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LCC6313 Principles of Interactive Design

AFI Catalog (in-class report)

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In analyzing the online American Film Institute Catalog, one can see that the affordances of the new medium bring a new scope and depth to database compilation, not only quantitatively, but qualitatively as well. In addition, this new medium offers opportunities for users to interact in a way that emphasizes agency and dialog in a field of endeavor that has traditionally been defined as "author-centric."

Quantitavely Superior to Traditional Compilations

Historically, compilations of information have been accessible through limited taxonomic structures and cross-referencing. The physical form factor of a printed publication often limits the weight and practicality of a fully cross-referenced database. Typically, a catalog overview might offer only two or three paths by which to search for information, with manual labor required to dupli-cate the bits of information found in the other two paths. In the printed AFI Catalog, presumably all data was collected prior to classification. Once sorted, a unique ID number was given to each artifact. The primary classification path is: decade/film type (feature, short or newsreel)/alphabetical title. Each decade of material resulted in its own volume. Each volume was then accompanied by an additional volume of the same artifacts cross-referenced. This secondary classifi-cation is structured thus: decade/index type (film credit, source credit, subject matter)/alphabetical. There are currently a total of 19 volumes in the printed AFI Catalog.

In using a computational archive such as the online AFI Catalog (Figure 1), the bits of information are placed in a "single-volume" catalog only once. The compactness of this form factor facilitates collection and viewing of more detail than has been possible with traditional print publishing. Consider the amount of work that would be required to revise the printed AFI Catalog to include a "rediscovered" film in 1925 — a complete renumbering, reprinting, re-indexing of two 1,000-page books. In the online version, additional bits of information can be added incrementally, without the labor- or cost-prohibitive factors of traditional publishing, which provides for timely inclusion of newly-categorized information.

Qualitatively Challenges Traditional Publications

Managing and using this online referential medium becomes increasingly complex. The field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) has identified several criteria that become critical in usefully deploying this new medium.
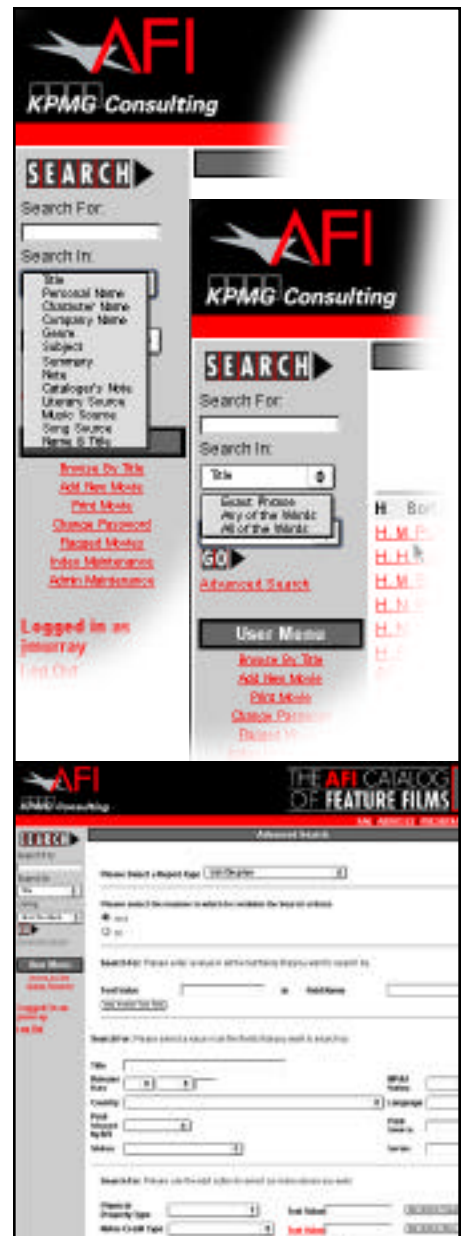

Figure 1 — home page, online AFI Catalog

Figure 2 — variable search methods supporting task conformance, online AFI Catalog

In answering the need to support the myriad methods by which users seek information, the online AFI Catalog offers task conformant search methods, i.e. user-selectable methods for finding information (Figure 2). And customizability of the interface is addressed by thoroughly cross-indexing (or linking) information — each user can determine what and how much detail he/she accesses (Figure 3).

The nature of the subject matter of the AFI Catalog — video and audio artifacts — begs for taking advantage of the multi-modal affordances of the computer medium. No other cataloging medium can afford the efficient random access of the text, video and audio components of an artifact. Thus, the encyclopedic nature of the medium can become manifest in this archive.

Agency vs. Authorcentricity

Traditional publishing demands that an imposition of cultural, political or narrowly-defined views be used to categorize information. In computational databases such as the AFI Catalog, the ability to search these bits of information in whatever priority the user sees fit makes for a user-defined orientation of publishing. No longer does an individual's (or institution's) notion of importance direct to us what information is accessible to us. For example, if a user believes that the date of publication of a film is central to their endeavor, he/she has an opportunity to have access to that information — in a timely manner. A detail of a record that might have seemed trivial at one time, all at once can be the focus of research.

The AFI Catalog, currently a work in progress, further alludes to the empowerment of the user by providing the opportunity for users to add to the database (Figure 4). By providing access to its framework (or procedural elements) used in classifying and categorizing information, individuals now have an opportunity to contribute to the archive.

In addition to heuristics-based analysis of the online AFI Catalog, an intangible quality of human cognition can be supported — creativity. The physical constraints of page-turning does not lend itself easily to the kind of information discovery that can occur from a mere mouse-click. This ability to serendipitously access other information allows for user-preemptive participation that is dynamic and spontaneous — qualities that support creativity.
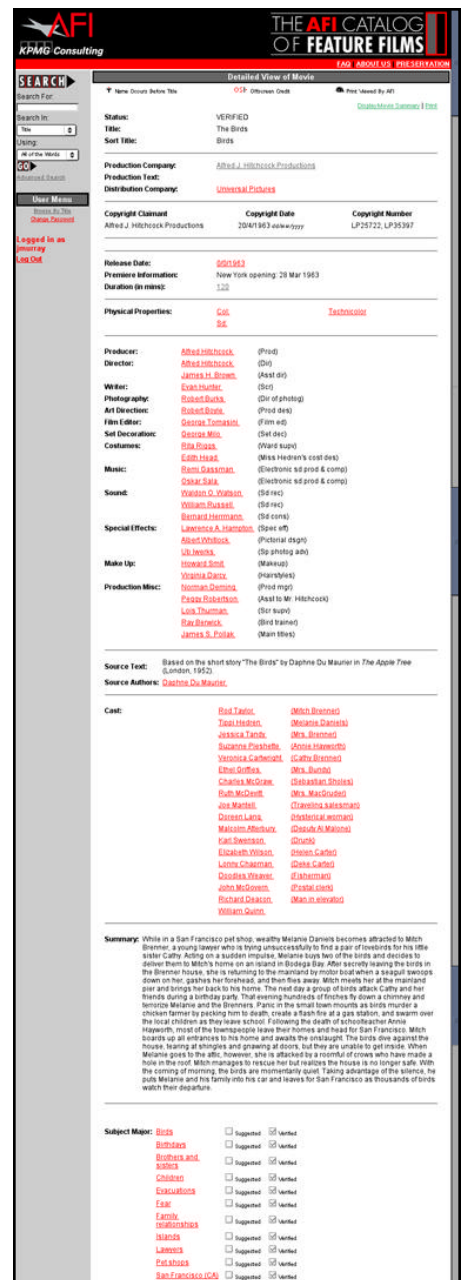
Figure 3 — detail of record, online AFI Catalog

Figure 4 — editable features, online AFI Catalog