Joining the dots: Challenges in the creation of information for public access

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Introduction

To what extent can public collections systems rely on information already held by museums? What other information is required and from where will it come? How much narrative content must be created from scratch - and by whom? How will disparate types of information be managed and accessed? And are users interested in it all anyway?

The creation of new types of content for public access has led the British Museum to ask these questions; this paper will attempt to provide some answers. In proposing some ideas for tackling content creation, I shall draw particularly on my work on the COMPASS project. Previous experience at a wide range of museums (including 'one man bands', local authority and nationals) leads me to believe that these ideas will have practical application elsewhere.

What is COMPASS?

COMPASS stands for 'Collections Multimedia Public Access System'. The system is being developed at the British Museum, where it will provide visitors with information about objects and their context. This information will include high resolution images, multimedia special effects, educational material, video etc.

The British Museum is engaged in a major building project to restore the historic Round Reading Room and the courtyard surrounding it, which is being glazed over to form 'The Great Court'. This space, designed by the architects Foster and partners, will improve circulation around the museum, as well as providing more space and facilities for our visitors, extra exhibition space and an Education Centre.

The centrepiece of the Great Court is the Round Reading Room, previously the central reading room of the British Library before it moved to its new premises at St Pancras. When the historic Reading Room opens to the public at the end of 2000, it will contain a public library and 50 workstations giving access to the COMPASS system. These workstations are being specially designed to complement the leather-covered desks in the Reading Room which, being Grade 1 listed, cannot be altered.

In addition to the Reading Room access, COMPASS will also be available in the Clore Education Centre within the Great Court, and on the Web. In Phase 1, the system will contain information about 5,000 objects, 10,000 images plus special effects and audio. Information will be stored in a database (based on Index+ and provided by System Simulation Ltd) with a browser front end providing an accessible interface. The whole project is funded from a generous donation from Walter Annenberg, former US Ambassador to Britain.

Aims and target audiences

With any system development it is of course vital first to define your aims and target audience. In the case of COMPASS, our primary aim is to improve the quality of visits to the British Museum. We hope to excite visitors' interest in the objects and to use the capabilities of multimedia to make links between objects and across galleries. We shall do this by providing stories, background information, images and special effects on screen, and printouts of gallery plans.

In terms of targeting a specific audience, COMPASS is emphatically not aimed at specialists. Our primary audience will be adult visitors with no previous knowledge of the objects. This will include tourists, many from overseas, family groups, school teachers and students.

Assumptions about the applicability of a new system to a target audience should be tested with a prototype development. In 1997 the British Museum produced a prototype. The prototype was tested with museum visitors and as a result of the success of this evaluation, the museum decided to proceed with full development. Throughout development, ongoing evaluation should continue, possibly through focus groups.
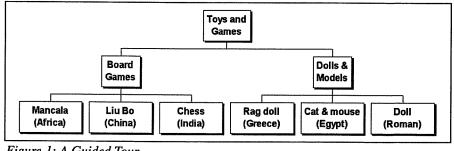

Figure 1: A Guided Tour

COMPASS content

The information being assembled for COMPASS comprises text 'stories' (200 word narratives) about the objects, some structured information, high quality images and special effects. These will in turn be linked to background 'encyclopaedia' records. Object and encyclopaedia records will also be linked together into what we are calling 'Guided Tours' - effectively virtual tours of the objects. Some of these will be aimed specifically at an educational audience, developing themes from the national curriculum.

Encyclopaedia records are also being written to explain background topics such as

- Places/archaeological sites.
- Religious stories.
- Biographies (eg or artists or collectors).
- Historical events.

One object record could be linked to many encyclopaedia records.

Creating content

To what extent can public collections systems rely on information already held in the museum? The first step, of course, is to survey existing resources. Figure 3 shows the resources available in the British Museum; most museums will probably have similar resources.

In each case, it is necessary to assess the value of each source and the way it is to be used. In the case of the British Museum's collections database, for
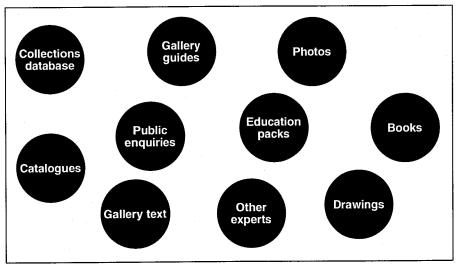

Figure 3: Resources

example, we decided to use this vital source of information to:

- Check museum numbers.
- Check structured information.
- Provide indexing and term lists.

Information from the collections database will be downloaded into the COMPASS system and nightly checks will be made to establish whether changes (eg. locations) have been made to the collections records. We found, however, that the collections database, produced as it was largely for curatorial use, did not include the sort of introductory information that we needed for our text narratives. These could in part be sourced from existing books and gallery labels, but in almost every case has had to be edited - and often written from scratch.

So - what is the best type of person to write this text? We have all seen examples which show that a thorough knowledge of a subject does not
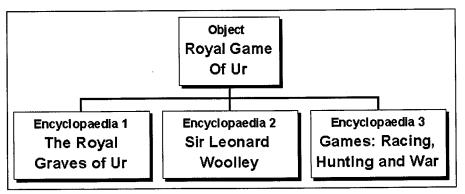
necessarily go hand in hand with a clear writing style. We each have our own strengths - whether concise labels or detailed research tomes. When writing for a non-specialist audience, a 'novice' view of the material can sometimes be of advantage. In the case of COMPASS, we have used a mixture of freelance writers and curators to write the text.

The first step in creating new text is to be clear on requirements. In our case, we had three main requirements:

- Must be readable by the target audience.
- Must be reliable, accurate, up to date.
- Must be finished on time.

The first of these was addressed by the production of guidelines for writers which were produced by the COMPASS text editor (Matthew Cock). These guidelines define the style that we need (short sentences etc.) and suggest that writers concentrate on stories and interesting anecdotes. We encourage writers to provide a 'personal' slant, perhaps by thinking about what they would say to interest a visitor if they were taking them on a personal tour of the gallery. Writers have a maximum of 200 words per object which causes difficulties for many, but we often point out that it is as if we had provided the space for them to write their perfect gallery label . . .

Figure 2: Encyclopaedia records

> **The Royal Game of Ur**
>
> *From Ur, southern Iraq, about 2600-2400 BC*
>
> **One of the most popular games of the ancient world**
>
> *This game is one of several with a similar layout fund by Leonard Woolley in the cemetary of Ur. The wood had decayed but the inlay of shell, red limestone and lapis lazuli survived in position so that the original shape could be restored. The board has twenty squares made of shell: Five squares each have flower rosettes, 'eyes', and circled dots. The remaining five squares have various designs of five dots. According to references in ancient documents, two players competed to race their pieces from one end of the board to another. Pieces were allowed on to the board at the beginning only with specific throws of the dice. We also know that rosette spaces were lucky.*

Figure 4: Example record

Credits

I would like to thank all my colleagues on the COMPASS team for their assistance with the production of this paper, ie.

- David Jillings, COMPASS Project Manager.
- Matthew Cock, Creative Editor.
- Martin Buttery, Image Coordinator.
- Mark Timson, Designer (Special Effects).
- Carolyn Howitt, Education Officer.
- Jodi Mattes, Access and Admin.

To address the issue of reliability and accuracy, all our object text must be written or approved by the curator responsible for that specific object. As for timeliness, we produce regular statistics on progress and highlight 'star' performers in newsletters. More seriously, we ask each department to schedule slots when they will work on their text. We have even resorted to bribes, such as the promise of special effects if the text is produced on time.

Following the submission of the first draft, the COMPASS editor edits for style and feeds back questions on content. (It is often hard for an expert on a particular subject to understand how basic a level of knowledge can be assumed.)

In summary, the procedure for employing freelance writers has developed as follows:

- The Curators recommend a writer in whom they have confidence.
- The Curators supply the writer with references to sources etc.
- The COMPASS team asks the writer to produce 4 or 5 trial records to test their writing skills.
- COMPASS and the writer exchange a contract detailing the deadline, position on rights etc. This contract is based on the BM Press's normal contract with book writers.
- COMPASS edits the draft text and feeds back questions to the writer.

- Once the text has been accepted by COMPASS, the writers are paid for each record written.
- Finally, the Curator must sign off the text before it can be published on the system.

You can see from the above that the process is much more like publishing than conventional museum cataloguing.

Keeping track

In order to keep track of the data that is being sourced and created for all multimedia systems, it is vital to record and manage the metadata for text, images and all resources. Such metadata includes Format, Author, Dates produced, edited, signed off etc.

It is important that the database used to store the information and metadata can track the creation progress. In our case, we developed a 'Life history of an object', tracking all the steps that object records, encyclopaedia records and images go through up to publication. This was used to inform the design of our production database.