

Free online games, open source software and library technical roles, what do they have in common?

By Jason Thompson

Abstract: Consumers are coming to expect a more flexible approach to purchasing software applications, with upgrades and add-ons being available as downloads rather than physically going to a shop to make their purchase. This shift in thinking is filtering its way into the library and information field with open source software, available for download online and with its own online community becoming more of a serious consideration than ever before. This calls for staff with a library background to also have technical skills and be savvy, installing, testing and rolling these open source additions to working life.

Keywords: Open source software, Technical skills, Librarians.

Título: Juegos online gratuitos, software de código abierto y roles técnicos en la biblioteca, ¿qué tienen en común?

Resumen: Los consumidores se acostumbran cada vez más a formas flexibles para la compra de software, descargando actualizaciones y add-ons online en lugar de ir físicamente a una tienda para hacer su compra. Este cambio se va filtrando también en la biblioteca donde se dispone de software de código abierto descargable online, y de una comunidad de usuarios con los que intercambiar experiencias. Sin embargo, esto requiere tener personal con formación bibliotecaria y también con conocimientos técnicos para la instalación, pruebas y mantenimiento de los programas.

Palabras clave: Software de código abierto, Habilidades técnicas, Bibliotecarios.

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Jason Thompson is a qualified librarian with an IT background. He has worked in the library vendor and outsourcing market in New Zealand over the last ten years. This has seen him in a number of roles working with a number of library management systems (including Spydus, Dynix, Voyager, DRA Classic, Taos and Sirsi Unicorn). In these roles he has worked mainly with public and academic libraries. Jason has a strong interest in new technologies and how they can be utilised in the library and information management world. He moved to London in September 2008 and has been working with Sue Hill Recruitment as a consultant since March 2008.

THE GAME SOFTWARE PUBLISHER *Electronic Arts (EA)*, have recently released their highly anticipated new game "Spore". You might ask what this has to do with the information management world -well interestingly enough, perhaps more than you would think.

Prior to the full release of the game EA released a key part of the game free to anyone who wanted to download it, prior to the rest of the game being available for purchase. The *Spore Creature Creator* allows users to create an almost endless array of (spore-like) creatures and is

considered by many to be one of the most advanced and user friendly pieces of this type of software available. Their intention has been that people will get hooked into the idea of the game and that a budding community will be already underway by the time of the full release. Going on anticipation and hype this seems to be paying off with a large number of downloads and interest in the game. This concept of free content and functionality is used successfully on the internet with a multitude of sites providing free online games with a subscription service option to remove the advertising.

Consumers are coming to expect this more flexible approach to purchasing software applications, with upgrades and add-ons being available as downloads rather than physically going to a shop to make your purchase. Even my *BT home internet hub* automatically downloads updates for its firmware from a central server –no more trawling the internet for that elusive firmware patch! The days of the computer shop shelves being crammed full of beautifully packaged boxes ready for purchases are dwindling as consumers are purchasing directly online and downloading rather than visiting the stores.

Open source software

This shift in thinking is filtering its way into the library and information field with open source software, available for download online and with its own online community becoming more of a serious consideration than ever before. Although most libraries are not taking the full leap in this direction, just the fact that libraries are looking in this direction is really causing some of the big library vendors to take notice of this and change the way that they deliver their software updates and new products. Traditionally the method has been to wait until a particular piece of requested functionality has been demanded by a large proportion of the user base before including it in the next release. Some vendors are now agreeing to provide access to their Application Programming Interface (APIs). These are valuable pieces of code which allow users with the right technical know-how to 'hook' into the application from other applications, such as open source based solutions.

The advent of wikis, blogs and the much publicised Web 2.0 have

all been major drivers in getting librarians' hands 'dirty' on their own time, rather than outsourcing the work or waiting for a vendor to provide an 'out of the box' version. This has increasingly called for staff with a library background to also have technical skills and be savvy with installing, testing and rolling these open source additions to working life.

“High on the list I am seeing a requirement for an understanding of SQL, administering relational databases, some scripting and data input and export skills”

The need for techno-librarians

Working in recruitment in the information and library sector, I have seen this reflected recently in a number of jobs requiring more

technical skills as part of the day to day tasks. No longer is it just the traditional System Librarian who is the technical fount of knowledge in the library, but rather a new breed of people with a hybrid Librarian/System Specialist job description. High on the list I am seeing a requirement for an understanding of SQL, administering relational databases, some scripting and data input and export skills. As more open source products are developed, there will be a growing need for people who have these skills and enjoy the challenges that come with getting open source solutions to interface with existing legacy and/or proprietary systems. Have you downloaded your copy of *Spore Creature Creator* yet?

<http://eu.spore.com/getspore/>

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