The Problem

Rare books, like archival materials, are valuable resources which can offer users unique opportunities for research and exploration. Unfortunately, the most common method used today to provide access to rare books, the library OPAC, comes with the following disadvantages: 1. the command search vocabulary needed to search within special collections are often difficult to use and not well known by users, 2. the discovery of many unique materials is hindered by the way results ranking algorithms are designed to focus on more “popular” entries, 3. the catalog fails to provide contextual information for rare books which would enhance the value of interacting with them. As a result, rare books are often underutilized as both research and educational materials. This is the current case for the Don Quixote Collection at Queens College, which is comprised of fourteen editions and related works of Miguel De Cervantes’ masterpiece spanning over 300 years.

Meaningful Access to Rare Book Collections: A Digital Prototype in Omeka

Using the free, open-source content management software Omeka, we have created an online access tool for rare books that allows users to explore the Don Quixote Collection of Queens College in new ways.

Features such as Javascript tooltips and a zoom interface were included to encourage users to actively engage with the digitized material. Context was used to provide a broad framework within which each volume can be understood as a part of the collection as a whole. This includes an online finding aid and detailed metadata that offer greater opportunities for users to browse and search for what they need.

Interactive Title Pages

Using interactive visualizations to illuminate a single edition, this exhibit offers a glimpse into the world of 17th century printing. The people, places, and methods involved in the production of this volume provide contextual information about the edition as well as insight into the world in which it was created.

Print History Exhibit

Interactive Title Pages

Using interactive visualizations to illuminate a single edition, this exhibit offers a glimpse into the world of 17th century printing. The people, places, and methods involved in the production of this volume provide contextual information about the edition as well as insight into the world in which it was created.

Print History Exhibit

Archival Description

Dublin Core, the metadata standard used by Omeka, is easily adapted to represent DACS fields and enables both basic and advanced searching on the site. The wiki finding aid is closed to outside editing and allows for the inclusion of contextual information that can be easily linked to various points throughout the site.

Metadata & Wiki

We chose DACS as our descriptive standard for its emphasis on archival context and its flexibility when used in conjunction with metadata standards. These attributes make it ideal for description at the item, series, and collection levels.

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