MMC (5) : The British Museum

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5.6 MMC (5) : The British Museum

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5.6.1 GDM Objectives

The British Museum and the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, have long–standing curatorial links, so The British Museum's Education Department was delighted to be approached by IBM-Japan to take part in a joint research project to create a prototype for linking the two collections into a single 'virtual' collection for internet users, principally students and teachers.

Given the very different character of the two collections, this was an opportunity to forge links between archaeological and contemporary material, so long as such links could be academically validated on both sides. By seeking to match the strengths of NME's collections, we would be utilizing and drawing attention to several lesser known areas of The British Museum's collections from Asia and the Americas. Our work would also benefit from NME's curatorial and technical expertise, both in anthropology and in collections data management, and from their long–standing technical partnership with IBM-Japan.

The British Museum's Education Department would bring to the partnership expertise in object–based learning for a variety of audiences. Since it was conceived as a research project, we felt free to select content areas which were not included in the rather narrowly-drawn UK National Curriculum. However, as educationalists, we hoped that the project would not only allow material to be presented to the user, using appropriate search mechanisms, but that it should also include examples of online object-based learning, and should encourage users to develop their own examples, which they could then share with other users, creating an online learning community. Hence we were glad when Cornell's Interactive Multimedia Group joined the project, bringing their considerable expertise in studying the use of multimedia, covering such matters as architecture, interface design and interactivity and user evaluation.

5.6.2 Factors governing Content Choice

Within the overall objectives, the content subject–areas were chosen by the two

museums for different reasons, which is reflected in their final shape.

Mexico was chosen by The British Museum. Determinants for the choice were the recent opening of a new permanent gallery, showing archaeological material but with a strongly thematic display, which had benefited from its conception from a high level of educational input. The gallery was supported by contextual publications, both curatorial and educational.

In identifying supporting NME objects, we were fortunate that Yoshiho Yasugi had recently curated at NME an exhibition of contemporary Mayan textiles, of which a catalogue was available in Spanish, so we could suggest possible comparative material. For other categories of material, we were dependant on NME's curatorial expertise.

Mongolia was chosen by NME. The principal factor here was the fieldwork currently being pursued by Yuki Konagaya, which was generating a substantial photographic archive for NME on nomadic life. In this case The British Museum supplied the contemporary objects. However this is only a small collection, which for various internal reasons was not easy to access. It had not previously been published, and photographs were not easily available.

Korea was chosen by NME. Again the incentive was a photographic archive, concentrating on the specific theme of contemporary food and drink. The British Museum has recently been building up a significant Korean collection, which at the time of the project was shown in a temporary display. However it concentrates more on 'fine art', for example with examples of high quality porcelain rather than on the daily life of the NME photographic record.

5.6.3 Strategy for Content–handling

The first question to be resolved in handling the contents was to determine what constituted a 'unit' of information. GDM was conceived as a system for handling a range of resources: images, text, audio and video; however since it was intended as an educational tool, it was agreed to group these resources into particular themes, which would allow their significance to be more clearly recognized by users, especially by teachers. Hence the main unit of content handling became the scenario, defined as a group of resources chosen for their relevance to a particular theme.

Although originally worked out to handle the Mexico material, the scenario method was particularly suited to handling the Mongolian and Korean photographic material, since many of the field photographs had originally been taken to illustrate precisely such scenarios.

However, the scenario method of content–handling, though ideal for demonstrating the ideas and priorities of the institution originating the material, probably made it harder for the institution receiving the material to choose contents to support the scenario, as was the original intention. For example, although it might be possible for The British Museum to add our own Mongolian nomadic objects, these would not necessarily illustrate the theme of dealing with livestock which had been selected by NME as the relevant scenario.

Yuki Konagaya's paper in this volume illustrates this point very well by drawing on the analogy of the flower shop, which sells flowers not in single units but arranged into bouquets. Treating information as single units can, as she says, 'cause a negligence of right meaning information.' Much of the exasperation but also the interest of the GDM project lay in trying to identify, and then to create, the right intellectual and technical relationship between information unit and scenario.

5.6.4 Methodology of adding and searching Content

In order for curators or educationalists in the 'receiving' institution to add content, in which they may not have an academic specialism, a common language had to be found. Similarly, in order to build the system, the technicians needed a search engine which, since it had to cross the language barrier, could not rely on the usual verbal thesaurus.

The solution identified for both these requirements was the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) cultural information system, a US system developed to facilitate the worldwide study of human behaviour. One of its very powerful tools, published as Outline of Cultural Materials (OCM) and Outline of World Cultures (OWC) works by assigning a numerical value to a broad range of analytical categories. This system is widely used at NME but is not currently used at The British Museum, so was not familiar to those doing data-entry at this end. It is a controversial method, since not all anthropologists agree that general concepts can be systematically categorized at all; it is also often challenging in practice to find categories which accurately express the nature of the data. For example, one of the first objects entered, a stone mould for the Mayan ballgame, was categorized as 77803 'extraordinary objects', an adequate but potentially over-extensive category. Despite these hesitations, however, the use of HRAF codes undoubtedly rendered practicable what would otherwise have been an almost impossible task of getting linguistic and anthropological agreement to a verbal classification system.

5.6.5 Interactive Function

As educationalists, we had ambitious aims for the GDM project. We wanted users to be able to do more than search for and open a scenario; we wanted them to be able to make their own arrangement of the material. We felt this function was essential to enable teachers to 'own' the content for classroom use. However it proved harder than we expected, both to give a name and structure to the function we were seeking to create and then technically to deliver it across the various scenarios.

The first attempt was the 'book': a provision for teachers to move GDM resources on to pages of their own making, rearrange the material and add their own text. This was a powerful tool, but proved flaky in delivery, and would have been too complicated to describe to users. The provision to rearrange existing material was however retained in the eventual product, which had a 'make-your-own-exhibition' feature.

The requirement for users to add their own text within the programme was met by the 'annotation' option: this is a 'comment box', which allows users to add their own observations on particular objects. They are also encouraged to focus these comments onto a particular detail of the object, by drawing a box around the detail on the image. This is a powerful tool for advanced object study, though perhaps beyond the requirements of the school teachers and students who are conceived as the primary users of GDM.

5.6.6 Observations and Conclusions

Intellectual
We had set ourselves a challenging task in seeking to identify links between two very different collections, and to combine these within single scenarios. We did find some useful conjunctions of content, principally that between the Mayan huipiles and the garment shown on the Yaxchilan lintels, as described in Yoshiho Yasugi's paper in this volume; however these were identified directly by project participants during a joint session in Osaka, not numerically using HRAF codes. We were not able to demonstrate the same level of conjunction when working distantly in our respective institutions.

Technical
The British Museum was very grateful for NME's help with data entry during the first phase of the project. When we had the human resources to attempt data entry ourselves, we found that although the system came with few instructions, once mastered text–entry was relatively easy. Image manipulation, which involved scaling and reformating, proved rather more challenging.

Both content–holders were under pressure from the technical team to generate more content, since this needed to reach critical mass before the search mechanism could be fully employed. This was less of a problem for NME, with its photographic resources, than for the British Museum, where each object had to be individually written up, its image located or newly acquired and its context in a particular scenario established. This difficulty in matching resources to our partners' expectations was a continuing feature, and would need to be addressed in any future similar project.

User-evaluation
The British Museum, along with the other GDM partners, undertook some evaluation of the prototype, although responsibility for this was largely taken by the Interactive Multimedia Group at Cornell. Our evaluation was internal only; we regret that the complexity of the product and the extra-curricular nature of the content topics did not allow us to attempt more comprehensive evaluation among students and teachers. NME did not suffer from this curriculum restriction, and a useful follow-up to the GDM project, although one not activated in the event due to lack of resources, would have been for The British Museum's Education Department to assist NME education staff to produce off-line resources which would encourage teachers and students to use GDM, both in school and during a museum visit. We shall watch with interest what ongoing use of GDM the National Museum of Ethnology is able to make.

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