Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Dynamic Reference Work

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The recent work of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy project <http://plato.stanford.edu/> has been focused on fostering and managing the growth of a dynamic reference work. Our particular project is to produce an authoritative and comprehensive dynamic reference work devoted to the academic discipline of philosophy that will be kept up to date *dynamically* so as to remain useful to those in academia *and* the general public.

Our concept of a *dynamic reference work* is defined in a way which distinguishes it from other online publishing projects, namely: (1) it is published in a continuously revisable electronic medium, (2) it offers a comprehensive set of entries on topics in a target discipline, (3) it *provides the authors of the entries with electronic access* to the reference work's central web server, so that they can remotely edit and update private copies of their entries and submit them for publication according to a regular update schedule and at any other time it becomes necessary to revise, (4) it maintains quality by way of a distinguished Board of Editors, the members of which commission the entries and referee both the initial versions of the entries and subsequent substantive modifications, *prior to publication* on the web, and (5) it creates, and makes publicly available, archives of the entries on at least a quarterly basis (i.e., these contain fixed versions of the entries, which can be cited in scholarly publications). A dynamic reference work based on this model constantly evolves and becomes *responsive* to new research.

Thus, a dynamic reference work is not merely a revisable work or one that is published online. Successful implementation of the dynamic aspects of this definition depend upon the ease with which the authors, subject editors, and the principal editor have access to the tools and information that allow entries at all stages of the work flow to be managed asynchronously. In such an environment, each entry has its own deadlines and it is necessary to track electronically the location of every entry in the work flow and provide automated reminders to individuals with work pending.

Over the past two years, the number of authors attached to our project has grown considerably – from about 350 to 600. As a result, the number of entries which are being submitted, reviewed, published, and updated at any given moment has grown rapidly. In the past year, the average rate at which we publish new entries rose from approximately 2 entries per month to 10 entries per month.

In this context of rapid development, our work on managing and fostering growth means: (1) working to insure that the asynchronous publication schedule for the entries is met even though there is no pre-determined publication date, (2) working to enable a small support staff on a small budget (compared to traditional reference work publishing) to manage the project in the face of rapid growth, and (3) working to help our users more quickly access and navigate the growing reference work as more entries become available.

We will demonstrate how our password-protected web interfaces, back-end processing system, and new front-end features, work together to facilitate the collaborative effort of creating and managing the dynamic reference work. We will highlight the newest parts of the system which are centered on growth. These include: (1) enhanced automation of email reminders that is sensitive to author and board member responsiveness and (2) an automated link-rot detection and notification system. Also, new and improved ways to navigate the encyclopedia including: (1) an automated dynamic re-cross-referencing system which enables users to more easily navigate the encyclopedia thematically, (2) a dynamically generated "What's New" page that summarizes the changes for updated entries, and (3) a system which allows users to view the changes in the updated versions of entries.

When compared to other online publishing efforts of similar scale, we face some unique technical challenges. For example, most serial publications do not require re-cross-referencing of their documents as new articles are published. People who want to navigate thematically do so through searches which can return irrelevant results that are easily ignored. Because our documents contain links to the related entries, we must maintain those links properly – lest the irrelevant links become part of the document itself.

A more in-depth discussion of the concept of a dynamic reference work, our implementation of it, and a discussion of the current state and future of our project is available in our recent paper 'The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Developed Dynamic Reference Work', by the present authors, forthcoming *Metaphilosophy*; to be reprinted in *CyberPhilosophy: The Intersection of Philosophy and Computing*, James H. Moor and Terrell Ward Bynum, (eds.), Oxford: lackwell, 2002. It may be found in PDF at the URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/sep.pdf>

The technical specifications of our system are described in the project description of our NSF/DLI-2 proposal (accepted in August 2000), which may be found at the URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/ editors/NSF/project-description.pdf>

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