

LionShare Faculty/Staff Focus Group

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INTRODUCTION

As a step in the assessment of the September 2004 Alpha “developer” release of LionShare 0.4, a focus group was held with four faculty members, any of whom would likely be potential users of the software on November 5. This was the second such focus group on this LionShare release; the first was conducted on October 15, 2004

PARTICIPANTS

The four faculty member participants represented the following fields of study: architecture, art, art history, and poultry science. All of these individuals trace their involvement back to the predecessor of LionShare, the 2001-2003 Virtual Image User Study (VIUS).

PROCEDURE

A member of the LionShare programming and development staff gave a brief demonstration of the Alpha release. The focus groups were moderated by a member of the LionShare project team and audiotaped. Two other members of the LionShare team, including the project director, were present to answer questions

MAJOR ISSUES AND SUGGESTIONS

Using a focus group protocol for structured discussion, the moderator asked participants to talk about how they would be likely to use LionShare, to discuss features they saw as useful or problematic in the demo, and to offer specific, real feedback on the Alpha release. Overall, this group did not raise any caveats about the current major directions LionShare is taking. They did offer suggestions for continued refinement. Most of those suggestions, they recognized, may not be practical for this release, but were offered as ideas for longer-term enhancements.

“Swarm” downloading.

The swarm downloading capability (to speed transfers) is great.

Strengthened user-defined access.

It's important to allow users to create and limit layered access levels through various hierarchy approaches. The current hierarchy approach is good and should be continued. A longer-term enhancement would be to continue to refine this ability to set these hierarchies up for different types of contributed objects, for different users, for a particular campus, and so on -- but again, the current approach is on the right track.

Object-user information.

There was interest in at some point adding the capability for file contributors to get a profile of who was using their contributed images, and/or to produce various “greatest hits” summaries.

Thumbnail images.

As in the earlier focus group, there were positive comments about the thumbnail image previews already built into this version. There was a suggestion that, if possible, search results produce graphics rather than the current default (text, with thumbnails shown as mouse-overs) -- or to allow users to specify one or the other.

Copyright and intellectual property considerations

From the earliest conversations during LionShare's predecessor (the VIUS project), copyright, fair use, and related matters have always surfaced near the top of the list of user concerns. For example, in both VIUS and LionShare surveys, more than half the users have stressed concerns in this area. Again, in this focus group, there were several questions and comments on these topics.

As in earlier conversations, it would be incorrect to say that the participants see LionShare's handling of intellectual property dimensions a perfect solution; they do not necessarily believe that there *is* a perfect solution. Nonetheless, there was consensus that philosophically, LionShare's middle-ground approach to collaboration, sharing, and access control is the right one. In essence, the participants seemed comfortable with LionShare's approach to file sharing, built on a trust fabric among targeted communities, and access control. Similar to someone in an earlier discussion, a participant in this focus group observed that "LionShare can't solve digital rights management."

This group in particular is supportive of the creative commons license being integrated into each file's metadata and tracking with the file. This group also commented favorably about, specifically, the Shibboleth middleware approach to authentication based on institutional or group affiliation.

User-posted comments.

There was a suggestion that future enhancements might include a place for Amazon.com-type user comments.

Peer server upload limits.

One participant noted that the way LionShare is incorporating peers is "brilliant." A long-term enhancement suggested was to allow individuals or units to limit their own peer servers, in terms of not allowing anyone to upload files. The participant said that this is probably not a concern now or at the early stages of LionShare, but at some point there may be a concern of overwhelming departmental or college servers' capacity.

Virtual folders.

Several suggestions supported the value of virtual folders. Again, this might well be addressed in future releases; it is not a short-term requirement, but would be valuable. The idea is to allow an optional display (basically, a playlist) organized differently from the ways in which files and objects are actually stored.

Look and feel.

There was a sense that, to date, LionShare development has understandably and appropriately concentrated at functionality, and that the interface could probably be made considerably more attractive. There were suggestions to make it look "classier" and "more academic" and "less Penn State," possibly by hiring a graphic design expert for some short-term work. Participants realize that the main needs for LionShare concern functionality; the suggestion is just to give some expert attention to colors, fonts, logos, and the like as feasible.

User customization.

There was interest in allowing users to customize their windows (for example,

fonts and backgrounds); again, this is not an immediate, pressing need, but an idea for longer-term enhancement.

Project input from database repository managers.

There was a suggestion that LionShare might benefit by getting feedback from mid-level personnel, responsible for locally managing large database and image repositories (such as college or department collections).

Interest in continuing to participate, to beta test, or to help build specific communities of users.

At the conclusion of the focus group, participants expressed their overall enthusiasm about and positive evaluations of LionShare, and are interested in continuing to be involved. Comments included “terrific” and “great work.”

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