

Minutes for SCC meeting of August 25, 2004

by Dave Redell

Attending

Mary Cicalese
Lee Courtney
Kathe Gust
Philip Gust

Paul McJones
Bernard Peuto
Michael Powell
Dave Redell

Dave Rosetti
Len Shustek
Dag Spicer
Ed Taft
Kirsten Tashev

Midcourse correction

Bernard suggested stepping back to assess directions and organization of the Software Collection Committee. Specifically, he proposed renewed focus on test cases and the “Software 100”. The active groups now seem to be those addressing: Fortran, MacPaint, software for the 1401 and PDP-1 projects, and to some extent, Page Description Languages. Noting that many other topics have been proposed and have then sat idle for lack of attention, Bernard proposed that members of the committee either join one of the active efforts or push one of the idle topics over threshold and get it moving forward.

Progress reports

Fortran: Paul has found source code for both Fortran I and Fortran II. This is a great breakthrough – especially for Fortran I, which was thought to be lost. The sources are in listing form, which will require scanning and OCR conversion. Other related material is turning up – e.g. SHARE library files. In most cases, decks of punched cards have long since been discarded due to their bulk. Magnetic tapes have often been saved, but due to obsolete formats and physical deterioration, transcoding them to modern media can be a substantial undertaking.

One key tool that Paul has used to both communicate his progress and attract others who may have material to contribute is a blog he has created called “Dusty Decks” (available at <http://www.mcjones.org/dustydecks/>). For example, it attracted a response from the son of Roy Nutt (who worked on Fortran I) saying that he has a collection of his father’s technical materials on microfiche, including a Fortran I source listing! Paul noted that he finds a careful mixture of diligence and diplomacy is needed to cultivate such contacts and develop them into real cooperative efforts.

In keeping with SCC’s desire to run historic software on emulators, Paul would like to run Fortran on an emulator for the IBM 704 – either by getting one from elsewhere or if necessary, creating it himself.

MacPaint: A major step in this project was the oral history interview conducted in June with Atkinson and Hertzfeld. The general conclusion from that effort was that there was much more material to be collected, both oral and in tangible form. A small group is needed (2-3 people) to do the background work and then meet again with the subjects for a “deeper dive” on the design of MacPaint. They also expressed some willingness to write down their recollections, but so far, no one has followed up with them on this. This appears to be an interesting test case with a rich vein of information to be mined. A

central question is the proper balance between gathering oral history and asking the subjects to write down their recollections.

IBM 1401: Mary pointed out that the 1401 restoration project, while largely a hardware effort, also involves a substantial body of software, including many decks of punched cards. Some of these have experienced significant deterioration. Work is in progress to sort through this material. A wider “public call for software” should also be on the roadmap for this project.

PDP-1: As with the 1401, this project is largely hardware-centric, but also involves a large volume of software – in this case, much of it on paper tape. To avoid damaging the old tapes, they are being read once and copied, mostly by Al Kossow. The software is a mixed bag, including lots of DECUS material and some site-specific software. Paul suggested looking into the state of Peter Deutsch’s PDP-1 Lisp system.

Other projects gathering momentum

Page Description Languages: Ed Taft is looking at this, and points out the rich collection of key people who are not only local but are well known to members of the Committee (including himself).

NLS / Augment: Phil Gust has talked with Doug Englebart about this, and will explore the available materials. He pointed out that *NLS* (oNLine System) was the original SRI project, and was renamed *Augment* when it was purchased for commercialization by McDonnell-Douglas. The exact ownership and accessibility of the software is not entirely clear, but since the original SRI work was funded by ARPA, there is hope that it should be available for public use.

Repository

Mary and Lee have been working on identifying candidate software and target audiences for the Repository. Lee gave a presentation on DSpace, an open-source Repository Framework being used at MIT and HP Labs, as well as a number of other universities. It is possible that DSpace will prove to be “the answer” to the Museum’s repository needs, but even if it doesn’t, it will raise a lot of the key issues and shed light on the whole subject. The software is only about a year old, and is still under active development, based on a SQL database and a Java front-end. Len proposed a criterion of a five-year lifespan for any Repository software that is adopted, with a clear possibility of exporting our data to allow migration to another system if/when the initial system becomes obsolete. Mary and Lee are exploring the status of DSpace as a tool with a committed lifespan, as opposed to “just a research project”, and will report back. We also need to look at the match between the target content of DSpace (research materials) and CHM (historical materials); the alignment seems substantial, but not complete.

In terms of the target audiences, there seem to be a number of different but interrelated groups. Among those identified are: CHM staff, donors, outside collectors, IP lawyers, researchers and the “general public”. We will need to refine this list and stay focused on it as we clarify the design of our repository, since the design needs to reflect the different patterns of usage by the different audiences.

Upcoming Meetings

	Wednesday	October 20	1:00pm – 3:00pm	Granite Room
	Wednesday	November 17	2:30pm – 4:30pm	Conf Room III
	No December meeting			
[Tentative]	Wednesday	January 19	1:00 pm to 3:00 pm	Granite Room.
[Tentative]	Wednesday	February 16	1:00 pm to 3:00 pm	Granite Room.
[Tentative]	Wednesday	March 16	2:30 pm to 4:30 pm*	Conf Room III.

*Note different time