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Kulturatlas.dk: reporting from a dancefloor of digitizing giants

My contribution to our publication on the Interface will be an unscientific report. It will portray how some of the largest and heaviest archive institutions in Denmark are coming together to collaborate and develop a prototype for a new web-application. Officially initiated on the 1st of September 2003 and planned to end a year later, the project "kulturatlas.dk" is funded for twelve months to rethink the function of a web archive and to develop a functional prototype. Not only the archive institutions' interface designs are rethought in this project, but also, and just as important, the archives' relation to the public, the 'use-value' of digitized artifacts and the identity of the archive itself.

Since I am part of developing the design for the new interface, I am unable to write an analysis, a scientific report or anything that involves an objective stance. This will therefore be an unscientific report. I will not attempt to judge, analyse or evaluate, but merely tell the story of how I experience working with the development of this project.

There are several ideas behind 'kulturatlas.dk.' Most of them are stated in the project's official description from 01-07-03. Here one may read that a major goal is to create a new, innovative form of archive database where a geographical matrix is employed as a digital user-board. The interface design is intended as a dynamic atlas of cultural history, focusing on the development of vernacular practices during the 20th century. Another idea behind the project is to create a digital archive that engages the public as suppliers of knowledge, of artefacts, even of labor force and also as the audience. Mutual engagement between centralized institution and local competence is hoped to become the productive basis of the atlas. A third idea is to make artefacts of different type come together under the digital umbrella. Sound recordings, video clips, photographs, texts of different kind will be composed together in dialogue with the users' engagement with the interface. A fourth idea is to highlight the changing relations between the local and the global, between the urban and the rural.

One does not read, however, that there are hopes for financial gain behind the development of this project. This is, however, most likely the case as the libraries and archives receive funding in proportion to their use, web-activities included. And nowhere does it say that the current statistics for the public use of, for instance, the image database at the Royal Library, does in fact not look very effective with regard to the costs spent on digitization and registration. Even though these aspects are not stated explicitly in the project description, it is perhaps important also to mention the economical sides to the story when a large public institution expects much of the registration and scanning of images be done on voluntary basis by the public. Not that that in itself is bad, or that it necessarily exploits the public, but it reveals a mode of thinking a concept like 'public service' that puts an interesting twist to the concept of 'immaterial labor'.

An obvious problem is how to visually compose a geographical map with a historical dimension in an interactive environment. Here I expect that creative measures beyond the ordinary will have to be enlisted. This will be perhaps the most entertaining part of my paper.

The project description assumes that there is a big interest in local history among the general public. It also assumes that the answer to the questions generated by this interest is hidden inside the archives. A persuasive motive for starting up the project is therefore to bring this material out in a digital, user-friendly form to the public, but in such a way that the archive's material merges with materials and information that the users may upload on the archive. Hence, a perhaps even more powerful motive is to try and make the archive an increasingly vital actor on the digital arena. Here I think that the archive institutions are about to change some old and fundamental notions about how it understands itself. This, I believe, is an important aspect to reflect upon in my paper.

I will leave out aspects that pertain specifically to the technical side. Whether it is XML or some other markup language that is employed seems irrelevant in this context. I will also but mention the different participants in the project and their roles they have assumed. The intra-institutional organizational problems and glitches that unavoidably will occur are also of less importance. There are historical predecessors to this project: e.g. Nordjyllands Kulturhistoriske Søgebase (NOKS), HistorieFyn and Det Levende Danmarkskort, published online by Kort- og Matrikelstyrelsen. Parallels to these historical predecessors will be made only when necessary for descriptive purposes; I refrain from making any historical comparative analyses.

I will for the next year collect as much relevant material as possible for writing an interesting and subjectively truthful account of these problems. I will also continuously make a diary of the new and unexpected problems that the visual design group faces. There will be a narrative subject in my text that experiences how the events unfold, and with its point of view do I hope to avoid both the objective stance and the complete picture. I do not attempt to give the full story of the development of the project and I assume that there are other, complementary sides of the story.