

The Virtual Coffee House - A Vision

Version 4 – 26 October 2008

Introduction

The Virtual Coffee House is an idea for a “virtual community” web site that extends and underpins a community’s “real world” activities, and is highly accessible and flexible thereby allowing participation by the widest audience.

Originally conceived as a way of better engaging RSA fellows spread across the northern region it was recognised that, if it achieved its ambition, it could become an exemplar that other non-profit organisations might benefit from.

This paper sets out the background and describes the idea via a short narrative and references¹.

Background

It was felt that the Virtual Coffee House should facilitate the widest possible range of possible encounter, for instance:

- Bumping into friends and acquaintances in the street
- Dropping into the local café/pub/community centre/university union
- Going to meet people in the privacy of their homes/workplaces
- Attending events out of curiosity or for a purpose
- Initiating and participating in community activities
- Meeting new people and linking into other communities

The following description of a “visit” illustrates how the Virtual Coffee House might look and function.

A Visit to the Virtual Coffee House

I am sitting at my computer. I click onto “The Virtual Coffee House” web site link. It is half an hour before the monthly Education Club Night I am going to. The home page loads with the message “welcome to the Virtual Coffee House”.

Directory

I can see who is around, and what they are doingⁱⁱ. I see a couple of new names and click on them to see the details they have chosen to share: their interests and skills, who they know, which groups and projects they are involved in, their reputationⁱⁱⁱ in each area they subscribe to, and how they feel about being approached on various subjects. I see one called Paddy is involved in some of the areas that interest me, and will be at an interactive lecture I hope to see next week^{iv}, so I book an e mail reminder and make a

note to contact her afterwards unless we become acquainted during the discussion.

Chat

A new contact of mine in the USA called Don is there. Last week I had a message from him^v asking if I would be willing to have a chat with him about his project, having seen my posting in the Help Offered area. I have discovered he knows several of my other contacts, has a good reputation^{vi}, and might have the skills to help with my own current project. I click on his instant message icon, exchange a couple of brief hellos and then go straight into a video call^{vii}.

He is quite new to the VCH and doesn't know about del.icio.us^{viii}. As it will be a great tool for his project I take over his desktop^{ix} and guide him through the VCH's own del.icio.us, adding a couple of new links myself while I am at it. I take the opportunity to record the session and post it on the VCH Videopedia^x for others to refer to in future. I intend to use it as part of a video conference^{xi} I have organised for a group around the country in a couple of weeks. At the end we arrange to meet at the VCH a little later.

Project Labs

I then go to the Project Labs^{xii} section: this is a window into all of the projects being undertaken through the VCH. I browse the categories and find a new project in the "Sustainability" category that looks interesting: I decide to subscribe^{xiii} as an observer and get daily alerts as it has already attracted some reputable contributors: if it proves of real interest to me I may apply to become a participant. I see there is a live discussion going on and take a quick look^{xiv}: there is no-one I know there so I carry on.

I go back to the main Project Labs list and find the "Society" category I have subscribed to. I had my weekly alert^{xv} about new postings last night and go straight to the project I set up: I respond to a couple of comments on the discussion forum, review some changes to the documents we are working on^{xvi}, and add a link to the programme I have drawn up^{xvii}. Next week there is an on-line project meeting so everyone in the project team needs to have seen it in advance: they will get an automatic notification of the posting. I also edit a comment I made last night. I then go back to the home page.

Club Night

On the home page is a window displaying pre-planned and impromptu events in and around the VCH community: preplanned events are listed in the calendar (including tonight's, for which I received an automatic reminder this morning); events currently happening are shown on a scrolling display^{xviii} that links to each event discussion and resources. Some events are open to all comers, some require "joining", and some (such as project meetings) are private to invited participants only. Some I can simply observe, some I can

interact with. At the click of a mouse I can join in, register interest, or post an event of my own.

In 20 minutes time two events I am interested in will start. One is a presentation from New York: I can watch and listen to the presentation from the comfort of my rural Northumbria living room, and participate in the discussions if I want, or come back later and catch up on the recording^{xxix} whenever suits me. The other event is part of the Education club night. I am going to that one because I want to take part in the video session afterwards. There will be speakers in Cape Town, London and Dubai.

The Café

I click on the Café icon. Inside the Club Night participants are gathering in one corner with, as usual, a number of other tables^{xxx} of people around the café doing other things (a mix of text chats and voice/video discussions), and a number of people including Justin who I know wondering around seeing what is going on. I approach him and we exchange a few words. We then move to a table where Philip, another of my acquaintances, is in an interesting discussion. I decide to leave them there and catch up on it later, and move over to the Club Night area. I exchange a few words with a number of people before I receive a five minute alert about the event.

Library

I have a quick look in the library to check the video I made earlier has arrived at the Videopedia^{xxxi} and is working. I also see a new file about networking and bookmark it for a later look.

The Function Rooms

The event is being held in one of a number of bookable areas. I click on the event link and a window opens displaying the dozen or so participants, a text chat, and a presentation screen where I can see Claire who is chairing the event. She then welcomes each of us by name and location^{xxxi}, and the presentations begin. A number of other people join in during the session. At the end a number of questions are raised and discussed^{xxxii}. I briefly return to the main club night area, leaving the last few participants starting a video chat: something else to catch up on later.

Conclusion

The VCH's Coffee House Challenge video conference event in NE Region on 23rd March 2007 showcased many of the tools and web sites that originally inspired and informed this Virtual Coffee House idea (see endnotes). Since then the RSA has experimented with its own RSANetworks site, although so far the ambitions of this paper are not reflected in it. Although some of the tools have moved on the fundamentals have not changed.

The next step is to find the expertise and funds to begin to turn this into reality, including

- Feasibility study to identify options, from mashups of free tools to engaging with leading edge developers such as IBM
- Market research to ensure that the eventual product would be taken up
- Implementation of a pilot site, possibly via OpenRSA.

The Virtual Coffee House Team.

Clare Maxwell
 Paddy Deans
 Don Pinchbeck
 Justin Souter
 Philip Aranzulla
 Peter Churchill*

*For further information contact roundhay125@googlemail.com

ⁱ It was initially inspired by, amongst other things, the IBM World Jam event <http://www.research.ibm.com/SocialComputing/WorldJam.htm> and http://www.theworkfoundation.com/Assets/PDFs/you_dontknowme.pdf. Such networking sites as Facebook and LinkedIn have shown the way forward.

ⁱⁱ Good forum software will go a long way towards this, for instance <http://www.vbulletin.com/> as used by <http://www.smartmaniacs.co.uk/forums/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Reputation systems are part of Ebay for instance. Also see www.digg.com.

^{iv} A good working example is http://www.etsy.com/virtual_labs.php. Also many of the tools envisaged in this paper are available at http://www.eluminate.com/demo/recorded_demos_list.jsp. Both of these were brought to our attention by Tessy Britton.

^v Instant messaging for instance Skype www.skype.com. Some networking sites include Skype links for instant contact with other members that are currently on-line.

^{vi} See above re reputation systems

^{vii} See also Skype

^{viii} As used by VCH for the CHC demonstration <http://del.icio.us>. We also tested out a free video and sound card recorder <http://www.camstudio.org/> with reasonable results (some file size and sync problems)

^{ix} For instance Radmin <http://www.radmin.com/products/radmind/> as used by VCH for the CHC presentation.

^x See <http://www.5min.com/> for instance: intended to be a video counterpart to Wikipedia.

^{xi} There are a number of free video conferencing products at <http://en.softonic.com/windows/conferencing-free> including Festoon, a Skype add-on trailed by our group. Other options are available, e.g. <http://www.counterpath.net/x-lite.html&active=4> which uses SIP.

^{xii} Inspired by <http://labs.digg.com>, in particular Swarm (see also below)

^{xiii} Again easily managed subscriptions are a feature of good forum software.

^{xiv} Chat room technology - see also Chat Circles below. Also Etsy and Eluminate above for pre-programmed events.

^{xv} Alert frequency choice is part of good subscription systems (see above)

^{xvi} Might be <http://docs.google.com>, or <http://openrsa.wikispaces.com/> as set up by David Wilcox and others.

^{xvii} Google Groups allow for links to web sites and documents for instance <http://groups.google.com/> as used by OpenRSA.

^{xviii} Again inspired by Digg. See also Etsy for programme of on-line events.

^{xix} See Camstudio above for instance

^{xx} You Don't Know Me But (see above) referred to

http://alumni.media.mit.edu/~fviegas/papers/chat_circles_series.pdf. We have been unable to find a working example of Chat Circles. IBM are doing interesting ongoing work in this area <http://www.research.ibm.com/SocialComputing/SCGdesign.html>. Etsy is an interesting working example that incorporates video (see above). Two other inspirational images of dynamic (although very different) environments are <http://labs.digg.com/swarm> and <http://www.touchgraph.com/TGGoogleBrowser.html>

^{xxi} See above.

^{xxii} This is how the Microsoft Live Meeting web-based demonstration starts (see above)

^{xxiii} Live Meeting does this by text questions and voice replies: smaller groups could use video links such as Festoon (see above)