Voyager Hacks
what happens when a SysAdmin, a blogger, a Javascript expert, an SQL junkie, an XML coder walk into a library ...

Jim Robertson, Assistant University Librarian
Robert W. Van Houten Library, New Jersey Institute of Technology
323 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Newark, NJ 07102-1982

Vox: (973) 596-5798
Fax: (973) 643-5601
email: james.c.robertson@njit.edu
Home page: http://web.njit.edu/~robertso

Endeavor Mid-Atlantic Users Group meeting
Millersville, PA, Oct 17-18, 2005

-- Final wrap-up report --

Abstract from the program:

This session will be a live, interactive, "working session." Jim Robertson, other panelists, and the audience/participants will brainstorm some pushing-the-envelope ideas for Voyager enhancements and then engineer solution(s) on the spot. Potential enhancements up for "vote" include:

- How to create a "blog this book" feature.
- How to make your Voyager text message a HOLD/RECALL message.
- How to make new books lists available via RSS feeds.
- How to automate a "most popular books" list.
- How to use Google maps within the Voyager/EnCompass environment
- How to user client-side includes to display additional info and options to the user

Come with your own ideas or forward then in advance of the meeting to facilitator Jim Robertson.

Brainstormers, technies, forward thinkers, and creative/innovative types encouraged to come to this session. Observers welcome, also.

Background:

Jim has long been interested in ways to position Voyager (and other Endeavor products) as "platforms" rather than products. Jim feels the large creative and innovative customer base can be better leveraged to extend, improve, and transform the products beyond their as-conceived uses.

Since 2002, the annual Canadian conference on library systems called Access has had a Hackfest for participants. Though Jim has not attended the conference, he became interested in its possibilities within the Endeavor community.

See:

» http://curtis.med.yale.edu/hackfest
» http://access2005.library.ualberta.ca/hackfest.php

The Hackfest community writes:

> *The Access 2005 Hackfest is a "collaborative effort to solve real world library problems using freely available tools"**. The hackfest is not*

only open to technical participants (ex. programmers) but also library staff from public service, cataloguing, and other areas.

Typically hackfests are gatherings of programmers who compete against or collaborate with each other for prizes, fame, or even notoriety. The Access 2002 Hackfest was a somewhat informal and completely collaborative effort to solve real world library problems using freely available tools.

In order to get an early start on the Hackfest, we posted some information on how we envisaged this working for the Access 2002 conference. Hackfests are activities that typically take place at technical gatherings and involve a group of attendees putting their collective resources together to solve a computer problem or develop an application before the end of a conference. This is sometimes done as a contest and may even involve teams, but for Access we were looking for a non-competitive and completely collaborative activity, and one that was not limited to the confines of the duration of the conference.

The key in all this was that the Hackfest be for all Access attendees, including reference, collections, systems, web, cataloging/metadata, and administrative librarians, not just for software developers, and everyone was encouraged to participate.

Pre-planning:

Prior to the meeting, Jim recruited a few "fellow travelers" to help populate the audience to ensure a certain level of participation. Jim was concerned the session would fail if it ended up being just him talking endlessly in front of the audience.

Varied technical experience was desired (e.g., Voyager admin, PHP, XML, SQL, etc.). Most important, however, was a certain level of creativity and willingness to experiment and push the envelope.

Jim was able to recruit:

1. Jesse Koennecke - Cornell University
2. Jeff Suszczynski - University of Rochester
3. Kurt Wagner - William Paterson University
4. Ken Herold - Hamilton College
5. Ray Schwartz - William Paterson University
6. Charles Lockwood - Loyola Notre Dame Library

Jim arranged with Scott Anderson at Millersville University to provide a PC in the session room that had:

- live connections to the Voyager Oracle tables via Microsoft Access
- live connections to the Voyager server at Millersville (to examine .ini and .cfg files)
- working Voyager windows modules (e.g., circ module, cataloging module, etc.)

Jim sent one or two emails to the group before the conference to lay out some of his vision for the session. The group agreed to meet for a last-minute planning session the night before the presentation.

L to R: Ray (foreground), Jesse, Ken, Jeff, Kurt, Jim

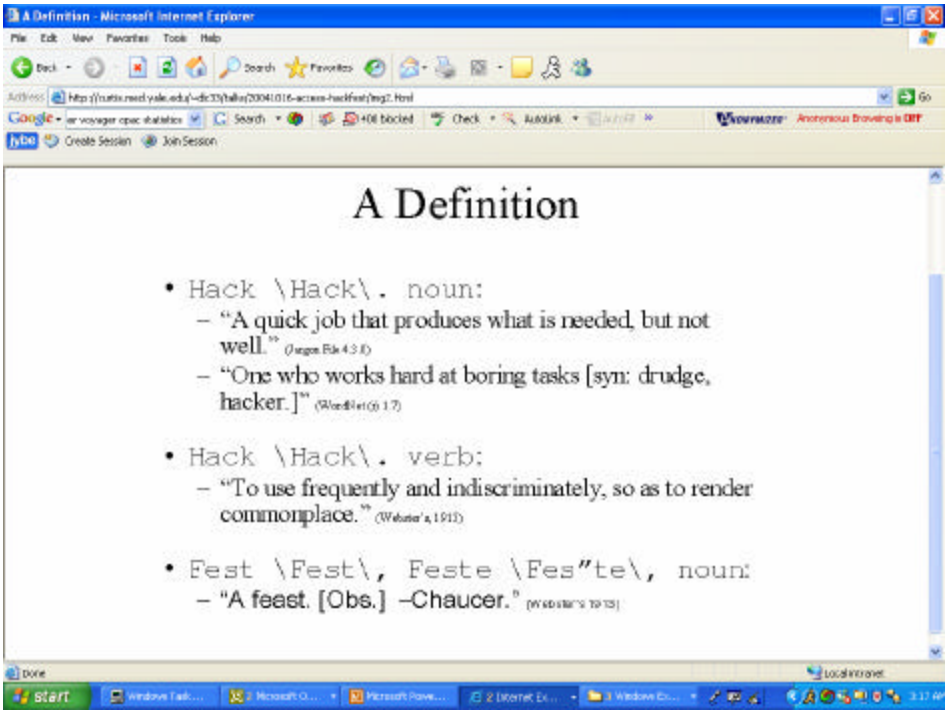
The session:

Nearly 30 people signed up for the session (participants noted):

1. **Jesse Koennecke - Cornell University *****
2. Cindy Greenspun - Yale University
3. Kathie Marvin - West Chester University
4. Liz Kielley - Messiah College
5. Robert Johnston - Edinboro University of Pennsylvania
6. Juliette Arnheim - Princeton University Library
7. Bobbi Gwilt - Syracuse University Library
8. **Jeff Suszczynski - University of Rochester *****
9. **Kurt Wagner - William Paterson University *****
10. **Ken Herold - Hamilton College *****
11. Katharine Farrell - Princeton University
12. Joanna Holcombe - William Paterson University
13. Julia McGinnis - California University of PA
14. Jennifer Hoover - Ithaca College
15. Lovernne Josephson - Lincoln University, Langston Hughes Memorial Library
16. Carol Otto - California University of PA
17. **Jim Robertson – NJIT *****
18. David Freeman - CIA Library
19. Kambiz Eslami - Princeton University Library
20. Metta Lash - Montgomery College
21. **Ray Schwartz - William Paterson University *****
22. Nancy Nyland - Montgomery College
23. Zoe Stewart-Marshall - Cornell University
24. Jennifer Nolte - Yale University
25. Mary Lou Sowden - Keystone Library Network
26. John Mullens - Campbell Library - Rowan University
27. Mike Cobb - Liberty University
28. **Charles Lockwood - Loyola Notre Dame Library *****
29. **Scott Anderson – Millersville University**

Bob Johnson of Edinboro University of Pennsylvania introduced the session. The room available was a fairly typical computer laboratory, with computers facing a projected PC's image. The most important part of the room setup was the availability of three whiteboards side-by-side on the long dimension of the room (24 linear feet of whiteboard).

Jim presented a few PowerPoint slides to “set the tone”. The content of the slides:



Jim added to the Hackfest-provided definition of hacks to include the implication for customer-driven creativity, innovation, and persistence. An attitude of: “You didn’t provide for this … but we’re gonna figure it out anyway!”

Categories of “hacks”

- improve / fix bugs / create enhancements
- real time processes vs. batch processes (much of Voyager is currently batch mode; new student model is I-want-it-now, don't-make-me-wait)
- alternate delivery channels (old Voyager is print and email; new students model is RSS, cell phone, text message, chat, blog, etc.)

- enrich the catalog
- interactivity (at Amazon.com you can **do** things once you get to a record; in Voyager, you are at a dead end)
- lone wolf vs. community / collaboration / group dynamics (old Voyager is lone searcher; new student model is working with others, leaving notes, finding notes, seeing that other have been there, done that, read that, like that, didn't like that, etc.)
- empower users (to make changes, to **do** things, etc.)
- cool factor / connect with state-of-the-art and raised user expectations for digital environment
- leverage the "network" of users, their activities, and their behaviors; the "in-the-margins" data of patron data, patron history, search history, usage data, etc.

Taylor's six categories of value-added services in library and information systems

- ease of use
- noise reduction
- quality
- adaptability
- time savings
- cost savings

» Source: Taylor, Robert S. 1986. Value-added processes in information systems. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publ.

Jim listed the possible hack projects listed thus far:

- How to create a "blog this book" feature.
- How to make your Voyager text message a HOLD/RECALL message.
- How to make new books lists available via RSS feeds.
- How to automate a "most popular books" list.
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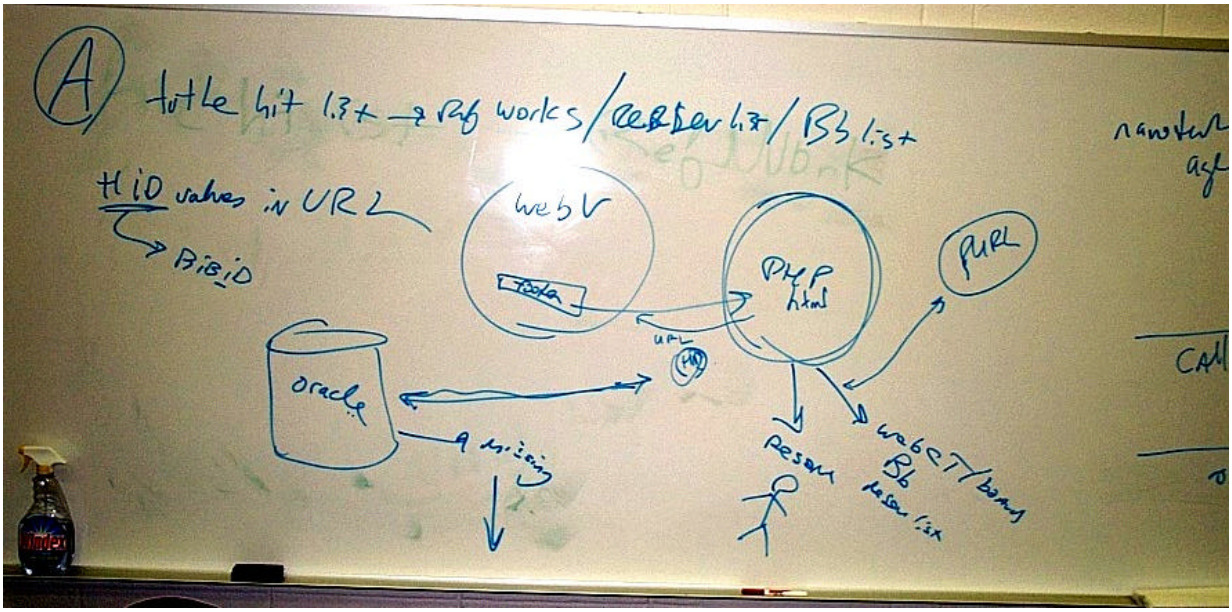
He augmented the list with some additional possible hacks that arose out of the previous night's pre-planning conversation:

- SRU/W services
- Spellcheckers (some work already being discussed on Voyager-L)
- Javascript solutions
- Bookmarklets (parse external pages and throw info to LFP or ILL)
- Onix table of contents
- WorldCat table of contents
- Using patron statistical categories in interesting ways (perhaps in conjunction with ILL data)
- Using item statistics categories in interesting ways
- A "tickler" / notification system outside the confines of the hold/recall system
- Commenting / blogging / wikis
- API's

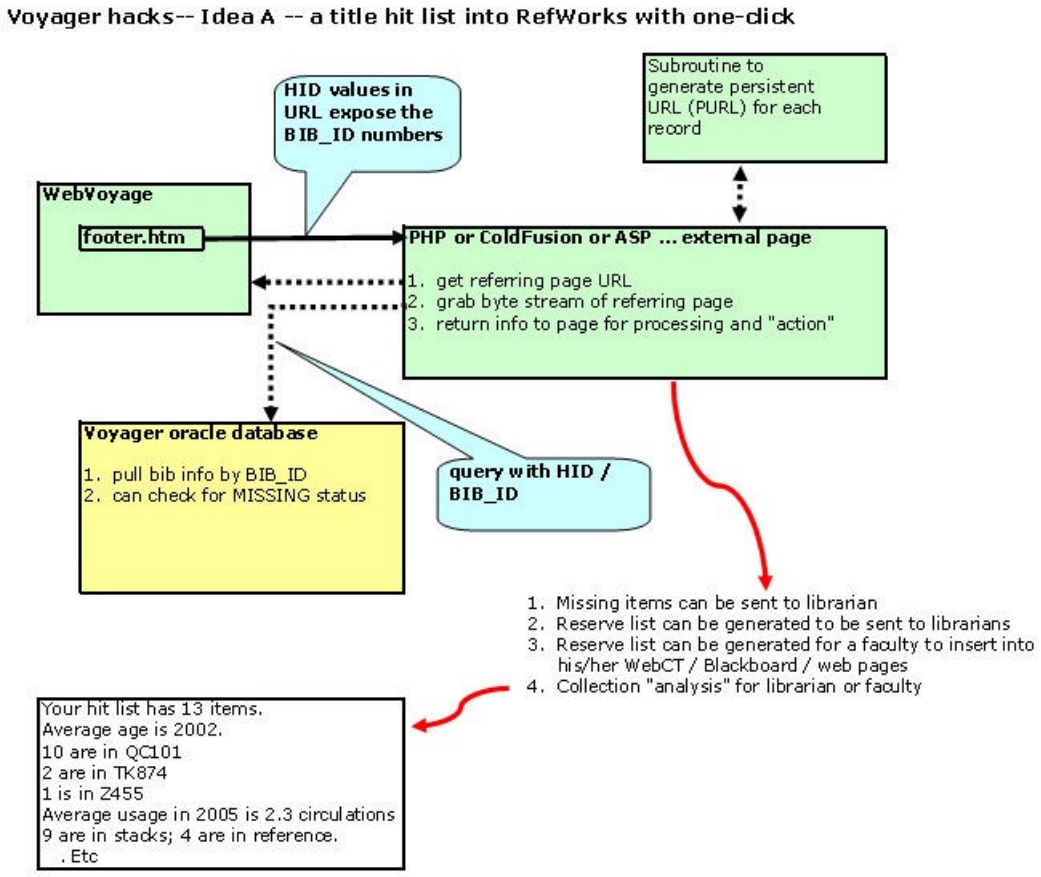
ABOVE: Jim Robertson at the whiteboard

The original plan was to divide into three groups: each working on one of the three problems. Ken Herold suggested we all work together on each problem, one at a time. The group adopted his suggestion.

Idea "A" – Sending a title hit list into RefWorks with one-click

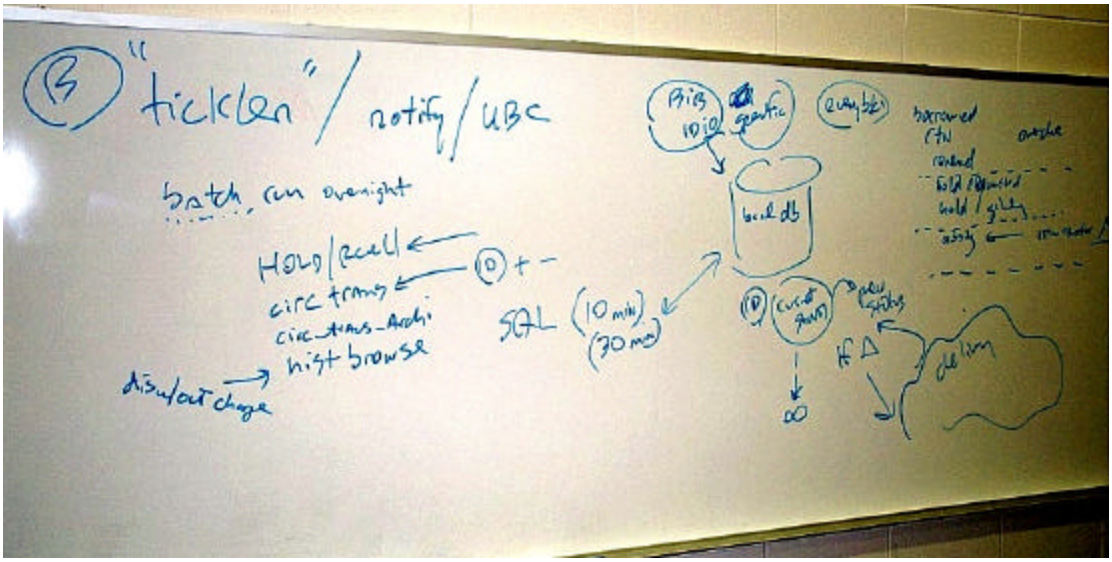


ABOVE: Photo of white board after the brainstorming and engineering of Idea A

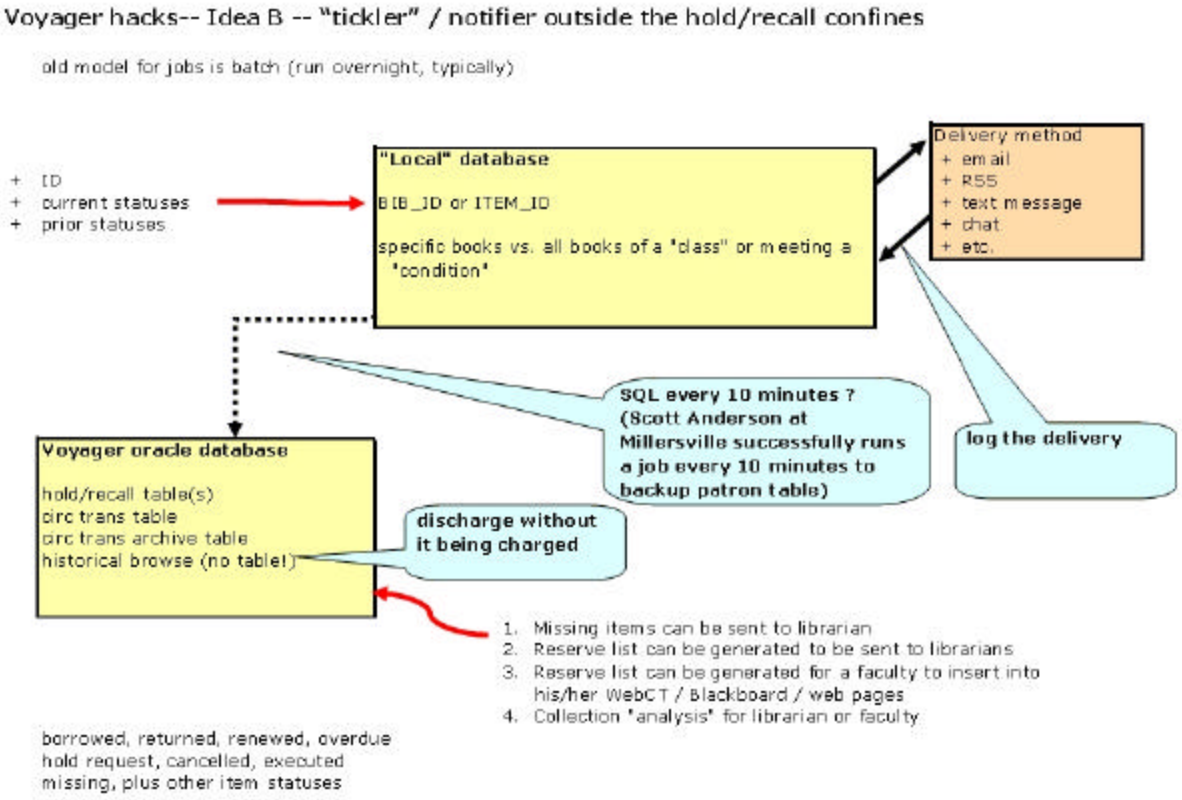


ABOVE: Jim's "cleaned-up" post-conference version of Idea A

Idea "B" – "tickler" / notifier outside the hold/recall confines

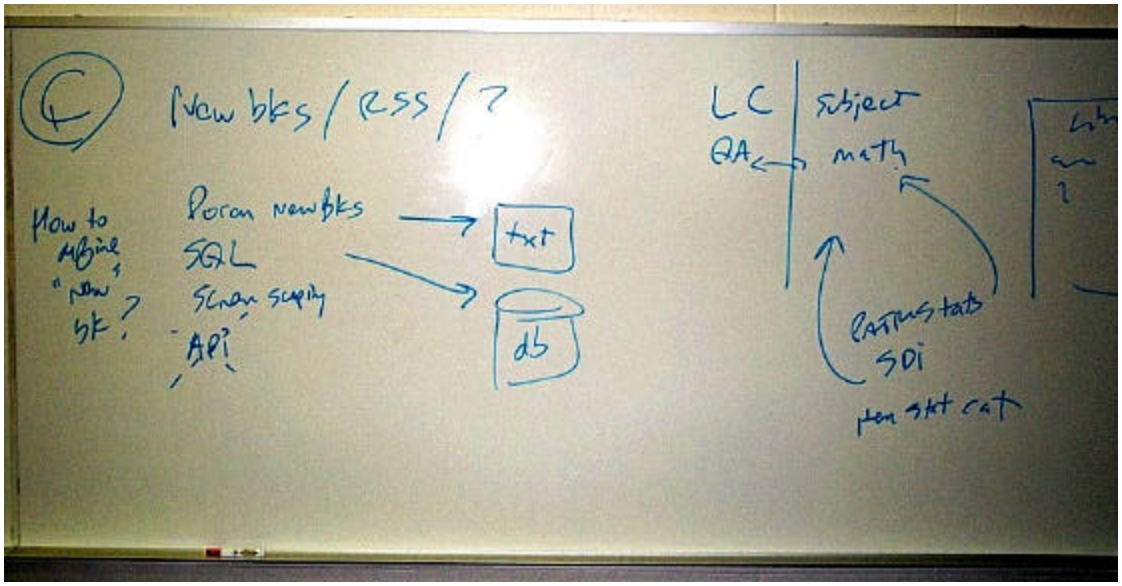


ABOVE: Photo of white board after the brainstorming and engineering of Idea B

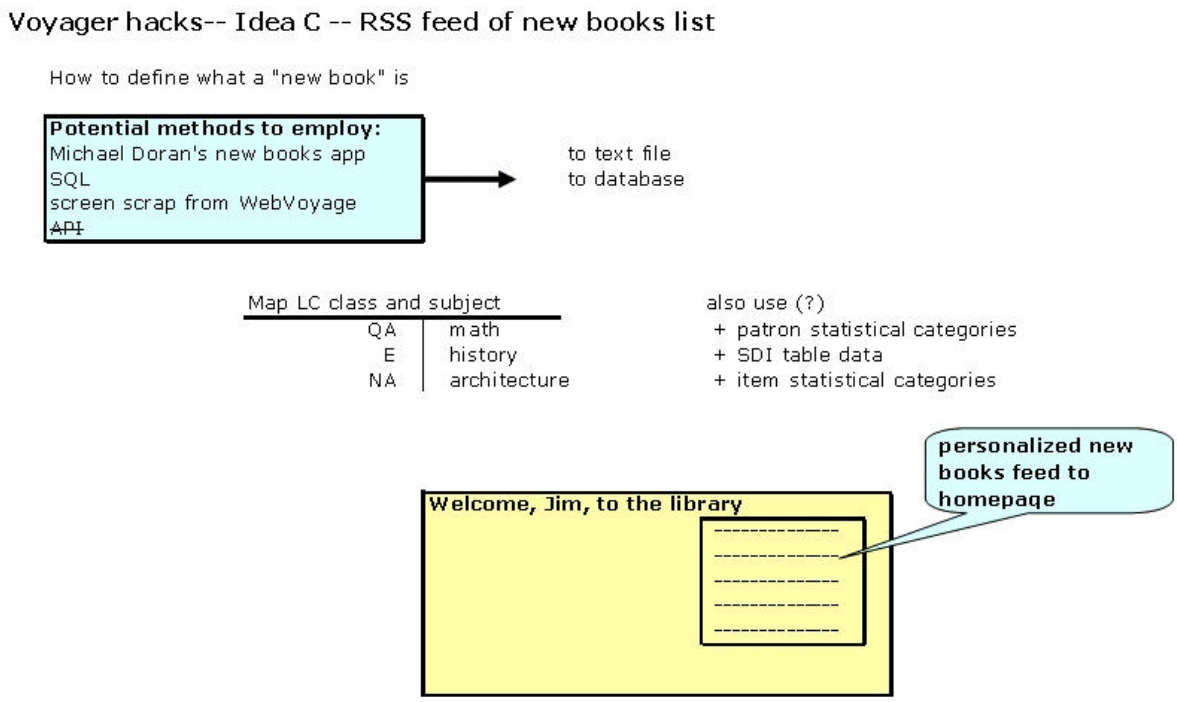


ABOVE: Jim's "cleaned-up" post-conference version of Idea B

Idea "C" – RSS feed of new books list



ABOVE: Photo of white board after the brainstorming and engineering of Idea C



ABOVE: Jim's "cleaned-up" post-conference version of Idea C

Timing:

- 11:30 introduction by Bob
- 11:32 welcome and "the idea" by Jim
- 11:40 listing and explaining possible ideas
- 11:45 brainstorming other ideas
- 11:55 settling on final three ideas
- 12:00 working up idea "A" in group discussion mode (led by Jim at the whiteboard)
- 12:10 working up idea "B" (led by Jim at the whiteboard)
- 12:20 working up idea "C" (led by Jim at the whiteboard)
- 12:28 wrap-up and thanks by Jim

Post-conference thoughts:

- We didn't use the Voyager windows modules at all; we didn't use the Voyager server .ini or .cfg files; but we did actually look up a few tables and elements in the Voyager Oracle tables.
- At times Jim felt he was leading the conversation too much. Ideally, he would have liked the conversations to continue under its own power. Nonetheless, the level of participation was fairly high.
- It was perhaps less a "hack" session than a "brainstorming" session. Still, "hacks" embodies much of the "spirit" for which the session was aiming.
- One hour was ambitious to get all the discussion in.
- It was a good idea to keep the whole group working on one problem at a time, instead of splitting the group into three (one for each project). People probably got more out of hearing all the discussion.

- While we didn't leave with any deliverable or fully-mature solution, the success of this session probably lies in its potential for "opening the eyes" of some of the participants to new possibilities and a new mind-set with which to look at Voyager.
- Additionally, no doubt the mental exercise of this session helped to clarify potential solutions to some problems for some of the more technically-bent.

Questions:

- Was this successful?
- What this useful / interesting to the participants?
- How can this be improved?
- How can this be done in Chicago at Enduser?
- Can this be taken to the next level (e.g., take place over 2-3 days; conclude with one or more "deliverables"; have a public and semi-public element (e.g., public discussion, "off-line" coding, public reveal)

Potential vision for a Chicago "Endeavor Hackfest":

Timing:

- One month prior: solicitation of ideas via a blog
- Day 1 of conference: public discussion of ideas; game-plan; blog posting
- Day 1 of conference: limited group with access to technology have a coding session; blog posting update
- Day 2 of conference: limited group with access to technology have a coding session; blog posting update
- Day 3 of conference: limited group with access to technology have a coding session; blog posting update
- Day 3 of conference: public discussion of process; public reveal of final products
- Two weeks post-conference: all code publicly available; post-mortem thoughts and public feedback available via blog

Logistics:

- Open registration for opening and closing sessions
- Separate restricted registration for coding sessions
- Dedicated "Hackroom" with technology for coders during the conference (e.g., access to a WebVoyage test server, access to PHP/ASP/ColdFusion server, internet access, Oracle access, MySQL, Apache, etc.)
- Commitment by Endeavor to have one or two of their developers as active, registered, equal-partner, participants in the Hackfest