June 1992

The Virtual Nemesis

Chuck Hamaker

Louisiana State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hamaker, Chuck (1992) "The Virtual Nemesis," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1221>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

The Virtual Nemesis

Let's Start Thinking About the Virtual Collection:
by **Chuck Hamaker** (LSU)

Generally speaking, collections are built on theoretical models. That is, the selector or bibliographer works from a perspective of what is appropriate for the collection given a large number of often unprovable assumptions. These assumptions relate to historic strengths, programmatic and possible future directions as well as fiscal constraints.

In the theoretical mode, for example, a book on the **Seleucids**, the post-Alexandrian generals who divided the world amongst themselves, and the 2nd edition of the **Concordance to Finnegan's Wake** have equal weight, given the appropriate collecting goals and adequate financing. In an atmosphere of fiscal constraints the fact that the **Concordance** is from a major American university press and the book on the **Seleucids** is (although in English) from a small German press, the likelihood is the **Concordance** would be purchased before the history, even though there are Ph.D. programs in both History and English literature. But in the Virtual Collection, which is a different way of thinking about what should be purchased, the reverse could easily be true.

At LSU we discovered that the first edition of the **Concordance** had no circulation since we first went up on our **NOTIS** system in the fall of 1987. That is not, of course, to deny that it might have had some browsing use, but at least there was no circulation demand on the book. The 2nd edition has the same number of pages as the first edition and costs, if memory serves me correctly, about \$150.00. In a collection designed to support Ph.D. work in English literature, to not purchase that book is almost unthinkable in the Theoretical Collection. The book on the **Seleucids**, a fairly obscure subject area certainly and one covered in many general works on history of the period, is about \$25.00. Bibliographic information passed through the reviewer's hands on both books at about the same time.

However, in checking the on-line catalog for other books dealing just with the **Seleucids**, it was clear that all 10

English language books at LSU had circulated 2 to 3 times in the past 4 years. There was measurable use for everything in English on this fairly obscure subject. In the Theoretical Collection, it may well be some other library's responsibility to collect intensively in that area of world history, but in our collection, the **Seleucids** Title I suggests it is a higher priority than the 2nd edition of the **Concordance**. We can borrow the **Concordance** if we really need it. It is clearly part of the Virtual Collection that we don't have demonstrable need (other than theoretical) to acquire. Because it is a **University Press** book, some, and probably many, libraries will acquire it. But few, if any, will pick up the book on the **Seleucids**, if for no other reason than country of origin. In fact, since the only way we found out about it was through the **Slips Notification Program of Otto Harrassowitz**, it is unlikely that many libraries will even notice it exists. The likelihood of being able to borrow it "later" is fairly small; the likelihood of its being used in the LSU's collection if we acquire it, fairly high.

This level of attention to the details of the use of the collection rather than the theoretical perspective is what I consider an essential component as we move to the next level of collection development, the Virtual Collection.

The Virtual Library is a concept that has been discussed in many articles and at conferences almost *ad nauseum*. It is shorthand for the library without walls. If it exists in the usable universe, then the library should be able to hand it to you. It may take time; it may take borrowing fees or one-time use fees; but we have begun to accept that external materials should be considered regularly to meet patron needs. The Virtual Collection, I would suggest, much like the concept of the Virtual Library, is a series of concentric circles with an in-house circle for which we will have to use skills and information we have often ignored to identify. Predictability of use will become more important, even in

larger libraries. **Finnegan's Wake** and the **Seleucids** will be trade-off decisions that will have to be made not only on the basis of our own collections, but on the basis of purchasing behavior in other collections.

The two most useful tools in the Virtual Collection mode will be the internal catalog with circulation data and the catalog(s) of other libraries that are natural borrowing partners. We cannot wait, I would suggest, for "formal" arrangements by subject areas because the fiscal pressures are so tremendous that decisions have to be made now, in real time; not in theoretical time. In that sense, libraries tied to other collections through joint on-line catalogs will have the real advantage. Florida and Missouri State University libraries look like a natural for this type of decision making where, hopefully, not just the catalogued books but the books on order are available to selectors in multiple institutions.

I am not suggesting that use or predicted use is the sole criteria for future purchasing decisions. I am saying that it will rapidly become a major criteria for libraries that have prided themselves on theoretical collection building. Two-to-three years of a flat or declining acquisitions budget, and just simply the normal cost increases in serials, will devastate theoretical purchasing in any academic or research library. For those of you who have directors who went to the recent CRL meeting this Spring, ask them for details of Dr. Knut Dorn's talk on the situation in the German booktrade with regards to availability of titles and purchasing in even the largest of American libraries. It was an immensely sobering talk. And ask for details at the same time of Mike Keller's talk and proposal for resurrecting a Farmington-plan system. Although we may be able to continue to fool ourselves that we are still building the worldwide collections of the 60's and 70's and, yes, even of some of the 80's, our friends throughout the world, who often have more experience selling books to our libraries than

we have in buying them, know that the great worldwide representative collections in the U.S. are rapidly reaching their end. And as that stops, the kind of purchasing I am talking about will become a necessity in most libraries.

There is another area where responsibilities must begin to change and that is in the area of intensive-use titles. A quick and dirty study of the 1000 most-used books in the LSU libraries suggests that 30% are no longer available in print or in subsequent editions. How do we guarantee access to the most popular scholarly and academic title in our collections when they are literally falling apart in front of us? Several colleagues who attended Sul Lee's Oklahoma Conference in February have responded to a brief list of titles I asked them to check, comparing the use in their libraries against LSU's use. In every instance where the other libraries had the same books, they were either being used intensively or were missing from the collections — i.e., "lost." We have a major preservation problem, not just with acidic paper or brittle books, but with books on important current topics falling to pieces in front of our eyes.

As a minor example, try to discover what happened to the most recent books in your libraries on UFO's. Some of these are fairly small print-run titles or specialty house items. Unless there is a special collection somewhere focusing on these items, I would predict that today's UFO books won't physically last the decade in libraries. In our library, we've had them disappear in under *three months!* And they were irreplaceable when we added them. Shouldn't there be a regular system of electronic imaging or scanning for some of these high-risk, low-print run areas? How do we set up the agreements to permit that type of storage or preservation? UFO's are a low priority area for LSU collections (as far as the Theoretical Collection goes) and I would guess that it is true for most academic libraries. But this is also a high-risk category for all libraries. In the Virtual Collection, which we must begin to think about, how do we guarantee the survival of that material on a national level? It's too "young" for preservation efforts, too low-brow for most special collections, and too hot to last.

I know this column and the last one

are quite different from what I usually deliver, but I think we need to start asking some very serious questions about what we are doing and how we should be doing it. I am not happy about the ending of what I call the Theoretical Collection in exchange for a Virtual Collection with an in-house core of use material. I am dismayed at the end of the great national collection that represents the world. But we don't have the tools — other than very general "status" numbers — to defend purchases that can be shown as demonstrably critical for local use.

50% of the books LSU added in the last 12 months circulated before they were 12 months old. From my perspective, that means we are not building a research collection — except in our special collections areas where the material doesn't circulate. But since we don't have national norms for that kind of statistic, how can I prove that this level of circulation is a danger signal for the health of the institution? Quite simply, I can't. And so I am driven to ask selectors to make very tight calls and deliver the most "usable" material. Is that where we are all headed? ☛

Coutts:

Working as part of your team.

*We can handle
all your book
acquisition needs.*

When you put Coutts on your team, you gain extensive knowledge of the book trade:

- bibliographic accuracy
- a single source to handle both the mainstream as well as esoteric publications
- personalized service
- book approval plans tailored to your specific and dynamic collection management requirements.

We handle firm orders, book approval plans, new title programs

(notification slip service), continuations/standing orders, book processing and provide electronic access to information and PC-software for ordering.

Let our professional selectors, knowledgeable customer service specialists provide you with solid, innovative cost-effective service.

Please call or write for more information.

Coutts Library Services Inc.
736 Cayuga Street
Lewiston, New York 14092-1797
(716) 754-4304 collect
Fax: (416) 356-5064
Telex: 061-5299