Final NEH Narrative

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Summary

The Native Knowledge Pathways 'eHumanity' project has been completed with a portal design and development that was achieved in combination with some user research and a usability study as part of the evaluation. The portal was developed, designed, and tested in order to ensure robust performance with an aim to provide the best user experience to the online users. The portal continues to live at the http://e-humanity.org URL.

Portal Development & Design

The portal was developed and designed in two major phases. The first phase consisted of basic features and design after conducting some informal usability testing and evaluation. The second phase included a big effort that was put into studying of the targeted Native-American audiences using several user research methods that are described in the "Evaluation" section of this document. Insights generated from user research led to a radical re-design of the portal that also addressed some concerns found in the feedback.

Major Accomplishments

The following are listed as major accomplishments of the eHumanity project.

User Friendly Design

The portal was designed for the target audiences that would allow them to use and interact with it in an intuitive user-friendly way. The feedback generated from user researched helped in making the portal more interactive and aesthetically pleasing.

Scalability

The portal contains a total of more than 70,000 digital cultural items. In the future, this number can be scaled up to include more than a million cultural items as and when required. The development was done with use of REST APIs that would also allow the portal instance to be used by other museums or collections when the portal code

will be released as an open-source. The use of open-source technology such as PHP/MySQL, HTML, CSS, jQuery would further enable developers around the world to contribute their own parts to the portal

Security

The portal has been thoroughly tested to secure any transmission of user profile data during sign-up and single sign-on phases. A huge amount of effort has been put in to fix any security leaks and/or vulnerabilities.

Search

The eHumanity portal team developed the eHumanity portal search engine with a philosophy that allows people to find any relevant information with ease. It also consists of an auto-complete feature that displays the titles of all the cultural items that are part of the portal.

Single-Sign On

The portal allows users to browse through the cultural items freely. It only requires authentication incase a user wants to start a conversation on a cultural item and add any item to his/her own collection. At present the portal supports creation of eHumanity portal accounts and authenticating via Google and Facebook accounts. This seamless integration of third party authentication allows millions of users around the world to login to the portal without creating their own account.

Subject Matter Experts

The portal allows any logged-in user to apply to be a subject matter expert so that their contribution in the cultural items conversation can have more weight than an average user, thereby allowing people to more likely trust the information provided by a subject matter expert.

Conversations

The eHumanity portal allows logged-in users to share and exchange useful information about a cultural item using the commenting feature that is available on every cultural item page.

Features

eHumanity portal consists of the following important features:

- Browse: Allowing a user to browse through all cultural items
- Search: Allowing a user to search the entire online collection in an intuitive way.
- Activity Feed: Allowing people on the site to observe the user activity in a hope to contribute useful information using conversations.
- Profile and Collections: Allowing a logged-in user to add any cultural item to their collections and edit their public profile page.
- Sharing using different social networks: Allowing any user to share a cultural item on a social network on their choice including Facebook, Google+ etc.

Evaluation

User research was conducted at several sites on Native-American target audiences that included students, faculty, and tribal members. The main purpose was to analyze the way in which the portal can be used and gather feedback from the target audiences about potential features or any other useful suggestions or ideas.

Usability Testing

Usability Testing was conducted at two locations where individuals were asked to perform a certain set of open and closed ended tasks. The data from usability testing led to several insights that contributed to the re-design of the portal in the second phase. For example, many users found using the word "artifact" used to describe objects in the repository very offensive. As a result, the work "Artifact" was changed to "Cultural Item".

Other User Research Methods

Other user research methods were introduced that enabled the eHumanity team to understand the target audience and their context of using such a technology. These methods included an ethnographic interview, focus group sessions, and a blog research with webinar

Evaluation Results

One of the main requests from the Native American community in order to facilitate cultural preservation was about being given an opportunity for engagement by the eHumanity team on a regular basis. They would like to remain part of this project and play an active role in the progress of this project. Other request was to have a global search and other features that would aesthetically enhance the design of the portal.

Most participants expressed interest in what eHumanity offered as a portal. They were appreciative that a resource like eHumanity was being developed. A loss of culture and heritage in the tribes over the years was mentioned on several occasions. Half of those questioned felt that visual images and even audio recordings would be more useful than text. The overall impression given in terms of visual appeal and usefulness was positive. However, several people expressed concern about unlimited access being offered to images of items that held strong cultural significance and proposed measures be taken to curtail viewing. For the most part, the participants were glad to know a site like this existed and willingly offered suggestions regarding how it might be improved.

Conclusion

The Native-Americans are accepting the use of current technology not because of choice but as the only way they can think about preserving aspects of their own language and culture even if it may not be the most effective. The obvious solution is to design tools that can fit within a living context. It could be less intimidating to use technology that ways. The best strategy would be to develop solutions that are more targeted towards the younger audience.