

User-Centered Design for Humanities Collections within a Digital Library

The Digital Projects Unit at the University of North Texas (UNT) manages a number of digital library collections, including the Portal to Texas History. The Portal is typical of digital library collections in providing unique user interfaces designed for anticipated audiences or discrete user groups, such as students and researchers. Developers of the original user interfaces to the Portal relied upon their best estimates of users' information needs and preferences while working within the constraints of a digital asset management system that offered limited customization of the user interface.

In 2007, the Digital Projects Unit implemented an open source application development environment to enable rapid prototyping of interface designs for the Portal. With this infrastructure in place, developers were no longer constrained by the asset management system. This infrastructure also set the stage for the expertise of the user interface design group with the Libraries, the Multimedia Development Lab, to be leveraged in a re-design of the user interface to the Portal.

In late 2007, the University of North Texas Libraries began a two-year research project, IOGENE: Interface Optimization for Genealogists. The project is funded in part by a national leadership grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services. The IOGENE project is researching the functional requirements of a targeted group of lifelong learners, namely, genealogists. Genealogists are both a significant and little-studied user group in the digital library user community. The IOGENE project is implementing an iterative user-centered design process that insinuates genealogical researchers into the design process, beginning with an assessment of their information needs and continuing through usability testing of the redesigned Portal interface.

The IOGENE project is a collaborative effort of the developers within the Digital Projects Unit, the interface designers within the Multimedia Development Lab, and the user study researchers within the Libraries' Information Technology Services department. The collaboration positions the department to create and exercise a user-centered model for optimizing interface design and development for the humanities collections within the university's digital library.

This session will:

1. Discuss the technical infrastructure for the rapid prototyping system.

2. Report key research results from the initial assessment and usability testing:
 - a. The challenges genealogical researchers pose to the digital library's practices and infrastructure, and
 - b. The feasibility of solutions that address these challenges.
3. Identify a preliminary model for the application of a user-centered design process for digital libraries composed of humanities collections.

Web Sites

IOGENE Project: <http://iogene.unt.edu>

Portal to Texas History: <http://texashistory.unt.edu>

Presenters

Mark Phillips, Head of the Digital Projects Unit, has experience in managing open source software development projects, as well as optimizing work-flows within the Unit. He has been involved with software development and digital content creation for the Portal to Texas History has presented in multiple venues in the areas of digital libraries and open source software development. (Mark Phillips, 940-891-6746, mark.phillips@unt.edu)

Kathleen Murray is a postdoctoral research associate working in the Digital Projects Unit at the University of North Texas Libraries. She has been involved in state-wide and national digital library projects and has presented at major library and information science conferences in the areas of needs assessment, digital libraries, and web archiving. (Kathleen Murray, 940-369-8395, kathleen.murray@unt.edu)