

2.0

watch

dispatches from the
front lines of web 2.0

BUILDING THE

LIBRARY

By **Amanda** Etches-Johnston

We just launched a redesigned website at my library (literally 48 sleepless hours ago, as I write this). The project consumed my entire summer, and as the launch date drew near, I experienced all the textbook signs of launch anxiety: plenty of fear, a healthy dose of nervousness, and limitless amounts of self-doubt. What if everyone hates it? What if all the blog comments are negative and scathing? Should we delay the launch until we can build in that one, beautiful feature we left out in the interest of time?

During one particularly anxious moment very close to launch, something occurred to me: I was not being a very good 2.0 librarian! I was gnashing my teeth over possible minor glitches! Wringing my hands over releasing something that is not perfect! Why was I not allowing “perpetual beta” and “radical trust” carry me through? It seemed like a perfect time for a lesson in these 2.0 philosophies.

PERPETUAL BETA MEANS PERPETUALLY BETTER

In the world of software development, product builds come out in releases, as part of the software release life cycle. The beta release usually gets tested by a small number of users before the product’s official release. Recently, the term *perpetual beta* has been used to represent web 2.0 companies that stay in beta much longer than you might expect of the traditional software development cycle. Flickr (www.flickr.com) is probably the best-known example of a product that stayed in beta for a few years (through millions of users and a fairly high-profile buyout by Yahoo!), and finally moved from beta to gamma, yet another stage in the release cycle.

So, why all the releases, and what’s up with all the software development jargon? When it comes down to it, web 2.0 companies have co-opted the notion of beta. It’s no longer about

releasing a product to limited testing before the final release; nor is it about trying to anticipate user needs and releasing the perfect product. Instead it’s about getting as many users as possible to use your product early in the development cycle, then getting them to tell you what could be better and what’s missing. It’s about continual development in response to user needs, which can only result in a better, more usable service.

PERPETUAL BETA NEEDS RADICAL TRUST

Continual development requires user feedback, and user feedback requires radical trust. Radical trust represents the essential trust required by anyone (person, website, company, organization, institution, etc.) who wants to engage with the online, social community for input, feedback, or just plain conversation. Wikipedia is probably the weightiest example of radical trust in action – by definition, the idea that an open community can build a relatively trustworthy encyclopedia about anything/everything requires a massive amount of trust. The social web is positively littered with similar examples that might have less import, but are still remarkably audacious. Take, for example, the library blog that allows users to comment on posts. Or the library that solicits user input on its topic/subject-based wiki. Think either of those things would happen in a library that didn’t embrace radical trust? Not likely.

ENTER: TRANSPARENCY

When you think about it, perpetual beta and radical trust are relatively meaningless without transparency: you can’t claim continuous improvement and open communication channels without being transparent and accountable in your communica-

tion with your user community. Take Twitter (www.twitter.com), for example. It's safe to say that users of this exceedingly popular microblogging solution have a love/hate relationship with it: when it works, it's fantastic; when it doesn't (during one of the frequent downtimes), we're quick to complain and denounce. For all its growing pains, Twitter has done one thing right: written openly about problems with scalability (i.e., too many users too fast), and honestly about what's being done to fix them.

SO, WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN FOR LIBRARIES?

Are there lessons in perpetual beta, radical trust, and transparency that we can apply to our products and services? I'd like to think there are. As in my website redesign example, I'd be the first to admit that these 2.0 philosophies aren't easy to embrace. There's nothing wrong with wanting to build perfect products and services for our users. But perpetual beta can teach us that perfect is a constantly changing and evolving target. And if we radically trust our users to communicate their needs to us, and if we are, in turn, transparent and accountable for the decisions we make in response to them, we're well on our way to building 2.0 libraries. Or just plain better libraries.

“CONTINUAL DEVELOPMENT REQUIRES USER FEEDBACK, AND USER FEEDBACK REQUIRES RADICAL TRUST.”

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