BUILDING A COMMUNITY AROUND HISTORICAL EVENTS AND NARRATIVES

THESIS DESIGN
INFORMATION SCIENCES MASTER

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CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION .............................................. 1
2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND ............................ 3
   2.1 Shared historical authority .......................... 3
   2.2 Narratives .............................................. 3
   2.3 Online communities and user participation ........ 4
3 PROBLEM STATEMENT .................................. 5
   3.1 Purpose .................................................. 5
   3.2 Research question .................................... 5
   3.3 Relevance of the research ......................... 6
4 TYPE OF RESEARCH .................................... 7
5 RESEARCH MODEL ...................................... 9
6 TASKS & SCHEDULE ................................... 11

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................. 13
INTRODUCTION

The research project ‘Agora’ is a multi-disciplinary collaboration between the History and Computer Science departments at the VU University Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (RMA) and the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (S&V). Agora focuses on developing a digital platform for the exploration of heterogeneous heritage collections. On this platform objects from diverse museum collections are related via historical events, which results in a more complete and illustrated description of these events. Therefore formal metadata and other contextual knowledge is exploited.

Agora’s goal is to provide a platform which encourages users to “create their own personal narratives that could lead to theoretical reflections on the meaning of digitally-mediated public history in contemporary society” [33]. Several user groups will benefit from this platform, such as cultural heritage professionals, researchers in the humanities, and the general public with an interest in history.

At this stage, Agora contains functionality for event browsing and logging the user’s journey. However, for a community a shared understanding of these events is required, as well as the shared notion of narratives as an interaction concept.

In this study, we explore requirements, scenarios and tasks of Agora’s target user groups, and accordingly develop a new approach for an historical community. We will do this regarding historical events as a concept of common understanding as well as regarding narratives as a concept of interaction.
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 SHARED HISTORICAL AUTHORITY

Cultural heritage institutions are conventionally viewed as institutions dedicated to the conservation of valued cultural objects, but also to the education of the public. Recently, museums and historical institutions are increasingly inviting the general public to share their historical viewpoints and experiences. This fits in the transformation from traditional museums into an agora; a public meeting place were discussions take place about science, research and history [5]. In this new situation, institutions function as a catalyst to support the sharing of contributions by non-traditional participants. In this way cultural heritage institutions are able to imbue a sense of democratization to the historical narrative emerged in museums.

2.2 NARRATIVES

Historical events and the relations between these events and collection objects form important building blocks in interpreting history. Only when collection objects are related to events their historical context is being provided. This gives meaning to a collection’s object and makes it possible to interpret it. As one historical event often only reveals a small part of the historical context of an object, narratives are another important building block in interpreting history. Each sequence of historical events can form an historical narrative [32, 18]. By converting these events into text the author imposes meanings and values on these events. And when the text is read or listened to, the audience will interpret it idiosyncratically [17].

Narratives have traditionally been the main mean of interaction used by historians. According to Stone [29] historical narratives have the following properties:

- organized chronologically
- focused on a single coherent story
- descriptive rather than analytical
- concerned with people, not abstract circumstances
- deals with the particular and specific rather than the collective and statistical
Especially in situations which require a social-science model of analysis, narratives are widely used. However, narratives are also criticized because of its narrowness and its preference for anecdote over analysis, and nice examples over statistical regularities [14].

2.3 ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND USER PARTICIPATION

Nowadays hundreds of millions of people participate in online communities\(^1\) and share together hundreds of billions of pieces of content per year.

According to a functionalist perspective in psychology, individuals perform certain activities because they serve one or more functions. Snyder and Cantor (1998) [28] suggest four clusters of functions:

1. Value-expressive: a way of expressing one’s values about altruistic concern for others.
2. Utilitarian: rewards from the person’s external environment; a person might contribute to a repository to receive monetary or other rewards.
3. Social adjustive: doing a certain thing may lead an individual to better fit in with the peer group.
4. Knowledge: by engaging in particular task, an individual might have a new learning experience and be able to exercise one’s knowledge, skills, and other abilities.

Much research has been done on the motivational factors in Wikipedia and other digital collaborative approaches (e.g. GNU, Linux) in which rewards, if any, is rarely tangible. Cifollili (2003) [6] distinguishes two types of motivation:

**self-motivation** which involves satisfaction, efficacy, and an intrinsic drive to acquire knowledge.

**social-motivation** which involves a desire to take part in the production of a collective good, a need for belonging, and a need to support a specific community. Motivations can also be ethical or relate to reputation, which can result in a source of authority.

In the phase of starting a new online community, incentives for user participation appear to be very important. If there are sufficient incentives which encourage participation, at a certain moment the community reaches a critical mass and “takes off” [4].

\(^1\) Source: royal.pingdom.com
3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

3.1 PURPOSE

These days online historical collections very much depend on a community of interested lay people and experts who collaborate with cultural heritage professionals. These collections of objects, events and thesaurus terms will benefit from an online platform which supports activities for browsing these collections and sharing user’s vision on it.

We expect the concept of historical events to provide common understanding between history researchers, history students and cultural heritage professionals. Historical narratives will form a mean of interaction in this community.

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

The goal of this study is to determine if an historical community can be built around historical events, by using historical narratives as a mean of interaction.

In order to achieve this goal, first we have to study if events are a good concept for common understanding, according to history researchers, history students and cultural heritage professionals. Secondly, we have to study if narratives are appropriate as a mean of interaction, according to these user groups.

With that information, we can then analyze the current application to determine gaps in its functionality and interaction.

This leads to the following research and sub questions:

1. To what extent are historical events (as a form of common understanding) and narratives (as incentives for contribution) appropriate to support interaction between history researchers, history students and cultural heritage professionals?

   a) What are concrete use cases, scenarios, requirements and constraints for each user group to function efficiently and effectively in such a community?

2. How can we create a community around historical events which supports the tasks of all user groups?
3.3 RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH

The Agora application\(^1\) has demonstrated that cultural heritage collections can be linked together by exploiting metadata and contextual knowledge. This offers new insight and ways to explore these collections. This has shown to be a big departure from the search interfaces available to history researchers, history students and cultural heritage professionals presently.

In this application collection objects are linked together through historical events. We assume that this will serve as a common understanding for all user groups, history researchers, history students and cultural heritage professionals. However, no study has been done on the effectiveness of this concept.

As narratives have traditionally been the main mean of interaction used by historians, we assume that they can be used for online interaction between user groups as well. This study should show to what extent this assumption is valid. In addition, we will argue how to implement narratives in a historical community consisting of multiple user groups.

\(^1\) http://agora.cs.vu.nl/agoratouch/
TYPE OF RESEARCH

I will perform an exploratory research, as the gradual process of accumulating knowledge should make the concepts under study more clear over time.

My research design is slightly based on the design science research methodology [22], which includes steps for identifying the ‘problem’, defining objectives for a solution, designing an artifact and evaluating its effectiveness.
My research will consist of the following phases (see Figure 1):

1. Requirements / scenarios / tasks gathering
   Infer the feasibility of events as a common understanding and narratives as a concept of interaction between user groups. Gather requirements, scenarios and tasks of a historical community of all user groups.
   *Methodology:* interviews with user groups

2. Comparing gathering results with current demo
   Identification of commonalities where current functionality does not meet gathered requirements / scenarios / tasks. The nature of each gap may dictate which gaps are transformed into objectives of a solution.
   *Methodology:* gap assessment according to impact and relevance towards requirements / scenarios / tasks, both in functionality and interaction.

3. Develop new approach (mockups)
   Development of mockups in which the research contribution is embedded in the design. Fine-tuning with user groups is necessary to finalize the new approach. Theoretical background may be required to move from objectives to design.
   *Methodology:* discussing and evaluating the mockups with all user groups to improve the effectiveness of the mockups.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Scheduled on</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Read literature</td>
<td>January 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Form theoretical background</td>
<td>January 2012</td>
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<td>3. Form research questions</td>
<td>January 2012</td>
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<td>4. Interviews user groups</td>
<td>February - March 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Gap assessment</td>
<td>April 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Developing mockups</td>
<td>April 2012</td>
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<td>7. Evaluating mockups</td>
<td>May 2012</td>
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<td>8. Reporting on results</td>
<td>June 2012</td>
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Table 1: Tasks and schedule
BIBLIOGRAPHY


