

News from the cutting edge

Searching through the collections database could be getting easier: a look at some of the latest software

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It seems to be generally acknowledged that the cutting edge this year is a bit blunt. Perhaps it is taking a while for new applications to catch up with the new technologies, or are the main exponents in museums finding themselves more lucrative jobs in commercial cyberland?

So what's new, new, new? Birkbeck College has been one of the leaders in applying imaging technology for museums and art historians. Researchers are now investigating software that can be used to analyse and compare the graphic elements of pictures without the intermediate step of classifying the image using structured terms. Such software exists, of course, and it is very good at picking out a military installation from a satellite image, or lining up a nut with a bolt. It is definitely possible that this could be a useful application to art historical research, but that is still some way off. It is already well beyond the stage where images with blue at the top and green or brown at the bottom are proposed as landscapes.

Some of us yearn to reduce those cupboards of dusty files to digitised images stored on a nice shiny hard disk, just as we've heard that insurance companies have done. Dream on! The cost of scanning and indexing, and of storing and retrieving the resulting images, is bad enough. But once you have done that, how do you add every single bit of paper that subsequently needs to be filed? Sounds like a quick way to collections management gridlock. And delivering a further cold shower, Kodak has announced an image storage service for archives that will use microfilm as the main archival medium, producing digital images only as needed for current work.

Assume you've achieved a database bulging like a Christmas pudding with juicy plums of fully contextualised collections data and glowing candied-peel images. How can the users find the lucky sixpence, or all the sultanas? There is some good news. Search techniques similar to fuzzy logic--"like", or "near", or "smaller"--are being developed to tunnel into the pudding. Geography and time are the starting points for many users, and the University of Glamorgan is developing geographical information systems to use with databases. British Telecom, too, is exploring ways in which database information can be presented visually, for example using a three dimensional bar chart based on a map to show telephone network faults. Imagine, the contents of your collections database could be shown like this against a timeline/maker grid ... the possibilities are endless.

But without a doubt, the software advance of the century is Netsumm, developed by BT. Salute British Telecom again for bringing to us NetSumm*. This handy facility can précis any World Wide Web page to the proportion of the original word length that you specify. Please BT, develop one that will be a front end to my in-tray, and I'll start a movement to double your chairman's salary the minute it's in place.