Rapid Access to Reference Resources

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ABSTRACT

Understanding, as opposed to seeing, depends on knowing the background, the context, of whatever is of interest. For this reason the creation of reference resources is foundational. Creating reference resources and making them available requires major investments of resources expertise. The benefits derived, the return on this investment, depends on the use made of them. The digital environment offers new possibilities for creation, publication and access, but the principal effect has been to increase the use of the resources that are easiest to use rather than the most trustworthy. Hence, a design challenge: How can the use of respected reference resources be made comparably easy to use? We will present a "Context Finder" a browser enhancement that reduces radically the effort required to find explanations in reference resources and report on infrastructure connecting the reader's screen, library guides, and reference resources.

Keywords

Search, reference resources, context finder, digital libraries.

INTRODUCTION

The difference between seeing and understanding anything lies in knowing the context. Who were the people involved? Where was this place? What else was going on at or before this time? Why was this event significant? . . . and so on. Large reference collections reveal the massive cumulative investment of effort and expertise in rich genres of reference resources to provide contextualizing explanations. But the benefit reaped, the return on this investment, depends on the *use actually made* of these expensive resources. Even effective tools will be little used unless conveniently accessible within users' working habits and their use is extremely easy.

The move to a digital environment offers exciting new technical options for the publication, access, and use of trustworthy, specialized scholarly reference resources, but the impact has instead been mainly to focus attention and use on the resources that are *easiest to use*: notably Google and Wikipedia. The rich resources of the reference library have become less visible and the extreme convenience of

Google and Wikipedia provide a seductive and wildly popular alternative. As a result reference resources and the resource guides and pathfinders crafted by librarians and scholars remain underutilized. The return on investment in reference resources will remain much less than it could be without a dramatic increase in use. Use is likely to increase significantly only if there is a *substantial* improvement in ease of use. And, as with any retail or service situation, substantially increased demand can be handled only by moving customers towards increased *self-service*. The design challenge we have addressed is this: How can the use of trustworthy, scholarly reference resources be made as easy and convenient to use as Google and Wikipedia?

THE STUDENT IN THE DORM

A student struggles to complete an assignment in her dorm room at 3:00 a.m. Closely related texts exist, as do relevant reference resources, and library guides that could help her. She may be aware they exist, but unaware of the details and, in practice, makes no use of them. Usually, just a few references resources suffice *if they are the optimal selection for that particular purpose and for that particular person.* In a print on paper environment her situation would be transformed if, just when she needed them, a librarian delivered to her the few best resources for *her* for *this* assignment and a different set for a different assignment and different again for another student with different knowledge and skills. *How could we provide that amenity in a digital environment?* The iconic student working at 3:00 a.m. is mythic, but the design challenge is of great significance because the need is pervasive. For most people in most places most of the time finding the few best reference resources for is not conveniently practical on paper or online, but that is what is needed and what should be provided. We will demonstrate how the reader can become connected with pertinent resources

A PROTOTYPE

A project entitled *Context and Relationships: Ireland and Irish Studies* (supported by the NEH-IMLS Advancing Knowledge program) enabled us to develop a prototype "Context Finder" designed to enable anyone to find contextualizing, explanatory information in trustworthy humanities reference resources. Its most recent form is a downloadable Firefox browser extension used in an course on Irish Gaelic literature. See Figures 1 and 2.

WORK IN PROGRESS

Current work includes support for readers to be able to change their menus easily and flexibly since the menu needs to be highly adaptive and situational, reflecting what is being read, the reader's preferences, what she knows, and the resources available to her. Anyone should be able to compile menus as easily as bookmarking websites. Menus should be sharable as "crib-sheets" usually are and a reader should be able to move listed resources from a library's guide into the menu.

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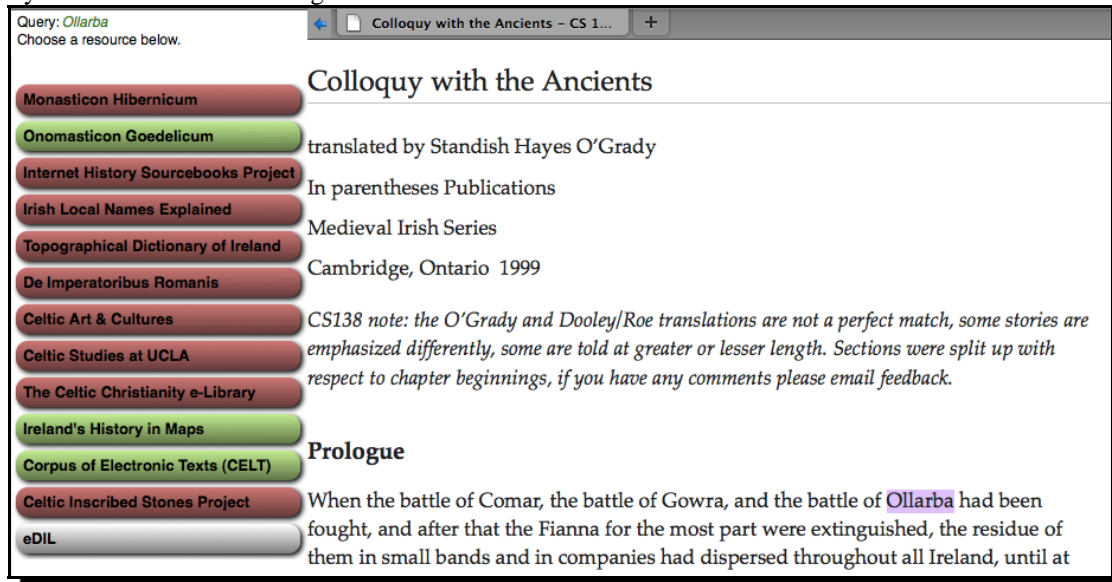
Figure 1. Using a Reference Resource when reading. The student reading an assigned text, *The Colloquy of the Ancients.* Clicking on the unfamiliar word "Ollarba" generates a menu of resources. The green sources mention "Ollarba."
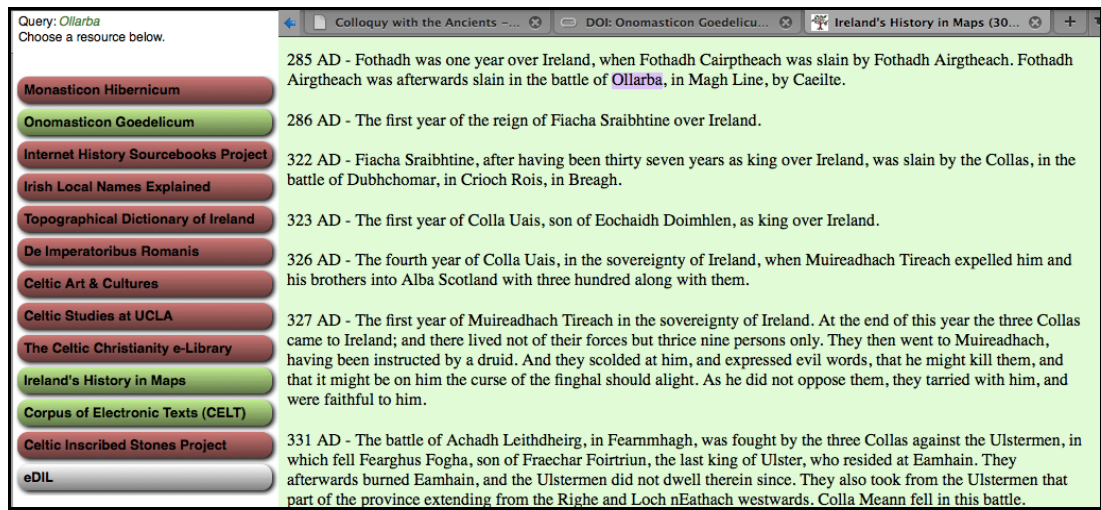

Figure 2. An Explanation. Clicking on the second green resource (*Ireland's History in Maps* (fetches an explanation of the chronological and political context of the battle of Ollarba and presents it in a new window.