

Archon™: Facilitating Access to Special Collections

Project Update, October 2008

Prepared for PACSCL "Something New for Something Old" Panel December 5, 2008.

Archon emerged as a research project from the University of Illinois Archives and the Sousa Archives and Center for American Music.¹ Archon is predicated on the notion that a **unified, web-based application** is a lynchpin in expanding access to archival descriptive information, digital objects, and electronic records. In this sense, Archon can be thought of as a Content Management System (CMS) that allows archives and manuscript repositories to describe and provide access to the totality of their holdings. Like most content management systems, Archon requires only a set of very common, free technologies (a webserver running PHP 5.0 or higher and a database server, such as MySQL.) The best technical overview of the system is a paper published for the 2007 Joint Conference on Digital Libraries.²

We chose to make Archon a web application for several reasons:

1. Low development overhead/cost:
 - Accessibility of open-source libraries speeds development process.
 - Large programmer base of students and professionals comfortable with PHP.
 - Emergence of interactive web technologies (AJAX).
 - Ability to integrate staff/description and end user/access platform (one less system to maintain).
 - Takes advantage of widespread nature of PHP/database applications.
 - Built on extensible 'package' system with 'MixIn' function.
 - Theme and templates system separate presentation from content, easier to tweak than XSLT.

2. Facilitates access to and reuse of archival information and digital objects:
 - Google-friendly web interface.
 - Immediate end-user access for descriptive records, digital objects and electronic records via a searchable website.
 - Seamless integration of archival descriptions, contextual information, and associated digital content
 - Ability to repurpose data to MARC, EAD, and other formats as necessary.
 - Provides potential future integration with other web-based systems (such as DSpace, Fedora, or Omeka).

3. Encourages efficient descriptive practices:
 - Places emphasis on collection-level description but allows description at any level.

¹ <http://www.archon.org/ICRGrant2004.pdf>

² <http://www.library.uiuc.edu/archives/workpap/FP090--prom.pdf>

- Leverages staff familiarity with web applications (no end user software requirements).
- Training costs lowered, if not eliminated.

Archon has exceeded the objectives of our original research proposal. The application is a stable production system and can be implemented in most web platforms with minimal fuss (although in rare instances, issues arise with certain software/server combinations).

When developing Archon, we felt that the system needed to meet Illinois' needs first and foremost, but that it should be based on descriptive standards, such as ISAD(G), DACS, and EAD. At the same time, we decided to release the code under the Illinois Open Source License. We believed that other repositories might find Archon useful and felt that they would help us improve the code through testing and evaluation. The Archon application has been adopted by nearly 30 institutions as a current or planned production system. Its user interface is available in English and Spanish. A list of known implementers, a sandbox, and downloads are available at the project website, www.archon.org. A production version of Archon is running at www.library.uiuc.edu/archives/archon/.

Based on our experience to date, we believe that our decision to develop Archon as a web application and to release it as open-source software was fundamentally sound. We would recommend that other repositories follow similar approaches with any infrastructure they develop.

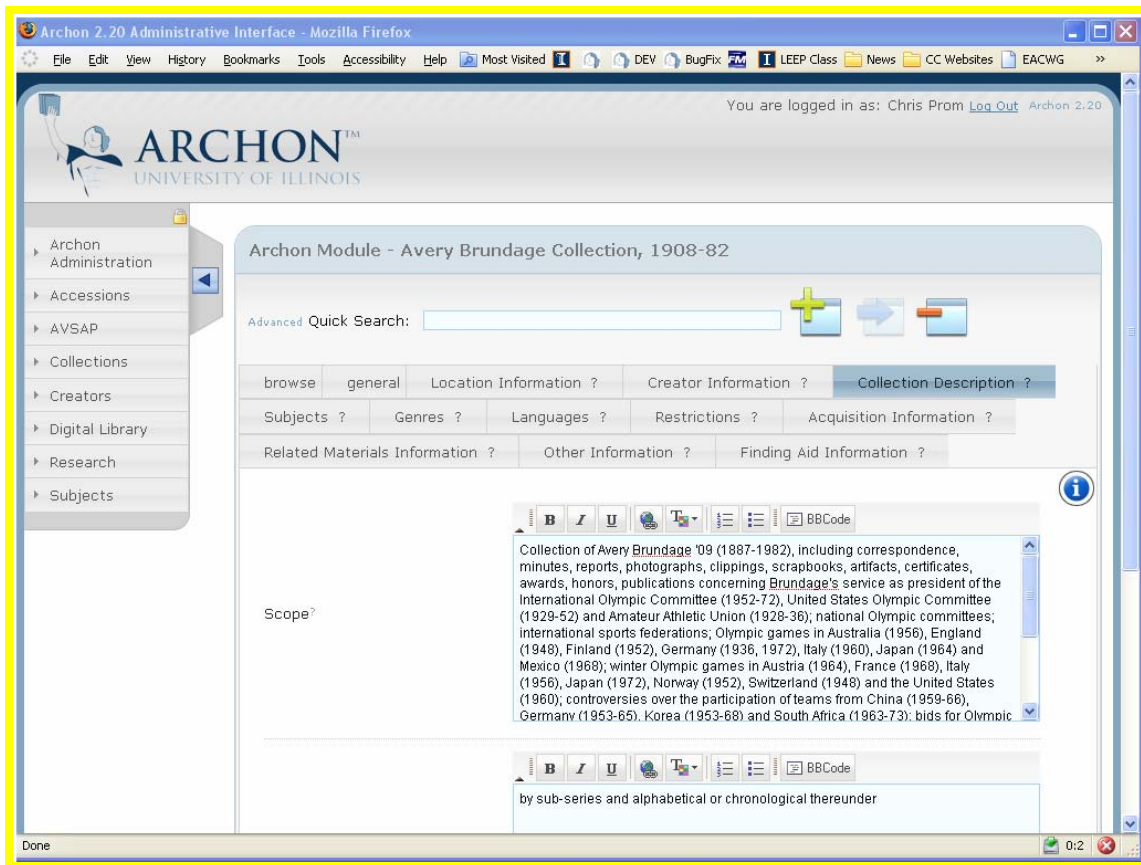
At this time, Illinois plans to keep developing Archon and to establish a SVN repository so that others outside UIUC can commit changes to the base code. Our immediate plans include:

- Release version 2.3 (minor upgrade) December 2008.
- Release version 3.0 with improved staff interface in January. A provisional screenshot is shown on the next page.
- Add bulk export/import functions for collections, collection content, and simple digital objects.
- Improve accessions and creator managers.
- Release AV Preservation Assessment module June 2009.
- Develop sustainability plan and study potential for hosted web services.

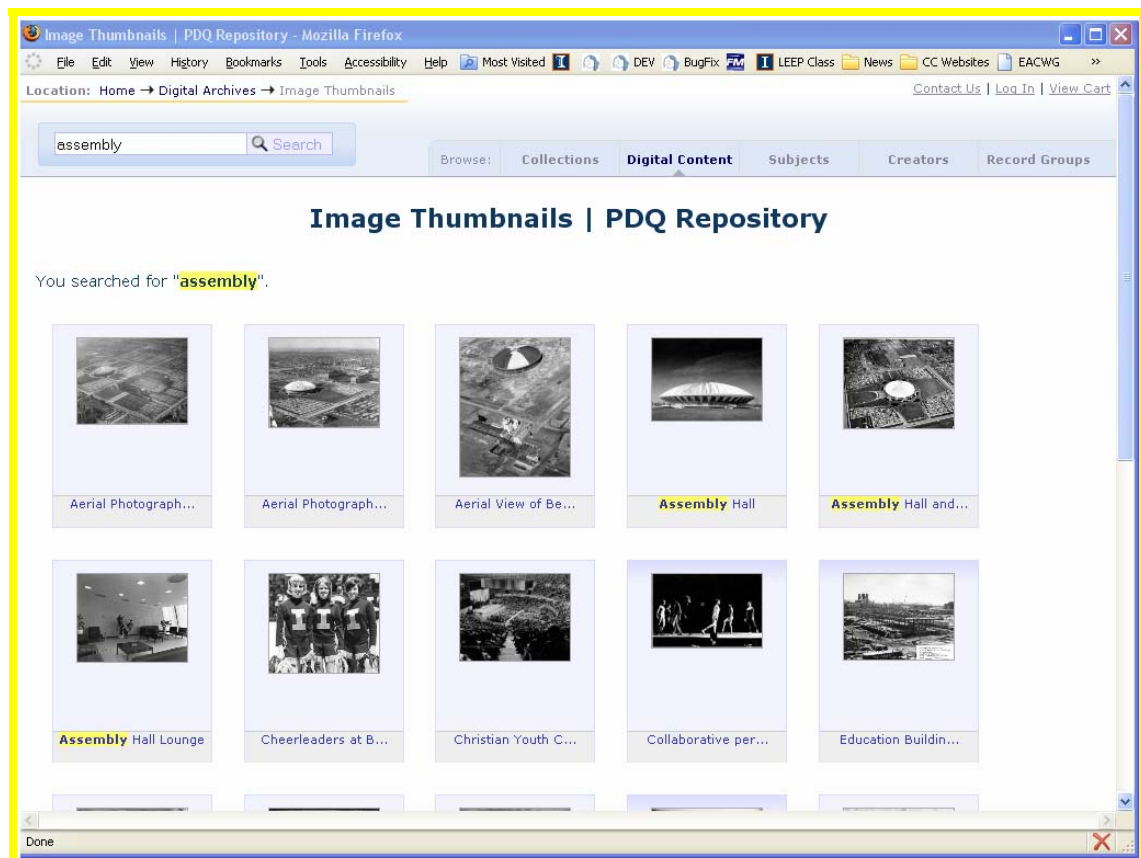
Longer term plans, subject to external funding:

- Form external advisory committee.
- Increase interoperability with other systems using OAI and SWORD technologies
- Undertake usability studies and develop new administrative and end-user themes.
- Develop "Electronic Records Manager" as new function.
- Investigate potential role of Archon as one piece in open archival information systems.

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Draft Staff Interface, Archon v. 3.0



User interface for thumbnail images, v. 2.2