

A conceptual approach for non-material heritage: the case of the Hat Industry

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Resumo

Este artigo analisa o actual trabalho da equipa de investigação na área dos Sistemas de Informação para Museus, especialmente no que respeita a museus de indústria, onde uma das mais significativas tarefas é preservar não apenas cultura material mas também tradição oral, procedimentos tradicionais, contextos culturais e sociais, história local e experiências sensoriais como sons e cheiros. O nosso estudo actual é o Museu da Indústria de Chapelaria, cujo projecto está em desenvolvimento em S. João da Madeira, o mais importante centro industrial de chapelaria do país no século passado. O projecto do Museu pretende integrar toda a comunidade local e regional, analisando, descrevendo e interpretando a realidade económica e social. Neste artigo apresentamos uma proposta conceptual para a recolha e uso de património não-material, um dos aspectos mais relevantes do projecto em curso.

Abstract

This paper describes our current work in the area of Museum Information Systems, namely for crafts and industry museums, where the main concern is to preserve and document not only material artefacts

but also oral traditions, know-how, processes, cultural and social contexts, local history, sounds, tactile experiences and smells. Our case study is a Hat Industry Museum, which is being created in the North of Portugal, at the heart of what was, in the last century, the biggest hat-manufacturing centre. As such, the Museum will be also a tribute to the social and economic life of a whole region. We propose a conceptual approach for describing non-material heritage, its application to our case study, and we review current efforts that can be used and integrated in the museum community.

Introduction

This paper describes our current work in the area of Museum Information Systems, namely for crafts and industry museums, where the main concern is to preserve and document not only material artefacts but also oral traditions, know-how, processes, cultural and social contexts, local history, sounds, tactile experiences and smells. Our case study is a Hat Industry Museum, which is being created in the North of Portugal, at the heart of what was, in the last century, the biggest hat-manufacturing center. As such, the Museum must preserve not only the material heritage, be it machines, hats, documentation, tissues, and other artefacts, but also non material heritage such as the effects on the lives of the people and the whole region. Given that most of the industries and the region suffered a profound economic impact, and most of the history and the people who made it are disappearing, there is an urgent need to preserve their heritage. In this context, oral traditions and history, mostly from whole families of workers, are among the most important intangible pieces of this industry museum.

From the museum perspective, the system is very simple to use. We have an interface that enables authorised users to input and/or manipulate data and another interface that enables the retrieval of information. The first one “builds” the individual record for each item as it is being completed, using the inheritance scheme of the model. The second one offers complete search possibilities on what concerns the fields to be searched, or the contents of those fields. And as the system works using an Internet browser, the search can be made locally or on a remote Internet access. In the future, as presently under development project aims at, the museum’s web site will facilitate the access to the inventory system wherever researchers are.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: in the next section we describe the case study and the methodology being used to identify, collect, preserve and organize both material and non material heritage. In section 3 we review existing conceptual modelling approaches as being applied by the Museum and other communities. We emphasize also current trends in information representation, communication and access techniques and technologies that are relevant. In section 4 we briefly describe the architecture of the system. Section 5 describes the

conceptual model we use, and sections 6 and 7 describe interaction issues. We close by discussing what we have learned so far, and what we hope to contribute to documenting non-material heritage.

The Hat Industry Museum

The Hat Industry Museum is being created in the region that was once the capital of Portugal's hat making industry. As such, the hat industry had a deep impact upon the lives of generations of thousands of people. Culture, habits, social life, crafts, was heavily influenced by the hat industry. Most of the factories are now closed, and pieces witnessing their prosperity are lying abandoned. The challenge is to scientifically and systematically gather, register, classify this material heritage, and, at the same time, register what we can consider non-material heritage, such as traditions, habits, know-how, skills and histories. Using an old factory as its main building, the Museum will recreate the sounds, the feeling, the processes, and will keep alive the heritage of the region. The Museum will use the Internet to make available all this information, in a standard as possible format, which prompted us to start developing a conceptual model for non-material heritage. An initial introduction is given in (Lira, Menezes, 2001).

At the Hat Industry Museum we have very different kinds of documents. The main groups are the documents that once belonged to the factories (mainly administrative and commercial documents) and the interviews with former workers that are being gathered as the result of anthropological research. But we also have very important collections of photographs, advertising material and medical records, among other categories. Most of the physical objects that we have collected from existing or already closed Hat Manufacturers belong to the following categories:

- heavy equipment;
- parts and supplies of machinery;
- raw materials;
- finished products (hats, hats accessories);

- administrative documentation, advertising materials, price lists;
- process documentation, machine operating manuals.

A great deal of effort was spent however registering oral statements of former actors, be it workers, managers, clients, people remembering histories; registering uses of equipment and materials, which are not used anymore, is also important, as most of the skills were non documented, and people learned at the work floor how to make hats. In order to understand the material evidences of the hat industry, as it was a century ago, it is of vital importance to record and make accessible all the information still available.

Oral statements are being recorded using high quality media, such as minidisks and miniDV tapes. The quality and long-life perspective of the records is crucial as these records will be of fundamental importance in the archive and documentation center of the museum. They will be the basis of permanent exhibition interpretation as well as essential material to internal research projects. They will also be available to be used by external researchers, locally or on-line. As the museum seeks a high level of integration with the regional community, these records will be used in projects developed in partnership with local schools.

This documentation module is able to accept text, sounds, images and videos. On what concerns script documents, the least demanding records are the ones that only register the contents of the document. In another level are those records that register the exact text of the document, transformed in word-processed text using an OCR program. At the higher level are those records that register a facsimile version of the document.

The criteria for classifying documents in these three classes are pre-established and combines three main aspects: relevance of the document in terms of understanding the history of the hat industry, existence of relevant graphic issues, and aesthetics. Oral testimonies and videos are also treated as documents, and records will have the proper link to the sound or video clip. Images will be shown in low resolution and a link to high-resolution sample will be available. Whenever different documents have some kind of connection, records will make that reference, enabling a complete research.

Another demand was that documents should be connected to other inventory issues, as material artefacts, machines and buildings. One of the main goals of the system is to enable the retrieval of complete information on any hat industry subject, whatever the beginning of the search.

Conceptual information modelling

As Museums, and other entities, move from dealing with tangible, material entities such as paintings, works of art, crafts, machines, to more intangible entities such contexts, implications between entities, history, traditions, there is a need for more semantically powerful and meaningful information models. There is also a shifting role that Museums, Libraries, Archives and similar institutions are playing now, with the possibilities the Internet and the Web have opened up.

Although conceptual modelling techniques have been proposed in the late seventies, their application by the Museum and Information Sciences community has had to overcome the analysis of the huge work and investment already made in cataloguing standards, electronic records standards, and Information Systems. Recently, the Documentation Standards Group of the ICOM/CIDOC proposed an Object-Oriented Conceptual Reference Model (ICOM/CIDOC, 1999), based on the notion of Ontologies, as proposed by Gruber (1993). The Conceptual Reference Model (CRM) is itself an evolution of the Relational Model (ICOM/CIDOC, 1995; Reed, 1995).

A mapping between the Consortium for the Computer Interchange of Museum Information data model and the CIDOC Reference Model is given in (Kody, Sledge, 1995). Other mappings are proposed by Doerr (2002). The CIDOC CRM (version 3.4.9) is now being proposed as an ISO standard (CIDOC, 2004).

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions proposed also a conceptual model to deal with bibliographic information, recognizing the pressing need of providing a clear and shared understanding of “what it is that the bibliographic record aims to provide information about, and what it is that we expect the record to achieve in terms of answering user needs” (IFLA, 1998).

We based our work on semantic constructs, such as ontologies, that define the concepts and terms in a given domain in a way that can be read by non-specialists. An ontological approach has several benefits:

- it is a high-level description of a domain, independent of implementation details; such a conceptualization can say that a book is authored by an author, leaving to the implementation the details of deciding how to name the entry or what cataloguing standard use; Ontologies can be translated to different implementation systems and formats;
- several institutions can share and agree upon an ontology (see previous example), regardless of the specifics of their implementations;
- besides being shared, ontologies can be reused; once a Time or Units of Measure ontology has been created, several institutions can reuse it without them having to define themselves the ontology. The Ontolingua project at Stanford University is an example of a shared repository of Ontologies, written by different contributors (Farquhar et al, 1996).

Based on our previous experience in Document Management and Information Systems, concepts such as inheritance, specialization, generalization, and encapsulation can greatly enhance the process of documenting and cataloguing, and accommodate easily modifications, evolutions, and mappings to other standards or formats.

Architecture of the system

The system is based on a client-server architecture using TCP/IP, the Internet protocol, and a relational database management system, as shown in the next figure:

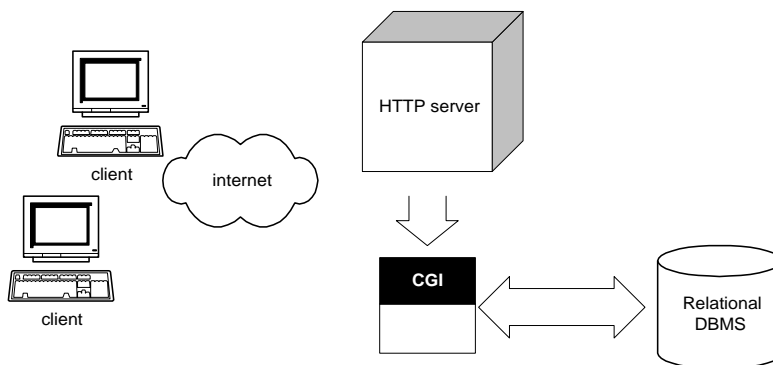


Figure 1: Architecture of the system.

Clients connect to the system using a standard browser via a network. Browsers must be JavaScript enabled and support HTML 4. For some applications, a secure connection is established using the Secure Sockets Layer protocol. The interface presented to the users introduces a minimum overhead, by reducing image and graphic elements, and by not using frames as this can bring some problems with some browsers.

The software architecture of the system uses a relational-object layer to present to the user an object-oriented view of the data, and to store it in a table format in a relational database. This is a common approach when we want the expressive power and the flexibility of the object model, and the convenience (even in cost terms) of working with a relational database. The CIDOC CRM also follows the object-oriented approach.

Classes with instances are mapped to tables, which contain all attributes, including inherited ones. Relationships are mapped to tables with just two object identifiers. Although this is not the most efficient

strategy (e.g. see Agarwal et al. 1995), it allows for most of database accesses to be made with only one join operation. Future improvements could distinguish between different types of relationships and decide different strategies for their storage in the relational database. If performance issues arise, an object-oriented database could be used in the future (Kim, 1990).

We defined a set of rules to present information to the user by taking advantage of the object-oriented model: browsing, navigating and searching information follows the structure of the model. Similar approaches have been proposed by (Paton et al, 1994).

The Object-oriented Model

We follow closely the OMG model (OMG, 1992). The object-oriented model we use has the following characteristics:

- Classes, with or without instances;
- Classes have a Name, Attributes, and Relationships to other classes;
- Attributes have a Name, a Type, and can be optional;
- Relationships have a Name, a Multiplicity, and a Type which is a set of classes;
- Single inheritance. There is a 'root' class which is the top of the class hierarchy;
- Instances belong to one single class.

Attributes and relationships can be redefined in the sub-classes. This model avoids multiple inheritance as it can be difficult to implement in practice, and to work with. Moreover, the redefinition of attributes and relationships would turn the model even more complex if multiple inheritance was allowed. This contrasts to the CIDOC CRM, which uses multiple inheritance.

The following figure shows a simplified Entity-Relationship model of the object-oriented model we use. For simplicity, we omitted multiplicity information, and some relationships do not appear inside diamonds.

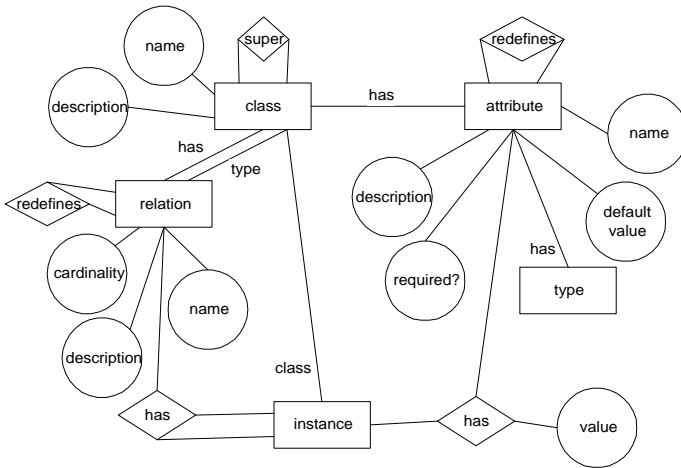


Figure 2: The E-R model of the system.

Classes, attributes, relationships and instances have permissions for Editing, Reading, Creating and Searching. Classes and instances have an owner. Permissions are specified for the owner, the group of the owner, and for the world, much like Unix permissions. We have found this a very convenient way of formatting information to be viewed by different users; for example, some documents contain sensitive, medical, data about employees which is only shown to members of some groups, but are hidden from other users and from the general public. This means that some attributes are only readable by some people.

Instance permissions were also found to be useful. In some cases, other users should not view instances created by some users; this is the case of personal folders for example. In other cases, we want an instance to be edited by the members of some group, but not by other users. For example, users belonging to the ‘management’ and ‘cataloguing’ group could have different permissions over the same classes and instances. Users belonging to the ‘administrative’ group should not be able to edit cataloguing information, and users belonging to the ‘cataloguing’ group should not be able to edit administrative information.

The following figure shows a small part of the class hierarchy for the Hat Industry Museum. The system currently has around 80 classes, 200 attributes, and 20 relationships.

A conceptual approach for non-material heritage (...)

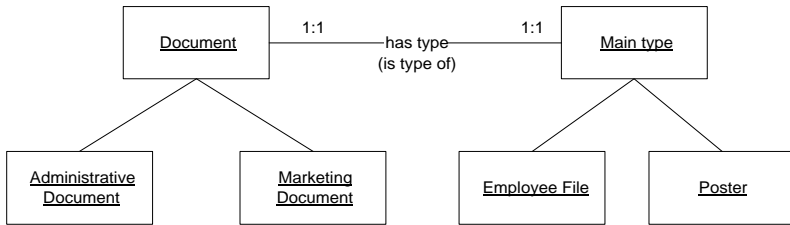


Figure 3: Part of the class hierarchy

In figure 2, relationship 'has-type' links a 'document' instance with a 'main type' instance and it is the most used relationship: every instance of 'document' has a relationship with one instance of 'main type'.

Navigating the model

The following figure shows the graphical appearance of such an instance. Gray bars are used to show relationships. When instances in the relationships are shown, the name of the class is also shown just after the bar.

'document' instance

'acto principal' relationship

'main type' instance

museu indústria chapelaria	
documento	
data de inventário	2003-11-26
inventariante	Alexandra Alves
identificador	MIC-00729-D
estado de inventariação	completo
estado de conservação	1
descrição	Cartaz Publicitário
acto principal	
cartaz publicitário	
: nº de exemplares	1
: marca	Joanino
: dimensões	160,4 x 110,4
: forma	original
: cores	cores
: slogan	'1891 - 1966 75 anos'
: outros produtos	
: título	Placa publicitária

Figure 4: Viewing an instance of a document.

In the left side of the figure we show the conceptual relationship between the instances. In the right side we show what is presented to the user. In this case, the user can see the instance of document, and also the instance in the relationship ‘has type’ (‘acto principal’). This is because this relationship is declared as ‘inline’, which means that the instances are also shown in the screen. In the figure below we show an instance that has relationships declared as ‘link’, which means that only a link to the instances is shown:



Figure 5: Instance with relationships shown as links.

Relationships can also be defined as accepting only new instances, existing instances, or both cases. For example, when a user is creating a new instance of ‘document’ he must create a new instance of ‘main type’: it would not make sense to use an existing ‘main type’ instance (for example an existing ‘medical record’). In some cases, it makes sense to use existing instances, as it is the case when creating an association between a ‘document’ and a ‘folder’: we can create a new folder, or use an existing one. The figure below shows an interface for creating an instance of document where both cases are shown:

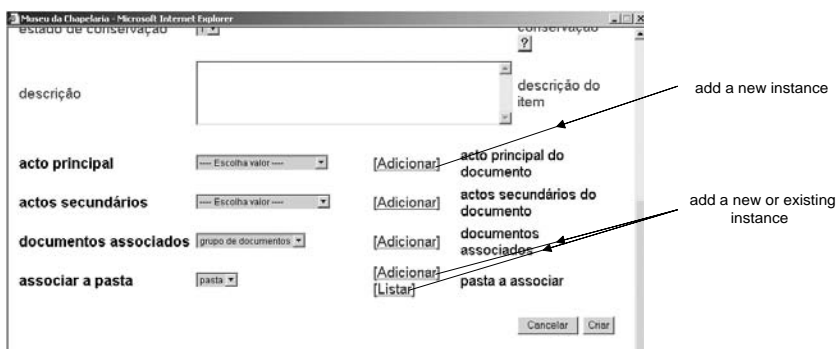


Figure 6: Adding instances to a relationship.

How to add instances to a relationship is a constraint that is defined at class definition time. Besides this and the multiplicity constraint, no other constraints are used, although we are planning to add a set of checking constraints, much like integrity constraints in a relational database.

The search interface

The search interface presents the user with a view of the model, from which the user can select attributes to list in the results, and restrictions to enter, as shown in the figure below.

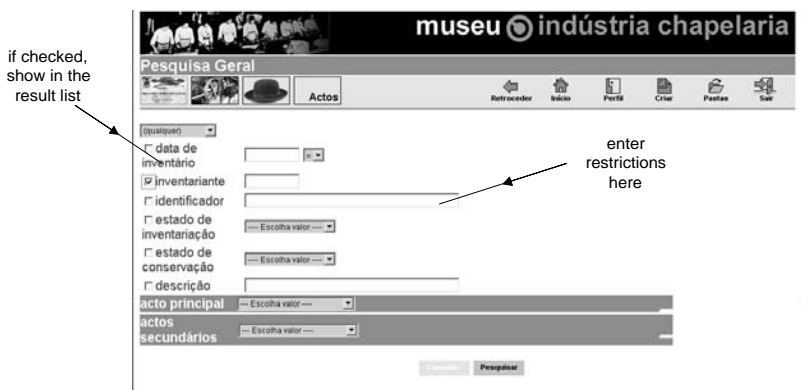


Figure 7: The search interface.

Class attributes and relationships are shown according to the protection defined for the current user. If an attribute can be seen and searched, a text box is shown next to the attribute. If the user checks the box before the attribute name it means he wants to see that attribute's value in the result list. Search is made as follows:

- Numeric values and dates can be searched using numeric operators (see for example the operator's option list after the 'data de inventário' attribute);
- String and text attributes use a partial match; if more than one word is given, a logical 'or' is performed.

In a future version, the user will have the option to perform exact text matches, and to use logical 'and' of words. Another interesting feature to add is to check for all attributes matching their values or to have at least one attribute match.

Relationships are also shown subject to the same protection restrictions. If a user is allowed to see and search in the relationships these are shown as in figure 7. The user can expand any of the relationships, thus seeing the attributes and other relationships belonging to that class. Figure 8 shows the expansion of relationship 'main type' ('acto principal').



Figure 8: The search interface.

Figure 9 shows the same search window as seen by a user with fewer privileges: only two attributes are shown and relationship ‘actos secundários’ is not shown. Note that both attributes are checked, so that the result lists two columns, one for each set of values.



Figure 9: Listing results.

Any instance in the result list can be seen by clicking in the link, if the user wants to browse for more information. Note also that in the example, the user is searching for instances of ‘any’ document having the word ‘cartaz’ in the ‘descrição’ (description) attribute.

Concluding remarks

When we began this project, we aimed at establishing a system that should respond to the CIDOC’s CRM standards (e.g. Reed, 1995, ICOM/CIDOC 1999). But we also wanted a system that would be easy to use and adaptable. That is why this system can be updated whenever the Museums needs: different fields and new types of documents can be

created very easily. As a consequence, we do not need to have all the documents' categories and types, and all the descriptive fields of each category or type, pre-established.

As our documentation will develop, our system will be updated. Finally, the system can be used in any language, as the names of the fields are all gathered in internal tables of the system; as a consequence, they are very easy to translate; it is not necessary to change the names of the fields in each individual record, as it inherits its characteristics from the system's scheme.

While developing the conceptual model of the Hat Industry Museum, priority was given to integration with existing efforts and standards so that future uses could be accommodated. Ontologies can be shared, are implementation independent, and translators can be written to different formats; interrogation languages can also be designed and used – see e.g. the approach in (Kody, Sledge, 1995) for the Z39.50 protocol – as long as the translation is done locally. We found that we needed a rich information model so that the information could be registered, and accessed. For example, oral information refers to how to cut or prepare a raw material, what is this tool for, or what skills are needed for a given process. We hope to keep watching and contribute to future developments in Museum Information Systems, as conceptual standards and recommendations are the key to inter-operability of existing and future systems.

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