Random Ramblings -- Bigger is Not Necessarily Better

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Byte 181. It sounds like the title of something Isaac Asimov or Thomas Disch might have written, or perhaps the location of some electronic doomsday scenario. I expect there are billions of Byte 181s out there doing good work — allowing doughnuts to be sugared, tires to be treaded, roses to be planted. And now we had our own Byte 181, but it was not doing anything helpful and productive like sugaring, treadering, or planting.

Our Byte 181 is a number two (“2”) and lives at the nexus of the ILS/Oracle divide telling Oracle that unequivocally, without question, forevermore, the directive from the script in which Byte 181 lives guides Oracle to output the second (“2”) vendor address. The problem is the code is absolute — the script tells Oracle to ignore the fact that the addresses may be tagged as active or inactive and, regardless, always plug in the second vendor address.

When new addresses are entered into the Oracle file, they get added chronologically to a list, and none are deleted (for auditing reasons), with the result that what we have in our ILS and what resides in Oracle can be, and usually are, completely different. The second address in our ILS, the one we want to use, might be address number 19 in Oracle, and yet the script points inexorably to number 2 — “Take that one,” it says, which might be hopelessly out-of-date or might be a correspondence address. So, in the script, Byte 181 tells Oracle to skip lightly over everything else and print address two from its table, and voila! — the birth of our vendor address problem.

For me, working in Technical Services, the investigation into the problem with Oracle is emblematic of everything we currently are doing; we have workflows that suffer from serious constraints, and we have to examine each one to determine how we can streamline, remove, or replace the constraint and make the workflow more understandable, transparent and manageable. However, unlike Byte 181, residing happily in a binary world and performing the same logical, albeit frustrating, thing every time, the bad stuff in Technical Services does not always happen for the same reason, with the same predictable results.

Byte 181 is the exemplar for those nagging little problems where workflows intersect, the place where communication breaks down, where there is no resident expertise to know how to fix things requiring countless meetings with ever-changing players. Byte 181 is our shorthand for the process of teasing out the part of a procedure that bogs down throughput.

It was now early in 2010. Things started working. Checks were getting printed, vendors were getting paid, glitches were being reported, a new collaborative, cross-disciplinary group was primed and ready to notify IT when and if things went awry. You would think that we would be happy, that we would find our laurels, wherever they were, and rest on them. But we became aware of something.

Oracle just went through an upgrade. Stay tuned. 🌼
I spoke to an expert from OCLC, did I learn the proper procedures. She emailed me the rather complicated steps, which I most likely have stored somewhere but am not certain that I could ever find again.

I’ve already written a short article in favor of the Google Books Project since having all the books in the world accessible is a laudable goal. I have not, however, in my reading seen any discussion of the potential problems that opening up the floodgates of availability might bring. “The Public Access Service license will allow free, full-text, online viewing of millions of out-of-print books at designated computers at U.S. public libraries.” (http://books.google.com/googlebooks/agreement/faq.html) From the Google terminal, the patrons of the smallest public library with a few thousand books will face some of the same access problems as those who use the world’s largest research libraries.

What problems will these users face? First, patrons will need to learn more effective search strategies. Many will enter search terms that bring up thousands of records. The Google search algorithm may bring to the top of the list the books that would most interest them, but then again it may not. Some will be overwhelmed at the number of possibilities when they would have been less frustrated with a more limited number of options. Choosing breakfast cereal in a convenience store is much easier than in a mega supermarket.

Second, the rules for searching and displaying results are not clear. I pretended to be an untrained user and searched for “Mars” to see how Google Books would handle this ambiguous search. The Google results page told me that I had 173,478 hits but returned only around 190 books before Google Books stopped providing results. All the suggested refinements at the bottom of the first page of results referred to the planet. Searching “planet Mars,” “God Mars,” and “candy Mars” all had fewer hits; but Google showed more results before cutting off access. Finally, the French word for the month of March (“mars mois”) returned the most available results of any search — around 400 books. If I’m confused as a trained librarian, think what will happen for the average user who wants books on Mars, the Roman God. I believe that readers can guess what happens when a teenager looks in Google Books for items on the singer “Sade.”

The third issue is the question of reliable and useful information. Small-to-medium public and academic libraries choose the most useful items for their user community as the Clinton Branch Library did for me. These enterprise operating in the same business environment as any other publisher. A few can do so without the help of their parent universities; the vast majority cannot and need to be subsidized at some level (on average, 10% of their operating budget).

How these two imperatives are balanced differs from press to press, depending on pressures both from the university’s administration and from the commercial marketplace. Some presses like my former employer Princeton have the advantage of being semi-autonomous: it is separately incorporated in the State of New Jersey, but the use of its name is controlled by a faculty editorial board and a board of trustees on which a number of university administrators sit. It receives no financial support from the university at all but fortunately has a handsome endowment, which derives from the astute management of the Bollingen Series taken over from Pantheon in the late 1960s accompanied by funds from Paul Mellon to see through publication of the remaining volumes, some of which (like the translation of the I Ching and books by Joseph Campbell) have been huge commercial successes. A few of the very largest presses, like Cambridge and Chicago, are obliged to turn over a portion of their earnings to their parent universities and thereby subsidize those universities in small part. At least one smaller press, Rockefeller, is also similarly obliged. Much more typical is the press at Penn State, which after more than a decade with no operating subsidy now has a subsidy at the level of the 10% average I mentioned above. Depending on how close to the margin any press operates, you may find one press feeling it necessary to raise prices on its books to satisfy the commercial imperative, while another press may feel it can afford to prioritize its goal of maximizing dissemination of its books by keeping their prices low and making them available as soon as possible in cheaper paperback editions. (Some presses, like ours, cross-subsidize between journal and book operations, the former’s surpluses used to offset the latter’s losses.) Overall, because of this disparity in missions between commercial academic publishers and university presses, independent studies of pricing of books have routinely showed university press titles to be priced lower, sometimes much lower, than those from commercial publishers. In this way, too, university presses are consciously subsidizing academe in general, if not just their own universities.

Those who, like David Shulenburger, have been critical of the positions that university press...