

Getting People Together

Mike Ellis

<http://electronicmuseum.org.uk>

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The web has always been about content. Commentators have recognised this simple fact for as long as the web has existed: technology comes and goes, but the importance of content stays the same.

At the heart of so called 'Web 2.0' is something which has content at the heart; a very personal need to enrich *connections between people* and the content that they share.

This essay isn't about the web – not really. It's about some of the ways in which the web can be used to bring people together – (yes, together as in 'in the same room') – and then the ways in which the web can be used to help keep those people in touch.

Maslow's 'Hierarchy of needs'



¹
http://www.online-information.co.uk/online08/seminar_description_ims.html?presentation_id=442.

²
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow's_hierarchy_of_needs.

Back in December 2008, I gave a talk¹ at the Online Information conference in which I drew parallels between the social web and Maslow's hierarchy of needs.² The talk itself focused on the fact that I believe 'Web 2.0' – or as I prefer to call it, 'the social web' – is important because it calls to basic human needs. 'Love / belonging', 'esteem' and 'self actualisation' – the top three elements of Maslow's triangle – all are bolstered by intimacy, creativity and community: key elements of the connectedness of the web, and some of the main traits of the social web.

The social web is successful – and I believe will increasingly become bedrock for more and more online experiences – because it helps us connect with others. On simple levels, this connection long pre-dates the notion of Web 2.0: e-mail, bulletin boards, IM (instant messaging) are ‘old’ technologies, but continue to thrive purely because they are on some level important to people because of these connections.

This essay will examine two ‘real world’ events – non-virtual, ‘bricks and mortar’ events. These events have had at their heart some of the fundamental aspects of the social web: interactivity, creativity, openness, honesty, sociability, experimentation. The fact that the events happened to revolve around technical subjects is for all intents and purposes immaterial: really the only impact this has is that the use of the technologies is more natural in the participants’ lives. In time, this will likely become the way for everyone.

The events

I put together these events during 2008. Although both were for similar audiences (reasonably technical, and with the web as their focus), there the similarity stops. The first of these (Mashed Museum 2008³) – was very quick to put together, very cheap and involved a small number of people. The second (BathCamp 2008⁴) was an entirely different affair which had around 50-60 participants and required months of planning and a considerable sum in sponsorship to support it.

1: Mashed Museum 2008

The first event we’ll look at was a ‘mashed museum day’ held in June 2008.

The notion of a ‘mashup’ is fairly well embedded for web developers – it is essentially a rapidly hacked-together prototype which takes different data sources and services to deliver something new and innovative in some way. Mashups can be produced quickly, cheaply (usually for free) and demonstrate new – usually innovative – ways of presenting data or content.

Mashups are particularly interesting in a museum context. Here, the traditional focus has been on making sure object and exhibition data is curatorially checked and 100% correct. Mashups tend to focus on innovation in displaying and ‘munging’ data, considering it from different, less traditional angles.

I wanted to take the energy, experimentation and freedom that are represented by mashups and give the day this flavour. I introduced the Mashed Museum day as follows, using Google Docs and Groups (see below) as collaborative tools to help me organise the event.

³
<http://mashedmuseum.org.uk>.

⁴
<http://bathcamp.org>.

⁵
<http://electronicmuseum.org.uk/2008/06/27/mashed-museum-2008/>.

‘You are invited to a day of coding, thinking and idea sharing with a select group of museum colleagues.

Mashed Museum 2008 will be a day of free-form thinking and doing with only enough structure to make sure we actually get something out of the (considerable) collective brainpower in the room.

The day aims to give us an environment free from political or monetary constraints. The focus of the day is not IPR, copyright, funding or museum politics. Our energies will be channeled into embracing the “new web”: envisaging, demonstrating and (hopefully) building some lightweight distributed applications.’

The main thing I wanted to get across about this day was that it was to be about rapid development, experimentation and freedom.

The specific audience for the event was a group of museum web developers. Around twenty people came along. Eduserv provided sponsorship for refreshments; we had free access to a large, networked room from Leicester University for the whole day.

The day itself was loosely structured – we wanted to give just enough shape to it to enable people to collaborate effectively but not too so much that people felt restricted. Towards the end of the day everyone was given the opportunity to present what they’d produced during the day. Again, we did this as informally as possible – beers were distributed and concepts presented at people’s desks.

During the day, I circulated with a Nokia N95 phone and did brief video interviews with those people who had produced something.

After the event, I updated pbwiki (see below) and blogged about what had gone on, and also produced a quick video cut of the interviews I’d carried out. You can see this, and read more about the outputs of the event on my blog.⁵

Feedback for the event was very positive. There were some minor issues – for example, we had no mobile coverage in the room and a couple of the mashups had to be altered to take this into account. There was also the interesting question of ‘how do I take what I’ve done back into my institution?’. This is an ongoing question that hasn’t been answered: one of the most common bits of feedback was that part of the reason the day was positive was because of the collaboration, and ‘being away from my inbox’. Giving mental space to people – it turns out – is possibly as important as the actual format of the event itself!

2: BathCamp

BathCamp was a 'BarCamp'⁶ we ran over a weekend in September 2008. We began planning BathCamp in April 2008 and although the effort was clearly focused towards the latter end of this time period, the 4-5 month span will give you some idea of the complexity of this event.

A 'BarCamp' is a 'participatory unconference' which loosely means a conference with a defined shape (in our case, 40-minute talks given during a 24 hour period) but an undefined set of topics or speakers. The unwritten rule of barcamps is that everyone pitches in: if you follow the strictest of BarCamp rules, you aren't allowed to even turn up without giving a presentation, but we were slightly more relaxed about this, encouraging speakers but not forcing people to take part.

The initial idea of a Bath-based BarCamp (an idea which was born during a drunken moment in a bar at a conference in Vancouver...) was taken forward by a small group of enthusiastic people who collaborated at first using Google Groups. Over time we expanded this group slightly, but also set up mailing lists for the local tech community.

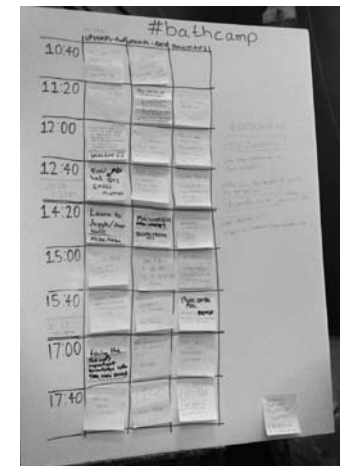
Geeks are reasonably easy people to target with marketing: they tend to lurk on similar mailing lists and around similar events. The notion of a BarCamp within this community is fairly well embedded, and the local nature of the event helped in terms of encouraging attendance.

Because the BathCamp event took place over a period of 24 hours, we needed a venue, accommodation and refreshments. We therefore went to local firms and contacts, and managed to raise around £3,000 to pay for the event. All the people coming to the event paid £5 each: nominally this was to cover the cost of special BathCamp t-shirts, but in reality it was also a sum which we hoped would encourage people to come along. A free event is much easier to make excuses for!

The talks themselves were incredibly diverse. The way a BarCamp works is that there is a time grid which is presented to participants when they arrive. It divides the day into slots (in our case, 40 minute slots): people then write the topic name on a Post-It note and stick it to the relevant slot. It is also important to note that barcamps work much better if there are at least 3 concurrent streams. This gives users the chance to pick and choose what they'd like to see.

On the next page, our BathCamp board once it had been populated.

6
<http://barcamp.org/>.



BathCamp board 2008

For the most part, we (the organisers) just left the participants to arrange the timetable on their own: there was some minimal shuffling to ensure an even spread of talk 'types' and also to fit in with the days' refreshments.

You'll probably notice two things from the image above: one, this is clearly a lo-fi setup, and two, that the range of talks was considerable, from juggling to Django, from the technology of archaeology to coffee making. This is part of the joy of an unconference: the serendipity and variety of the presentations.



Presentations during BathCamp 2008

Interestingly, the lo-fi aspect was something which troubled me at first. I thought about various ways of displaying this board on the web, on mobile devices or print-outs. I even put together a simple SMS system which allowed people to 'buddy' each other. The reality of course is that these things just don't work in an un-conference environment. Not only are they harder to set up and maintain, but there is also something very powerful to be said about the collaborative effect of participants crowding around a physical, hand-drawn timetable between each set of talks.

Now we've looked at the events, let's examine some of the services and tools available to support the arranging of these kinds of events.

The tools

We used a hefty combination of online tools for the organisation of these events. BathCamp, being by far the more complex used most (if not all) of the list below. Mashed Museum used rather less.

Here is an overview of some of the main tasks and tools:

- For *lightweight project management* tasks (delegating and sharing tasks and deadlines) we used 'Basecamp'⁷, a free (unless you upgrade for additional functionality) online system.
7
<http://www.basecampHQ.com/>.
 - For *sharing of collaborative documents* such as letters to sponsors, timetable outlines, etc. we used Google Docs⁸. Again, free – and a very easy way of sharing and collaborating with Word-like or Excel-like formats.
8
<http://docs.google.com>.
 - For *alerting and discussing* among the core group of organisers, we used Google Groups⁹, a simple mailing list. Another free tool.
9
<http://groups.google.com>.
 - For *sharing of non-collaborative documents* such as logos and flyers, we used Box¹⁰ and Dropbox¹¹. Again, free for limited use.
10
<http://box.net>.
 - For gathering e-mail addresses of potential participants and for sending out of regular news bulletins to these people, we used Campaign Monitor¹², a professional online service for sending e-newsletters. This is a paid service; however, we negotiated a sponsorship deal whereby we displayed their logo on our e-mails in return for free 'sending credits'.
11
<http://getdropbox.com>.
 - For *capturing the final participants list*, and also for billing purposes, we used Eventbrite coupled with PayPal. This is a service which is paid, but by a fixed sum per ticket sale.
12
<http://campaign-monitor.com>.
 - For alerting people and keeping interest in the event high, we used a standard hosted version of Wordpress¹⁴ for blogging and Twitter.¹⁵ We also bought the domain name <http://bathcamp.org> and used the free Google Apps¹⁶ system to manage e-mail accounts on this domain. Ditto, we set up a Facebook BathCamp group and invited friends. Most importantly, we made extensive use of the microblogging tool, Twitter for rapid alerting.
13
<http://eventbrite.com>.
 - For information following the event – we used a mix of pbwiki¹⁷ (a simple, free, hosted wiki service), Flickr¹⁸ and our own website.
14
<http://wordpress.com>.
- 15
<http://twitter.com>.
- 16
<http://google.com/a>.
- 17
<http://pbwiki.com/>.
- 18
<http://flickr.com>.

There is one other main tool worth mentioning which we have brought into the mix following the BathCamp event to manage ongoing evening events. This is from <http://www.ning.com> and is invaluable for quickly setting up a social network, managing users, discussions, e-mail alerts and so on.

The collaboration required was of course surrounded by large number of regular meetings to discuss next steps, budgets, tasks and so on...

The simplicity of good technology

People who are too close to this stuff – for example web developers or project manager – often miss the fact that it is simple stuff which works best. Web developers, for example, love 'features'. They're addicted to buttons and complexity. They even have a rude phrase for people who don't understand the things they build: 'PEBCAK' (Problem Exists Between Chair And Keyboard).¹⁹

What they often don't focus on is that the important thing with technology and processes usually work better when they are *invisible* – as slick, intuitive and non-invasive as possible.

Here's what Tom Standage, author and technology commentator says:

'If you look at the telephone we don't really have either enthusiasm or scepticism for it now. It's just become invisible and that is the sign of a mature technology: you don't notice it's there any more.'²⁰

As people get used to this as a concept, the sites and services available naturally tend towards usability and simplicity. And as they do this, more non-technical users are finding that these services are truly useful in helping to foster and create *offline* relationships and experiences.

Having said this, many of these tools are quite impenetrable at first. Many of them – as you will have seen – are free from a financial aspect. This doesn't necessarily mean that they are free from a time aspect. Knowing which to choose and how to use them most effectively together is a bit of a black art, and really comes from personal preference and practice as much as anything else.

Live coverage

There were elements of both events which constituted live coverage. Events that have this element are often described as being 'amplified'. There are many ways of doing this, and the landscapes and technologies are changing all the time, but there are some techniques emerging.

The first of these, and arguably the most important, is more a kind of 'meta-technique' which is used to bring together the disparate public elements of these kinds of conferences. Simply, it's the use of a unique 'tag' or 'hashtag' which is attached to blog posts, tweets, documents, images and so on whenever the event is mentioned.

This allows the technologies and people involved to see and search for aggregated views of all mentions of this particular event. Take BathCamp as an example. Because we used (and

19
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pebcak>.

20
http://www.open2.net/digitalplanet_learning-zone/cybertalk_script.html.

publicised) the tag *bathcamp08*, you can search for the event as follows:

- Google Blog search: <http://blogsearch.google.com/blogsearch?&q=bathcamp08>.
- Flickr Image search: <http://www.flickr.com/search/?q=bathcamp08&utm=tags&z=t>.

There are also some technologies (I am developing one called OneTag²¹) which can be used to aggregate this content together, and display on web pages or via RSS feeds.

21
<http://onetag.org>.

For the Mashed Museum event, we briefly used a mid-range webcam and the free video streaming service Mogulus²² to broadcast live to anyone who cared to join us. This is free, but requires reasonable bandwidth – and, more importantly – a reason! We found few people watched the stream because (in this instance) this was a ‘had to be there’ event rather than anything which could really be participated in remotely. Similar free technologies exist for streaming audio, but again should be considered carefully in the context of the particular event.

22
<http://www.mogulus.com/>.

Tweeting and Blogging during events is common, particularly the former. There is also a system called CoverItLive²³ which lets event delegate contribute to a continuing stream of chat about the event – the ‘backchannel’. These kinds of systems can also be set up to gather feedback or questions for a speaker. It is of course also possible to hook these systems up to SMS so that messages or questions can be sent in by text on a mobile phone.

23
<http://coveritlive.com>.

Conclusion

Really, the important point for me is that there is no conclusion: this is a rapidly changing space where formal conferences are being joined by different formats. Working out which of the various formats works for a particular audience and subject is absolutely key – ditto, choosing which technologies to use in a particular context.

As time goes on, we will undoubtedly see many things changing in this space: most likely, however, we’ll see an increasing overlap of online and offline experiences, where the ‘pre-event’ merges into the ‘during’ and ‘post-event’. As mobile and web technologies become more powerful (and more invisible!), these events will increasingly spread beyond their physical presence and onto the web.

Here, we’ll start to see on-line and off-line audiences engaging more closely with the content and with each other. The focus of the ‘social web’ will become as much about the bringing together of people into physical spaces as it currently is about virtual ones, ultimately blurring the edges between what ‘physical’ and ‘virtual’ actually means.

A word tree visualisation of maritime memorials using IBM's Many Eyes, starting with the word 'Lost', produced during workshop Mashed Museum 2008.



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