Chapter X

Evolving Tool Support for Digital Librarians

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Abstract

Usability in digital libraries is often focused on end-user interactions such as searching and browsing. In this chapter, we describe usability issues that face the digital librarian in creating and maintaining a digital library. The Greenstone digital library software suite is used as an example to examine how to support digital librarians in their work.
Introduction

Usability in digital libraries (DLs) often concentrates on end-user interactions. In this chapter we describe the evolution of tools to support the other important class of DL user: the digital librarian.

As libraries have become more computerised, librarians have had to learn more and more about computer systems, file formats and Web servers. The Greenstone software development team has, over several years, developed a variety of tools to abstract away from these technical details to simplify the tasks of creating and maintaining digital collections.

Tasks supported by these tools include: collection creation, metadata assignment, collection interface design and multilingual interface support. We outline the history of Greenstone, the role of the digital librarian and how the tools have evolved to meet the needs of Greenstone’s users.

Background

Greenstone is a tool to simplify the construction of digital libraries (Witten, Boddie, Bainbridge, & McNab, 2000; Witten & Bainbridge, 2003). As with many tools, it hides the complexity of the task from its users. A digital library can be understood at several levels, from a sequence of ones and zeroes to a whole library: as tool designers the problem we face is which levels are appropriate for user interaction. As Greenstone has developed and the user base has expanded the tools have changed to more easily support the work of digital librarians.

Discussions of usability and digital libraries (e.g., Borgman, 2003; Blandford, 2001; Keith, Blandford, Fields, & Theng, 2002) usually focus on the end-users — the users that search the collections for information. The influence of DL creation tools on user studies is rarely discussed, yet the tools completely delimit the possible experiences of the information searchers. If the digital librarians find their tools hard to use then they are unlikely to be able to produce high quality DLs. The problem for the Greenstone developers is thus much harder: design Greenstone so that digital librarians can use it to produce easy-to-use digital libraries.

The earliest versions of Greenstone contained content-based abstractions, such as documents and collections, that are drawn from library and information science (LIS). These concepts have remained relatively static throughout Greenstone’s development. In contrast, the DL creation tools have evolved through several versions; largely to enable collection creators to work without
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