for

content may be problematic. Defining what is and what is not appropriate for iTunes U has been somewhat open to interpretation. With upcoming guidelines on courseware, it becomes apparent that faculty cannot force students to use a non-NCSU hosted service as the sole outlet for courseware delivery. We believe that at the end of the day that this is an extreme position, and that faculty, students and staff would like to make use of iTunes U for content distribution. Certainly, iTunes U's authentication mechanism has a decided advantage over Wolfoast, in that only those who are registered for a course can see content, if the faculty member chooses that option.

But, it is clear that we must provide a complimentary solution for delivering media-rich content feeds in a platform and software agnostic way. iTunes U and Wolfoast are not exclusive of one another; Wolfoast hosted feeds can show up in iTunes alongside feeds generated by iTunes U itself. We can have our cake and eat it to.

Doing Two things at Once

ITD is in the midst of deploying a new set of services, which one part of could potentially be more sophisticated than the existing Wolfoast service. It supports a much broader selection of media (video, audio, acrobat), offers much better content management tools (including actual tagging of content in a feed, which Wolfoast does not support at all). The support of Acrobat content will allow content creators the ability to provide transcripts of content to meet sect 508 requirements, which we cannot do with Wolfoast.

The decision was made to take the remaining money that was in the LITRE budget and invest in this new service, expanding the LITRE grant's role out from its original mission to include that of Wolfoast itself. In the original project proposal, it was suggested that we could move Wolfoast services to Movable Type itself; Agriculture Communication's Economic Forecast Podcast is generated by Movable Type hosted by ITD. But at the end of the day this new set of services are superior because:

1. Single point of support -- the same support methodologies in place for the existing project could be easily extended to Wolfoast at no additional expense of manpower. The demands for supporting a user using this new service for podcasting will be the same (or perhaps less) than the umbrella project itself.
2. Benefit of scaling -- resources necessary for successfully deploying a podcasting service extend beyond technical support to physical storage and infrastructure. It is clear that cost per user drops as we extend the current project out to include current and future Wolfoast authors.
3. Richness of experience -- by picking a single solution, we are able to offer a service that will better meet author's needs, given limited our resources.

Admittedly, this was not part of the original grant proposal, but we had met the technical specifications of the reduced form of that proposal and more; this investment was made because it clearly was in the spirit of intent of the original proposal itself, which was to

provide content creator publication autonomy, not tied to specific coursework and semester schedules, flexible in nature to meet the needs of a campus that more than ever needs these kinds of resources to be available.

To Be Done

LiveJournal

At this point, we are ready to have faculty use LiveJournal for coursework. A few faculty have been specifically contacted, but it is time to talk with DELTA about how they may want to have a faculty member utilize LiveJournal for coursework. Due to its ability for the end user to set their own levels of privacy, it is quite relevant to FERPA guidelines, which will make it a better choice for certain things than alternate solutions such as Wolfblogs. We would like to have 100 users registered by this fall.

At that time we will require faculty to communicate to us potential problems or suggestions. Given our limited manpower budget, requests for feature enhancement will have to be scrutinized carefully. We are much more concerned with a basic level of functionality that is consistent and reliable than encouraging feature enhancement.

TimeFrame: Next 3 Months

Movable Type

We have purchased licenses, and have already had contact from two faculty in different colleges that are interested, plus casual interest from other staff and faculty as well. The Contemporary Art Museum will be using Movable Type for some of their online presence, so we will be focusing on having their installation up and running in the next two weeks. After that, it becomes much easier to deploy additional Movable Type installations for others, since the underlying technology that Movable Type uses is based on things we already support. We want to have a couple of good examples up and running before actively recruiting, so that potential users can get a clearer understanding of what Movable Type can and cannot do for them. It is not a general purpose web publication system, certainly not a replacement for all things that Macromedia Dreamweaver can do, but for content that needs to be frequently updated, it may be a good alternative to existing solutions. The important thing to understand here is the output is still HTML, so users are not locked into proprietary content management systems.

Time Frame: 2 weeks for initial deployment for CAM. After that, we should be able to set up other Movable Type deployments very quickly. Accounting and policy issues are more critical here than technical ones.

Wolfcast

We will begin the migration to the new infrastructure as soon as the new servers are set

up and deployed. We will need to notify current Wolfcast authors about the impending changes, give them good documentation explaining how the new publication environment will work, and migrating their content. Authors will be free to choose iTunes U or Wolfcast, or both, if they so desire. We do not want to damage the good will that we have with current content creators.

Time Frame: 1 - 3 Months

Conclusion

This is a very ambitious set of projects, but they reflect the world outside the university, where autonomous publication models have revolutionized the way that people communicate. Universities that originally led the adoption of the web as a way of publishing content have now found themselves behind, as new services spring up overnight like mushrooms. This project is an attempt to take the best, most stable, least trendy aspects of these publication models and put them into the hands of authors and content creators. This will include not just faculty, not just staff, but students themselves.

We will begin work promptly on nailing down specifics, such as who will be involved this fall in using these new services. To this end, as the semester winds down, this is a good time to look for collaborators outside of ITD. DELTA/LTS is an obvious partner, but we must also consider the IT director's in the individual colleges as well, as they may have uses for these publication systems that fall outside of the realm of specific course and semester related content.

Thank You For Your Time.

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