HOW NOT TO CREATE A DIGITAL MEDIA SCHOLARSHIP PLATFORM: THE HISTORY OF THE SOPHIE 2.0 PROJECT

Jasmine Kirby
Social Sciences and Humanities Librarian
Iowa State University of Science and Technology
“INTRODUCTION TO SOPHIE”

WHAT WAS SOPHIE 2.0?

- An update on Institute for the Future of the Book’s 2008 Sophie 1.0 platform
  - 1981 Hypertext demonstration
  - 1992 Expanded Books Toolkit
  - 1996 work on TK3 through Bob Stein’s Night Kitchen company begins
  - 2004 Institute for the Future of the Book founded

- Sophie 1.0 demo released 2007

- Create dynamic multimedia “books” where the content was all equally important could be arranged in different ways and annotated

- A variety of uses were proposed for the software, narrative storytelling was not one of them
THE PROBLEM: SOPHIE IS MISSING

- Net worth: $4,194,500*
- Last seen 2011
- What happened?
HAS ANYONE ELSE NOTICED?

- The Sophie 2.0 developer site [http://sophie2.org/trac/] not updated since 2011
- Founder Bob Stein in two interviews (2010, 2011) discusses the failure of the Sophie project
- There was a January 2017 *Computers in Libraries* digital humanities piece that mentions Sophie 2.0
TAKING A NEW APPROACH TO THE CASE

- Placing computer applications in the history of science and technology
- Understanding and appreciating the challenges faced by the creators
- Putting creator decisions in the context of beliefs at the early 21st century about technology and software development
SO YOU WANT TO REINVENT THE BOOK

- Decide what makes a book a book
  - Is it still a book if it incorporates new media and authoring from comments?
- Figure out how to translate those features into a completely new media
- Convince people that the new media is better or at least just as good as the old media
ROBERT “BOB” STEIN

“In saying that I ‘left the project after blowing through more than $2.5-million,’ your article implies that I left the enterprise cavalierly, when in fact, the University of Southern California put someone else in charge.”

- Letter to the Editor, Chronicle of Higher Education March 1st 2011
ROBERT “BOB” STEIN

- Former leftist publisher, digital media pioneer
- Let predecessor to Sophie, TK3 never come to market to keep the Mac version
- Maoist with McLuhan-esque view of the power of software
- Project management style for Sophie 1.0 was more suited for traditional book publishing
Based in New York but affiliated with University of Southern California

Overly ambitious

Multiple projects and experiments with different visions of the future of the book going at once, CommentPress

Documentation and tech support services were limited

Kept changing their mind but did not insist on using an iterative type of project management
SOPHIE 1.0 TEAM AT IMPARA GMBH/UNIVERSITY OF POTSDAM

- Sophie 1.0 built in the Smalltalk programming language
- Wanted to include the most features possible
- *Field of Dreams* marketing strategy
THE ANDREW MELLON FOUNDATION RIT PROGRAM

- Only provided funding for prototypes
- Required the switch to Java with belief that software would be maintained by open source Java developers
- Global economic recession resulted in a shuffling of people on projects
THE OPEN SOURCE JAVA DEVELOPER COMMUNITY

- Never came through
- Were never asked what they wanted
- Were missing in action long before Sophie was 13
THE SOPHIE USERS

- Never really defined, mostly educators
- Blame themselves for not being ready for the software of the future
- Really just wanted a software that worked
- Needed more love
Programmers for hire affiliated with the University of Sofia in Bulgaria that were tasked with switching Sophie 1.0 to Java

Inherited a mess and just focused on translating the mess into Java

Not easy to get involved in the open source project if you weren’t in Bulgaria

Didn’t reach out to mainstream publishing companies experimenting with mixed media books at the time
Provided “evangelism” for the Sophie 2.0 project

Emphasized creating a software for free and open source, multimedia document creation, and new forms of authorship and intellectual property

“Original Synners” pedagogy that encouraged experimental media forms created with experimental software

Focused on how Sophie 2.0 would change scholarly practices
AND THE CULPRITS ARE...

- They all did it, working together!
ADDRESSING RUMORS OF A MORE RECENT SOPHIE SIGHTING

- Scalar is in no way related to Sophie whatsoever
- Different history, projects overlapped
WORRIED ABOUT THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES TOOL YOU WORK WITH GOING MISSING?

- Has this been updated? When was the most recent update? Are updates regular or sporadic?
- How is this project funded? Is this grant funded? What happened to other recipients of these grants?
- How well does the software work? Has the software ever worked? Is this software supposed to work?
HERE ARE SOME MORE QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE:

- Where can I get tech support? How fast is the response for questions about glitches? Are users told to fix glitches themselves?
- Was this software created accounting for intellectual property laws and other legal issues faced by users?
- Does this software claim to be meant for nontechnical users? Is there documentation? Is there a glossary for software-specific terms?
- Are there reviews? Demo projects? Are demo projects created by ordinary users or institutional groups with advanced IT resources?
WHILE THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SOPHIE 2.0 IS A TRAGIC STORY OF WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN:

- It is not the job of librarians and digital humanists to use software we hope will work because it aligns with values we find important

- It is our job to recommend and contribute to digital tools that won’t eat our users’ homework
QUESTIONS?
THANK YOU!