

Title:

Gathering Lost Things and Connecting Lone Researchers: SobekCM and Digital Humanities Collaborations with the Librarians and Scholars

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Abstract:

In our presentation, we will provide a brief overview of the SobekCM Digital Repository Management System which was developed with librarians, scholars, application engineers, and a richly diverse user community with many others and their need represented. The presentation will cover the importance of user communities for software development to ensure that software meets technical, operational, functional or system design, non-functional or system quality or system architecture, community, and collaborative requirements such that users can see beyond the software to define their needs, instead of being subjected to software where technology is a limiting factor that dictates policy decisions. In the presentation, we focus on specific examples of collaborative Digital Humanities projects with scholars that have been enabled by the SobekCM software and that, in turn, have helped to drive and define development for SobekCM.

SobekCM's name is a reference to the Egyptian crocodile god, Sobek, who was a collector of lost things. SobekCM was born of collaborative projects, including the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC, www.dloc.com) and Ephemeral Cities. SobekCM's name thus also serves to reference its ability to gather together and connect collections, materials, and communities. While not explicitly defined as Digital Humanities projects from the start, the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) and Ephemeral Cities both began with scholar collaborators from the humanities and both have served to further develop the scholarly cyberinfrastructure for the Digital Humanities. This presentation will feature examples from dLOC, Ephemeral Cities, and subsequent projects born from them (including *Unearthing St. Augustine, Pioneer Days in Florida, and the Panama Silver, Asian Gold: Money, Migration, and the Making of the Modern Caribbean DOCC* or Distributed Online Collaborative Course), to show the importance and value of collaboration with user communities and specifically with scholars and scholarly communities.

SobekCM's User Communities

The University of Florida's George A. Smathers Libraries began development on a digital asset management and repository system capable of supporting immediate needs for scholars, galleries, libraries, archives, museums, research, teaching, and data collections, as well as the needs associated with supporting complex international collaborations. In 2012, the UF Libraries officially released the SobekCM Digital Repository Management System as Open Source Software. The release marked a milestone for the software and for the large community of contributors from across the world who participated and continue to contribute to SobekCM's ongoing development. Contributors included those contributing code, as well as contributors from the many critical user communities, especially scholarly communities.

As explained in “Six things to know about successful open-source software” from the Knight Lab at Northwestern University (July 2013), open-source software projects succeed and flourish when developers are also users of the software. Similarly, Charlie Edwards in “The Digital Humanities and Its Users”¹ explains the importance of users, explaining that success for open source software is defined by its user community and relies on the user community for testing and feedback for ongoing improvement. Similarly the authors of the 2013 report *Searching for Sustainability: Strategies from Eight Digitized Special Collections*² noted the importance of “Developing the value proposition through understanding the audience” and noted an example where the system display and operations for digital collection software directly benefitted from user input with “iterative design as feedback rolls in from users” (22). The report also emphasized the importance of engagement with the user community for sustainability and longevity: “the ability to attract devoted users and other stakeholders and the ability to attract resources that will permit the resource to grow over time” (16). Devoted users and stakeholders can greatly add value for digital collections in terms of the collection contents, technologies, and new possibilities. Also, as explained by the authors of the report: “The best online “versions” of the physical collections do not just translate them to the web; they transform and enhance them, making them potentially even more useful than their physical counterparts” (29). Audiences and users can have critical insights into collections because they are uniquely informed on the collections and can bring that expertise into collaborative opportunities that support the technologically-enabled enhancing and transformation of collections.

The SobekCM user community includes many communities with many types of users in each. The larger sets of users can be organized loosely into groups based on primary interests, and the feedback and support contributed:

- Patron users (e.g., providing feedback and insight on wanted features, questions, and interface needs);
- Authors, creators, and publishers (e.g., providing insight on representation, branding, rights, and interface design);
- Internal users with expertise in collections and curation in libraries, archives, and museums (e.g., providing feedback, insight, and user testing for interface design, internal tracking features, integration with other systems, user supports, and new enhancements for specific needs);
- Scholar users (e.g., providing feedback, insight, and user testing for research, teaching, service, and scholarly community needs, especially as associated with virtual scholarly communities online); and,
- Internal users with expertise in technologies and who are also related to another user groups (e.g., providing feedback on specific shared concerns; for instance: Research Computing groups for collaboration on scholarly research and data, technical experts on scholarly projects with concerns specific to those projects, exhibit coordinators with concerns specific to the archiving and presentation of objects in exhibits as well as online exhibits, etc.).

Collaboration with user communities and user groups is of great value. Rising interest in the Digital Humanities has brought new opportunities for collaborating with scholarly users and

¹ <http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/31>

² <http://www.arl.org/publications-resources/3022-searching-for-sustainability-strategies-from-eight-digitized-special-collections>

communities, and new collaborative work that helps to drive and define development that supports the Digital Humanities and that enhances the SobekCM software overall because of the active level of engagement.

Technical Requirements and Beyond; More than Lists of Technical Features

By featuring and building from examples—including dLOC, Ephemeral Cities, *Unearthing St. Augustine, Pioneer Days in Florida*, and the *Panama Silver, Asian Gold: Money, Migration, and the Making of the Modern Caribbean DOCC* or Distributed Online Collaborative Course—in this presentation, we will show the importance and value of collaboration with user communities, specifically with scholars and scholarly communities. By building from these examples, we will show how critical user feedback and involvement has been in enabling a system and tools that are developed ground-up to meet user needs in the best manner possible, and how doing so enabled new projects to become possible, as with the *Panama Silver, Asian Gold: Money, Migration, and the Making of the Modern Caribbean DOCC*. These new projects, in turn, engaged new users and existing users in new ways for more feedback and participation. We will also cover recent feedback and opportunities which have emerged from collaboration on Digital Humanities projects and needs, including new technical developments with SobekCM's Curator Tools, which are being actively used by several Digital Humanities scholars for their research projects. In all, we show the value and importance of collaboration with scholars and scholarly communities, especially with Digital Humanities, for the contribution to software and tool development for larger needs including digital scholarship and data curation.