

Minutes of SCC Meeting of May 17, 2006

Hopper Conference Room, 5:30–7:30

Submitted by Nadia Ilyin

Attending

Dick Guertin	Al Kossow	Fritz Schneider
Kathe Gust	Paul McJones	Bill Selmeier
Phil Gust	Randall Neff	Len Shustek
Gardner Hendrie	Paula Newman	David Wise (ACM)
Nadia Ilyin	Bernard Peuto, Chair	
Paula Jabloner	Michael Powell	

Presentations and Discussions

Software Collection Workshop

Bernard Peuto told the group that a full written report on the workshop will be made. He asked several workshop attendees to comment.

Al Kossow: Everyone agreed with our direction; somebody should spearhead a collection effort; and everybody is willing to help. The only thing that surprised him was “how little IBM has.”

Bernard commented that the IBM representative was concerned because we are working agreements with Apple and MSFT, but not yet (or not as much) with IBM. IBM says it has a database of its software covering the last 30 years, which they say they are going to destroy.

Al said that IBM claims to have nothing before 1973. Bernard commented that, “You [Al] have said anything before 1975 is in danger and anything before 55 is—forget it”.

Al also commented that “people want me to set up a website for collaboration.”

Paul McJones said that there were two corporate [IBM] people present, and neither could officially help, but both seemed interested/enthusiastic about unofficially participating. Bernard noted that we need a high-up sponsor in a corporation (but not the president).

Paul noted that Tim Shoppa and Paul Pierce, who have collections, are surprisingly interested. A collaborative website is the key thing, and it could be hub for people to continue talking. Many avenues already exist, e.g. slashdot, news groups, etc., but they are disjointed.

Bernard commented that he has never liked the attic/parlor imagery, and this was supported by the attendees who said that the actual model is in between the two. Bernard pushed for another model. He called it a kind of “Open Software collecting” model in which passionate people are doing collecting work alone or with few partners in a non institutional environment; their means and methods are not standard; but the good people do good work. To collect the maximum amount of software, we need to work with them. He said that everyone did not necessarily agree with this model, but they also didn’t disagree. “The same two guys [the practicing collectors Shoppa and Pierce]” started out with a wait and see attitude about the workshop, but ended up positive. Bernard said that “We have the opportunity to start this kind of relationship, and afterward, it takes off by itself.” He continued that the workshop participants showed a degree of agreement that he had not expected to see on the idea that software collection is contextual, unlike hardware, and that thus we have a harder problem than just collecting. Others present seemed to think this was obvious.

Paula Jabloner agreed with Bernard’s statement about the contextual nature of software collecting and said it is indeed harder to do. You can’t use software unless you have the other documentation. As an archivist, she was glad to see that the attendees grasped this idea..

There was further discussion reiterating and agreeing.

Dick Guertin noted that he knows a professor at Stanford who wants a tape read but there is no machine that can read it. Even if you can get the bits off the tape, how do you know what it means?

Bernard responded that the museum has a list of people who can read various tapes mechanically. This is an informal network of people who just know about each other. For this reason, the museum needs to establish this service in a media lab, because probably no one else will really do this, and the current set-up is unreliable.

Al responded that the plan for the coming year includes developing the ability to read four different types of media. Phil Gust noted that life of a tape is said to be approximately five years. Al responded that is is really closer to 20years; but one must weigh how important the tape’s data are in doing this work. Applying more dollars can give a better result, but it should be cost effective.

Michael Powell said that individuals who have set up a way to do this may produce nonstandard or inconsistent results that can’t be read later from their output media; the museum could step in here.

Paula Newman commented that Henry Gladney has done some work on this. There was a further short discussion.

Bernard wrapped up this discussion by saying that the workshop was more successful than he had feared at one time. Participants suggested that we have it more often and have more communication. We might use a slightly different mailing list in the future.

Paula Newman wondered who was there. Bernard said that it was half museum/SCC people and half from outside, the latter being two to three each from academia, corporate, and independent collectors. It was invitational, which has pros and cons. The cons are that people can feel left out. The pros are that it creates community and contacts outside of what we have now.

Gardner Hendrie: Museum Oral History project

Gardner Hendrie made a presentation about the museum's oral history program. He said that there are two objectives:

- 1 To get detailed histories from people who have done something of some significance in the computer field. Of the interviews they have done, the shortest was less than two hours; the longest, seven hours.
- 2 To get video for use in exhibitions, both physical and on the Web. The next big project is the Timeline; questions they are dealing with are, for example, who is first in the timeline? What is the order?

As interviewers, they have used both historians and content experts. They try to use either one or the other. It is important to get reasonable richness on the technical side. The interview is more successful if the interviewer is a knowledgeable content expert who is good at asking questions and not talking too much.

The interviewees are a wide range. The emphasis is on those who haven't been done before. The Charles Babbage Institute has done a lot of of historical interviews; but they are audio, not video. The Smithsonian and others also have done interviews. Intel has done focussed ones.

Bernard asked if this focus was business or technical. Gardner said, "Yes, and yes."

Continuing, Gardner described active priorities for an upcoming exhibit. Priority is being given to [interviewees] for the exhibit opening in late 2009. we have three years to get them. Also, priority is on people who are old. Otherwise, it is an endless list.

Process: They use videocam, which has higher resolution than regular digital video. They send the result out for transcription; and the result is proofed and edited by a volunteer, Len Shustek. They archive the DVDs to hard disk and make further disks that can be further processed, and they make further DVDs of the raw interviews.

Al asked what happens if the interviewee dies before the interview is proofed? Gardner said that essentially nothing changes. Sometimes we send a transcription to the interviewee and he/she doesn't even look at it.

Transcription is not the gating item; the limit is only lack of interviewers. Getting and interview in the can is the first priority, rather than polishing the result.

Paula Newman asked if the interviews are or will be available online. Gardner responded that in general, they will be; but the material is sometimes sensitive. Paula Jabloner said that the museum is working on a good place to put them. The quick and dirty solution is to put the interviews under the Search the Collection area on the museum's Web site and provide a link to that.

Gardner has a list of what they've done so far. Volunteer interviewers' interests are reflected in the ones we have. There is a group of software business histories that were started by Burt Grad at the Software History center, which is now integrated with us.

Jim Porter and the Disk SIG are focusing on the History of all people involved in the creation and evolution of magnetic disks from beginning to end.

Gardner is working with the Microprocessor SIG to document the origins and history of x86 family and of dynamic RAMs.

Other interviews that have been done:

The two developers of MacPaint

Dan Bricklin, Bob Frankston

Jonathan Sachs

Mitch Kapor

Hendricks (Symantec)

For this coming year they hope to do:

Backus; McCarthy; Brooks; Gates; Lampson; the developer of the Sabre system; and more.

Gardner asked SCC members to do two things:

- 1 Suggest other people to interview
- 2 Be an interviewer. Start with somebody you worked with or know, who knows you, where you know the content. Do it along with your collection. Gardner offers training to interviewers. You learn by doing. Also, it's easier at the outset if you pick a talker rather than a shy person. It's OK to do more than one interviewee at once, but Gardner likes to do one-on-one because he thinks he gets more.

Len Shustek said that the two approaches are different: an interview with more than one subject is more about the project, whereas an interview with one person is more about the history of the person and his work.

There was a further discussion of how interviewing is done; and of how they got started.

Fritz asked if we go to the interviewee's location or have them come to us. Gardner responded that "We make it as painless and comfortable as possible" for the interviewee. Often we go to them, and often to their homes. The idea is to get the best possible interview, but not try for super quality. We have lights and two portable [videocam] sets: one on the east coast and one on the west coast.

Contact Gardner Hendrie at ghendrie@aol.com to volunteer as an interviewer. It's fun because "the interviewees are some of the most interesting people there are."

Bernard Peuto: Web Site Links Project

Bernard Peuto spoke for Dick Blaine, who has put a directory of software collections on the SCC Web site. Bernard demonstrated the Web page briefly and asked the other members to examine it and provide feedback on the organization and content. <http://community.computerhistory.org/scc/projects/directoryofswlinks/>. Bernard will send the results of the comments to the distribution list. He noted that the owners of the sites to which we are linking do seem to like having the recognition and the imprimatur of SCC and the CHM on them.

Kathe Gust said that she will be showing this as a handout at BayCon, and she offered her compliments to Dick Blaine on it.

Bernard said that Dick did this in one month, "which is pretty good!" He said he felt encouraged by this achievement because "we have talked about this for a long time."

Bernard then introduced visitor David Wise, who was here for a meeting of the Executive Committee of the ACM Council; he also cochairs the ACM history group. David spoke only briefly but cordially and said he was here to observe.

Nadia Ilyin: CTOS Project

Nadia Ilyin presented a proposed project to collect the CTOS-based products of Convergent Technologies (CT), which was founded in 1979 and acquired by Unisys Corp. in 1988. CTOS is the acronym for the proprietary Convergent Technologies Operating System. Nadia explained the hardware and software products involved and why it seems a good idea to start this collection now: principally because she has connections to many of the original designers, who are still reasonably young and in good health, and because the products all represented leading-edge technology at the time. The

committee offered positive support for starting the project. A slide presentation accompanies these minutes.

Short Reports

Al Kossow:

Al reported that he has read in all the music tapes from Peter Sampson.

Paul McJones:

Paul is working with the HOPL organizers to preserve the software and related documents that will be discussed at the conference. Paul said he is talking to Bjarne Stroustrup about collecting materials for a C++ project. Paul also talked to Burt Grad of the Software History Center and will meet with him next week to talk about his oral histories. We are interested in some of the same companies, but we are more interested in the technical side, vs. Burt's interest in the business side. But we could share contacts. Also, Bob Patrick, who is a colleague of Burt's, has some interesting little essays that explain what the problem was that led them to do certain things.

Gardner pointed out that we do have an oral history from Bob. Paul noted that there exists an old one too. Bob's point of view is that of an informed user.

Paul then turned to the FORTRAN and Lisp project and reported that Jean Martin is filling her garage with IBM stuff.

Phil Gust:

NLS: Phil is working on keysets; there is a proposed SRI keyset and an Alto keyset. (The SRI designer left and went to Xerox.) His other project is that SRI has asked for help with its 60th anniversary, and wants a reproduction of Englebart's keyset. This would cost \$20,000 to do with USB technology. But there are people who would be interested in selling these if they were available. SRI can afford only \$10,000 for NRE. Phil needs to find more money for this project.

Len asked if this project has commercial viability. Phil said that it probably does not, although a limited-edition set signed by Doug Englebart might be good. Phil will meet with the designer next week. The anniversary of the first NLS demonstration is in October. It will be HTML and will include movies and the Augment system. They can extract 15,000 files to XML. They need help; Phil needs CHM to call for volunteers for all phases: XML, C, and Java coding. SRI can put some volunteer work into it but not enough.

It was suggested that Phil contact Jim Sommer the volunteer coordinator at the museum.

On the legal side, SRI will release all materials to which they have rights. MCI is the last straggler. It is slow going there because there has been an outflux of people due to their merger.

Len commented that in the end, Phil will have gone beyond the level of due diligence in this area.

Paula Newman:

In reference to the book collection project, Paula has started making a strawman list of 100 books, divided into categories, the most important to collect and the most important to annotate. She will put this list on the SCC site for comment. We now have a set of criteria for the books.

Paula decided to first pick the books from the overall list and then figure out why she had picked them. Often, it turned out, it was because the author was someone that she knew was a very important person in the development of ideas. While annotating the list, we may need to acquire a book in order to verify the information. What do we do about money to acquire books? Al responded that it depends on what she plans to do with the book: strip covers and scan?

David Wise said that he knows something about the ACM book project, but its goals are different from ours.

Paula said that we want to collect not just the book, but also its historical context. We need to farm particular books out to experts to do some entries. Bernard explained to David that we are interested in the people who wrote the books.

David said that ACM is interested in obtaining the digital licenses and putting the books online and making them available. "I think we are working together on this," he said, noting that other people (libraries and corporations) are culling books and discarding them now. Paula agreed. Len said that we should have those books that a library would no longer have.

The meeting adjourned at 7:30.