Omeka and Neatline Workshop with Nicole Riesenberger
Michelle Smith Collaboratory for Visual Culture
November 12, 2014

In this workshop, PhD candidate Nicole Riesenberger demonstrated the use of Neatline, a plugin that integrates mapping and timeline features into the online collections management and web-publishing system, Omeka.

Nicole presented two projects, one pedagogical and the other research driven:

- a teaching site for fifteenth-century Italian art
- a companion to her dissertation, charting the intersections of art and politics at the Neapolitan court in the late fifteenth century

PhD student Grace Yasumura also contributed tips and best practices based on her recent work in Neatline as a part of an exhibition project.

Teaching Site

Omeka is a simple framework that can be customized by selecting a theme and thoughtfully installing an array of task-specific plugins.

Nicole used the Simple Pages plugin to customize the homepage and add a group of pages that anticipate student needs for a one-stop class website: syllabus, class schedule, and a resources page with embedded videos. Simple Pages can be created and edited in HTML, allowing for images, links, formatted text, embedded slideshows and videos.

The Omeka dashboard has two main navigation bars.

The top navigation is administrative and links to:

- project title – click here to see public view
- plugins – click here to activate and configure installed plugins
- appearance – click here to select and configure a theme (this is also where you can make site-wide changes to navigation and display settings)
- users
- settings

Nicole focused on populating her site with information rather than customizing its look but she suggested a deep dive into the 'appearance' page for those more interested in design.

The left navigation is visible to the public. Its text is customizable (appearance>navigation). Default links include:

- items – here item files (in this case images of artworks) are uploaded and affiliated with metadata (creator, title, date, etc) following the Dublin Core standard
  tip: while it's ideal to include as much data as possible (that is accurate and available), the admin can decide which fields matter to the particular project. While Nicole took care to include patron, date of commission, creator (artist), and title, she wanted to prompt students to source and harvest additional information through their own

research. It served her teaching goals to limit visible information comparable to that which appears on an Art History PowerPoint slide.
tip: Dublin Core includes “source” and “rights” fields, which are important given the complexity of copyright in fine art reproductions. Nicole made an effort to pull as many image files as possible from ArtStor and, where not possible, selected a high resolution image file with a clear provenance.

- collections – here items can be grouped (in this case Nicole has grouped artworks by city of origin)
  tip: each item can be grouped into only one collection – for a more fluid configuration of images, Omeka offers an exhibit feature
  tip: to add an item to a collection, first create the collection, then visit the item record page and select the collection from the dropdown menu at right
  tip: add multiple items to a collection at once from the Browse Items page by selecting those items, clicking the blue Edit button at top, and selecting the collection from the dropdown menu

Big idea: organizing images on a map in Neatline pushed Nicole to operate beyond the traditional canon. She felt compelled to include a representative sample from across Italy rather than devoting the majority of the class, as is more typical, to artworks produced in Florence.

Naples Neatline Project

As a complement to her dissertation, Nicole built a research site, charting the intersections between art and politics across time and geography in the city of Naples.

With the Simple Pages plugin she customized the homepage and added a group of pages that make the site navigable to scholars on Early Modern Naples and non-specialists alike: an about page introducing the dissertation project, an author page with Nicole’s credentials, bibliography, items (hosting relevant artworks and metadata), and Neatline.

The Neatline plugin is linked in the left navigation and opens to a landing page that can feature multiple Neatline exhibits. Nicole’s page includes:

- map of Naples with hotspots programmed to be visible at certain timeline intervals
- still image of a key object of study with hotspots that emphasize details and context

Like Omeka, Neatline can be outfitted with additional plugins or widgets to extend its functionality. Nicole’s site uses:

- Waypoints – allows admin to list hotspots in a side menu, suggesting a sequence like a table of contents
- SIMILE Timeline – timeline feature allows admin to define hotspots by a date range, so that they only appear as the user scrolls to that point in time
  tip: set the date range a bit earlier and later than the hotspot should appear to alert the user that she’s approaching a period of interest

Each of these Neatline plugins or widgets requires a separate installation and activation.

Getting started in Neatline:

- Click “Create an Exhibit” and add a title, URL slug, and description

- Select your Widgets (e.g. Wayfinder, SIMILE Timeline) from the dropdown
- If you are creating a map, select map type from the “Default spatial layer” dropdown
- If you are working with a still image, paste the stable URL of that item file to the “Image Layer” textbox
- Set number of zoom levels (at a lower value if your image is of poorer quality)
- Save your exhibit settings and click on the title of your exhibit to enter the Neatline interface
- Note the top left navigation for your ground layer (map or image): records, styles, plugins
- Click styles to set a new default zoom for your ground layer
  tip: use the zoom tools on the image itself to arrive at a preferred scale and then click “Use current viewpoint as default” at bottom left and then save your settings
- Click plugins to confirm that your widgets (e.g. Waypoints, SIMILE Timeline) are installed and ready to go

Adding a hotspot:

- Click “New Record” and add a URL slug, title, and description (body) – to edit this information in html click “Edit HTML”
  tip: to close out of the HTML editor and save your work click the square icon with arrows pointing to its four corners
  tip: record description or body can include multimedia files like embedded video, Sketchup models, or links to PowerPoint slides
- Notice the top navigation of your record: text, item, map, and style
- Click “item” to associate this hotspot with an image or file in your Omeka database (all items will load to a dropdown menu)
  tip: by default, all item metadata will appear on your hotspot record unless the Hide Elements plugin is installed and configured (NB: at this time Hide Elements preferences are universal and hide selected metadata on all public pages of the Omeka site)
- Click “map” to define where on your ground layer this spot will sit. Select your shape or geometry and click the location of your choice on the ground layer.
  tip: make a custom shape in Adobe Illustrator and select “draw SVG (enter markup)” to paste its SVG outline code into Neatline – as the image is vector-based you can adjust size without distorting proportion
  tip: a polygon will form as individual points – if you need to move your point, you will have to move each individual segment so it may be best to avoid polygon function
- Click “style” to customize the look of the hotspot and define its date range
  tip: “Fill color (selected)” indicates the shapes fill color when the user scrolls over it with the mouse and “Stroke color (selected)” indicates the same of its outline. If your ground layer is an artwork, you might wish to make fill and stroke colors very subtle, only becoming more visible with the hovering of a mouse
  tip: set Fill color opacity at zero for a transparent hot spot
  tip: If using Waypoints, be aware that the item will fall off the list except during its proscribed date range. To work around, duplicate records so an invisible hotspot is always accessible through Waypoints even as the visual hotspots come and go according to the timeline.

Nicole has spent 80 to 90 hours of labor on these projects to date. Omeka is not an intuitive user interface – time is spent figuring out how to do each operation but once a process is refined populating the site with items or loading the Neatline exhibit with hotspots is not difficult.

Resources:

- Duke University's Neatline Guide

Additional plugin tips:

- Avoid Image Resizer – it can crash the site
- PDF reader is useful and functional – it goes into effect in Item records for files uploaded as PDFs