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ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS

DESIGNING DIGITAL EDITIONS FOR HUMANS: INSIGHTS ON USER
EXPERIENCE AND USABILITY FROM THE *DIGITAL DOSSIER*:
ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT AND CUBA (1800–1830)

DISEÑO DE EDICIONES DIGITALES PARA HUMANOS: PERSPECTIVAS
SOBRE LA EXPERIENCIA DEL USUARIO Y LA USABILIDAD A PARTIR DEL
DOSSIER DIGITAL: ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT Y CUBA (1800-1830)

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the critical role of User Experience (UX) and usability in digital editions. Through a detailed examination of *Digital Dossier: Alexander von Humboldt and Cuba (1800-1830)*, a web application that gives access to a collection of primary sources, we explore how human-centered methodologies can improve the usability of digital editions. Our findings underscore the importance of placing Human-Centered Design and User Experience at the heart of digital editions, addressing challenges such as usability and multilingualism. The case of *Digital Dossier* demonstrates how these considerations can shape a successful and sustainable model for future digital projects.

Keywords: User Experience (UX), Usability, Human-Centered Design, Digital Editions, Multilingualism.

RESUMEN

Este artículo investiga el papel crítico de la Experiencia de Usuario (UX) y la usabilidad en las ediciones digitales. A través de un análisis detallado de *Dossier Digital: Alexander von Humboldt y Cuba (1800-1830)*, una aplicación web que ofrece acceso a una colección de fuentes primarias, exploramos cómo las metodologías centradas en el usuario pueden mejorar la usabilidad de las ediciones digitales. Nuestros hallazgos subrayan la importancia

de situar el diseño centrado en el usuario y la experiencia de usuario en el centro de las ediciones digitales, abordando desafíos como la usabilidad y el multilingüismo. El caso de *Dossier Digital* demuestra cómo estas consideraciones pueden configurar un modelo exitoso y sostenible para futuros proyectos digitales.

Palabras clave: Experiencia de Usuario (UX), usabilidad, diseño centrado en el usuario, ediciones digitales, multilingüismo.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital editions are uniquely positioned to reimagine how historical and literary works are preserved and accessed. Yet, as Kirschenbaum (2004) contends, digital interfaces are often relegated to the final stages of project development, leading to designs that may not meet user expectations. This issue is particularly critical as digital interfaces are the primary points of interaction between projects and their users. When interfaces are difficult to use or unintuitive, digital editions risk alienating potential audiences, thus diminishing their scholarly and public impact.

Despite advancements in technology, digital editions often fall short of user expectations. As Franzini *et al.* (2019) point out, digital editions are inherently imperfect tools, unable to meet the full range of needs across their varied user base. These digital projects, which are often driven by the integration of data encoding, digital repositories, or the use of advanced software, sometimes overlook one of the most crucial aspects of any digital product—usability. Many projects place too much emphasis on the technical features and functionalities while failing to consider how easily users can navigate the platform, understand its content, or engage with its features. This disconnect frequently results in interfaces that either do not communicate the project's objectives clearly or are inaccessible to users without a deep understanding of the underlying technologies.

Interestingly, Edwards (2012) suggests that in Digital Humanities projects developers and users are often the same people, that is, that researchers create their own tools for their usage. In this article, however, we aim to fill the gap in existing research and argue for the opposite thesis: if we adopt Human-Centered Design methodologies like User Experience research and design, and incorporate user's feedback during the development phase, digital editions can meet our targeted user's needs and reach a wider audience.

The *Digital Dossier: Alexander von Humboldt and Cuba (1800-1830)* ('Home Page', 2023) presents an insightful case study on how User-Centered Design and User Experience (UX) research and design can influence the success of digital projects. The website application hosting the *Digital Dossier* aims to give access online to historical documents related to Alexander von Humboldt's trip to Cuba in the early 19th Century. These editions, which include notes, essays, correspondence and

administrative documents, are presented through a multilingual graphical user interface (GUI) (Rojas Castro, 2023) and employ advanced digital technologies such as TEI-XML encoding (Burnard, 2014), TEI Publisher as a publishing platform,¹ and digital facsimiles via the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF) (Rojas Castro *et al.*, 2023).²

By centering the user experience in its development process, we argue that the *Digital Dossier* tackles critical questions: How do users interact with digital editions? What makes these editions easy to use and intuitive for both scholarly and non-scholarly users? How can multilingualism and cultural diversity be seamlessly integrated into the design of digital interfaces?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: USABILITY AND USER EXPERIENCE IN DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT

As Norman articulated in *The Design of Everyday Things*, Human-Centered Design (HCD) is “an approach that puts human needs, capabilities, and behavior first, then designs to accommodate those needs, capabilities, and ways of behaving” (Norman, 2013: 8). This philosophy emphasizes the creation of tools that are not only functional and efficient but also emotionally satisfying to use. Key concepts such as usability, prototyping, and user-centered methodologies are essential to the development of dynamic websites and digital platforms. These principles frame the iterative processes of User Experience (UX) research and design, ensuring that the resulting product aligns with user expectations.³

The development of any digital platform begins with careful planning and project management, which are critical to ensuring usability and engagement.⁴ Defining project requirements in the early stages is foundational for subsequent design and development phases (Al-Hawari, *et al.* 2021; Sedeño *et al.*, 2017; Yahaya *et al.*, 2017). These requirements must address key user needs, such as easy navigation, accessibility, and relevant content presentation. By focusing on these aspects, the groundwork is laid for creating a platform that is functional, user-friendly, and aligned with the project’s objectives.

¹ A comparison of the affordances of TEI Publisher and Edition Visualization Technology (EVT) can be found in Alvite-Díez and Rojas Castro (2022).

² For further information on IIIF, see van Lit (2020) and Urrea (2024).

³ For an introduction to Human-Centered Design and UX, see Benyon (2017).

⁴ The terms and phases mentioned in this section belong to Kogon (2015), who adopts a classical approach to project management. However, the process is usually more flexible as developers do not possess all the required information at the start of the project. For an “agile” approach to the development of digital editions, see Ferraro and Sichani (2018).

A crucial step in the design process is the creation of prototypes, which serve as early drafts of the product.⁵ Prototypes allow designers and developers to test assumptions, visualize platform functionality, and provide users with an early opportunity to engage with the interface (Carfagni *et al.*, 2020; Rivero *et al.*, 2014). This iterative process of creating and testing prototypes is essential for refining the design, addressing user feedback, and ensuring the product's usability. However, this feedback-driven approach is not without its challenges.

Design decisions are frequently guided by the “rule of the majority”, a concept critiqued by Larose and Barron (2017). This approach relies heavily on aggregated user feedback, which, while valuable, tends to focus on the preferences of the majority. Consequently, the needs of minority user groups, who may have unique requirements or preferences, are often underrepresented. Gómez Gómez (2021) warns against framing users solely as passive consumers of digital content. Moreover, this binary relationship between designers and users risks overlooking opportunities for more active, participatory approaches to UX design. Engaging marginalized users in the design process and actively incorporating their perspectives could enrich the user experience and ensure that digital tools are inclusive and equitable (Seale, Hicks, and Nicholson 2022).

As the project progresses into development, usability becomes a central concern. Usability, as elaborated by Norman (2013) and Krug (2019), encompasses multiple dimensions, including utility, comprehensibility, efficiency, and emotional satisfaction. These principles are the foundation of UX, which focuses on the overall interaction between users and digital tools. UX research methods, such as focus groups, surveys, and observational studies, collect data on user needs and behaviors, while usability testing evaluates how effectively users interact with the platform (Sundt & Davis, 2017). While these methods are essential, they must be complemented by strategies that proactively address the needs of underrepresented user groups. This ensures that the final product serves a diverse audience rather than prioritizing the preferences of a dominant majority.

In addition to usability, accessibility plays a vital role in creating inclusive digital platforms. Accessibility ensures that tools and interfaces are usable by individuals with diverse abilities and technical expertise.⁶ Features like screen reader compatibility, keyboard navigation, and adjustable display settings are integral to expanding the platform's reach and usability for a broad audience. Accessibility and usability work together to create an equitable and satisfying user experience.

⁵ An application of prototyping and models in Digital Humanities can be found in Ciula *et al.* (2023).

⁶ For a comprehensive literature review of accessibility in Digital Humanities projects, see Pirrone *et al.* (2023); from a Human Computer Interaction perspective on the same topic, see Himmelsbach *et al.* (2019).

Throughout the development lifecycle, iterative testing remains a cornerstone of the process. User feedback and usability testing are crucial during the monitoring and controlling phases, enabling the team to identify gaps between the initial design and actual user interaction. This iterative refinement ensures that issues related to accessibility, navigation, and content presentation are addressed promptly, aligning the platform more closely with user needs. However, a truly user-centered approach demands that these iterative processes involve active participation from a diverse range of users, challenging the assumption that the majority's preferences can adequately represent the whole.

Even after the platform is launched, usability remains an ongoing consideration. Continuous evaluations through user feedback, usability tests, and iterative enhancements allow the product to evolve alongside user expectations. This post-launch phase is vital to maintaining relevance, ensuring that the platform continues to deliver an effective and meaningful user experience throughout its lifecycle.

In digital scholarship projects, particularly those focused on cultural heritage, usability and UX are not secondary considerations but central to achieving accessibility and engagement. These projects must meet the needs of diverse, often global audiences while balancing technological sophistication with ease of use. The integration of methodologies such as prototyping, usability testing, and accessibility assessments ensures that these platforms are inclusive and engaging. By prioritizing both content quality and user experience, and adopting participatory design approaches that engage marginalized users, digital tools become meaningful and impactful resources that serve their intended purpose while resonating with a broad audience.

3. CASE STUDY: *DIGITAL DOSSIER: ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT AND CUBA (1800–1830)*

The *Dossier Digital: Alexander von Humboldt and Cuba (1800–1830)* is an online platform launched in January 2023 by the Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de La Habana (Cuba). Developed using TEI Publisher, the web application initially utilized version 7.0.0 of the software and has since been updated to version 9.0.0, reflecting ongoing improvements in platform functionality and performance.⁷

The web application was developed as part of Proyecto Humboldt Digital by a team of two Digital Humanities researchers (Antonio Rojas Castro and Violeta López) working in the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (BBAW) over six months in 2022. The technical infrastructure—including the installation of eXistDB and IIIF servers—was supported by TELOTA, the Digital Humanities team at BBAW, and the Oficina del Historiador.

⁷ The second version of the *Digital Dossier* is currently accessible at: <https://dossierdigital.ohc.cu/exist/apps/ProHD/start.html>. The website application can also be downloaded from GitHub: <https://github.com/humboltdigital/ProHD>

Amongst all existing publishing technologies, TEI Publisher was selected for its modular and sustainable design, which allows scholars to publish texts without requiring advanced programming skills ('TEI Publisher', 2022). Customizations to TEI Publisher include an expanded ODD file (prohd.odd), tailored templates for displaying editions, and multilingual interfaces in Spanish, German, and English. The platform's responsive design ensures accessibility across various devices, while advanced metadata filtering and search functionalities enhance user interaction.

A key feature of the *Digital Dossier* is its dual focus on both internal users (researchers and team members) and external users (non-scholarly public). Internal users depend on custom software for managing and encoding data, necessitating interfaces that are both efficient and user-friendly. External users, including scholars and non-specialist audiences, require intuitive platforms for exploring the digitized materials. The project's multilingual approach ensures that it can reach a global audience.⁸

The development of the website application has provided several valuable lessons, including the importance of clearly defining user needs and project goals. Incorporating both qualitative and quantitative user feedback has been crucial for refining design and usability. In the following sections, we will cover how several usability tests were performed and helped us to apply changes to the initial version of the website.

4. METHODOLOGY: TESTING THE USABILITY OF THE *DIGITAL DOSSIER*

To evaluate the usability of the *Digital Dossier*, we conducted three rounds of remote user testing in January 2023. This section details the key aspects of our approach, including what pages were tested (homepage and edition page), the devices used, demographic selection, research questions, tasks, and results.

The testing centered on version 1 of the home page-browsing area (Figure 1) and an edition page (Figure 2) selected by the user, emphasizing core functionalities such as accessing editions, navigating metadata, and exploring multilingual content. The primary interface was designed to allow intuitive exploration of historical texts, supporting scholarly practices like citation and downloading.

Participants accessed the platform exclusively through desktop computers, ensuring consistency in interface interactions. All tests were conducted remotely via Zoom, allowing users to complete tasks in their natural environments and ensuring diverse geographic participation.

⁸ During the revision phase of this article, it has appeared an article by Horváth *et al.* (2024) that discusses the tension between multilingualism and usability, while arguing for the usage of UX personas.

Figure 1

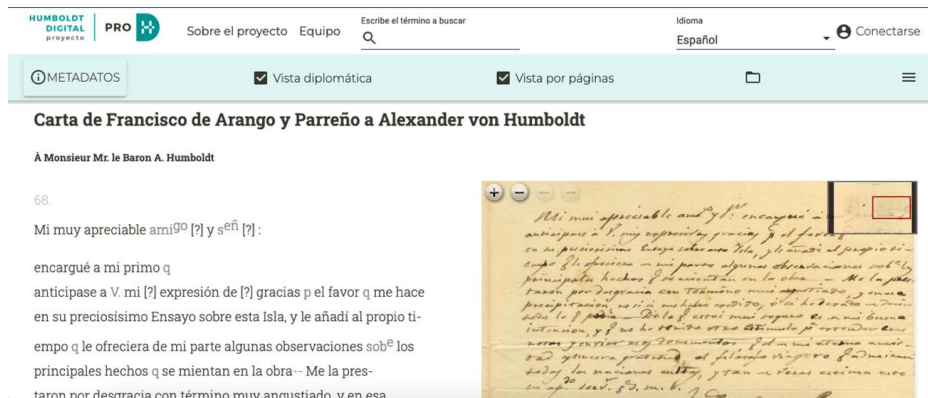
Screenshot (fragment) of the home page and browsing area of the Digital Dossier (v. 1.)



Note. Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 2

Screenshot (fragment) of an edition page of the Digital Dossier (v. 1.)



Note. Source: Own elaboration.

The usability tests aimed to address several critical questions:

1. Does the homepage and browsing area feel familiar and intuitive for our target users?
2. Can users accurately identify and access the digital edition through the side metadata panel?
3. How do multilingual content and interface design affect the overall user experience?

4. Are users able to intuitively explore content, switch between text views, and download editions in various formats?
5. Is it easy for users to understand the editorial principles of the digital editions?
6. Does the interface facilitate citation and sharing of the digital editions?

The target audience comprised researchers, academics, and students interested in historical documents and Digital Humanities. For each test, five participants with no prior experience using the platform were selected. This iterative approach allowed for identifying usability issues and implementing improvements across subsequent tests, with a total of 15 participants.

Participants were asked to complete specific tasks that reflected common use cases. These included:

1. Navigating the homepage to locate a specific document.
2. Accessing and interpreting metadata through the side panel.
3. Switching between different text views.
4. Downloading a document in a different format.
5. Understanding and locating editorial principles for a selected edition.
6. Citing or sharing an edition using the tools provided by the interface.

During the test, however, users were provided with “scenarios” that give contextual information and contain implicitly one of the aforementioned “tasks”. So, for instance, if we want to test if users can access the metadata section of an edition, instead of requesting “Click on the ‘Metadata’ button and have a look for information about the edition”, we would say something like: “You have accessed a single digital edition. You are now interested in finding out more about the creator of the text, those responsible for the transcription, and its source. How would you go about this?”. By presenting “scenarios”, thus, we avoid certain words present in the interface or give excessive hints that would shape excessively the completion of the task.

5. FINDINGS: STRENGTHS AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The usability tests conducted on the *Digital Dossier* revealed both strengths and areas for improvement that provide valuable insights into the state of the interface and its alignment with user needs. These findings underscore the inherent complexities of designing interfaces for digital editions, especially when catering to a diverse, multilingual, and multidisciplinary audience. While the website showed promise in addressing several core usability principles, the results also highlighted significant challenges that needed to be addressed for the platform to become truly user-friendly and accessible.

5.1. Strengths: Achievements in Text Visualization and Editorial Principles

The usability tests highlighted several key strengths of the platform, particularly in supporting its primary scholarly functions. One notable success was the ease with which users interacted with the text visualization features. Participants were able to seamlessly switch between text views (diplomatic or normalized), demonstrating that this functionality was both intuitive and well-implemented. This achievement is especially important for a platform designed to provide access to a diverse collection of historical and scholarly materials.

Another strength was the clarity and accessibility of the editorial principles. Users consistently located and understood this information without difficulty, indicating that the platform effectively communicates its editorial framework. Similarly, the “Suggested Citation” page was highly visible and easy to find, supporting users’ academic needs and facilitating proper attribution of materials.

These findings suggest that the platform successfully meets its core objectives of providing an accessible, user-friendly interface for exploring historical documents. The effective integration of tools for text visualization and metadata presentation fulfills the basic needs of its target audience, including researchers, students, and members of the public interested in Alexander von Humboldt’s journey to Cuba. This solid foundation supports meaningful engagement with the platform’s rich content.

5.2. Areas for Improvement: Navigation Challenges and Multilingual Accessibility

The usability tests revealed several critical challenges that needed to be addressed to enhance the platform’s overall user experience. One of the most significant issues was related to navigation, particularly when users attempted to access documents by author. The faceted search system, designed to organize and retrieve texts, proved unintuitive for many users, making it difficult to locate specific materials efficiently. This highlighted the need for a more streamlined and user-friendly search and navigation structure. An improved system allowing users to filter and search by categories such as author, title, and language would greatly enhance content discoverability and usability.

Another major concern was the platform’s multilingual accessibility. Non-German-speaking users struggled when default pages appeared in German, creating unnecessary barriers to navigation. This issue underscored the importance of robust multilingual features to accommodate a diverse audience. Enhancing language accessibility with a more visible and intuitive language-selection interface or automatic language detection based on user preferences would help create a more inclusive and seamless experience. The challenge also raised broader questions about the cultural sensitivity of the platform, particularly in balancing global accessibility with the linguistic diversity of the texts, which include German, Spanish, French, and English.

In addition to these technical issues, feedback pointed to dissatisfaction with the homepage design. Several users found the homepage lacked a conventional structure, making it less intuitive for first-time visitors. This highlighted the need for adherence to familiar design patterns in key navigational elements. A more standardized homepage layout, with clearly defined sections and easily accessible links to important resources, would help users orient themselves quickly and enhance their overall experience.

These findings emphasize the importance of refining core aspects of the platform, particularly navigation, multilingual functionality, and homepage design.⁹ Addressing these challenges is essential to better align the platform with user expectations, ensuring it serves as an effective and accessible tool for exploring historical documents.

5.3. Implementing Changes: Refining the User Experience

The first version of platform demonstrated strong functionality in supporting scholarly tasks such as exploring texts, understanding editorial contexts, and citing materials. However, improving navigation –particularly for accessing editions by author– and addressing language accessibility and homepage design are crucial for enhancing usability and meeting the expectations of a diverse user base.

In response to the feedback gathered from the usability tests, several immediate improvements were implemented. One key change was the addition of the author's name after the title of each edition on the homepage. This adjustment aimed to improve the discoverability of texts and provide users with more context when browsing the website. Another important change was the reorganization of the metadata section, where the creation details of each text were moved to the top of the metadata panel for easier access. These changes are in line with best practices for improving the clarity and accessibility of scholarly resources.

In the following months, further changes were implemented in collaboration with Jinntec GmbH. These changes gave way to what can be considered the second and current version of the website completed before closing the project in late 2023. In concrete, this second version addresses the issues identified with the faceted search and navigation, improves multilingual accessibility, and incorporates a proper home page (Figure 3) that introduces the content to the user. This second version was also tested with real users and included a broader demographic, particularly users based in Cuba, who provided critical insights into how the platform can be made more inclusive and accessible in the future.

⁹ Further information on the multilingualism strategies undertaken as part of Proyecto Humboldt Digital can be found in Rojas Castro (2023).

Figure 3

Screenshot (fragment) of the current home page of the *Digital Dossier* (v. 2.)



Note. Source: Own elaboration.

6. CONCLUSION

The development and refinement of the *Digital Dossier: Alexander von Humboldt and Cuba (1800-1830)* highlights the transformative potential of Human-Centered Design (HCD) in the creation of digital editions. By integrating iterative usability testing, multilingual accessibility, and user-centered methodologies, this project demonstrates how digital editions can cater to a broad audience, including both scholarly and non-scholarly users, while addressing the challenges of accessibility, navigation, and cultural inclusivity.

The successes of the *Digital Dossier*—such as its intuitive text visualization features and accessible editorial principles—underscore the importance of aligning technical functionalities with the needs and expectations of users. At the same time, the challenges it faced, including issues with navigation, multilingual accessibility, and homepage design, emphasize the need for continuous user engagement and iterative refinement. These lessons point to the essential role of user feedback and adaptability in creating sustainable and meaningful digital projects.

Ultimately, the insights gained from the development of the *Digital Dossier* contribute to a broader conversation about the future of Digital Humanities. They

reaffirm the value of HCD in enhancing the usability and impact of digital tools while offering a roadmap for integrating advanced technologies like TEI-XML and IIIF into user-friendly interfaces. By prioritizing the human experience, digital editions can fulfil their dual mission: preserving cultural heritage and making it accessible to a diverse, global audience.

As Digital Humanities projects continue to evolve, the methodologies and findings presented in this study serve as a model for future initiatives. They emphasize that successful digital editions are not merely about data modeling and encoding best practices, or sustainability and preservation challenges, but about creating platforms that meet their targeted user's needs and that facilitate the interaction between the user, the interface, and the information.

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durante el entrenamiento, le despista una mancha en la reproducción que se ha utilizado o las líneas están muy juntas y no logra leer una marca superescrita y la confunde con un trazo de una letra de la línea anterior.

Ya que el objetivo del modelo Spanish Gothic Incunabula (HSMS) es incorporar los textos de los incunables españoles a un corpus lingüístico (donde podrá ser usado por otros investigadores como fuente para ediciones o estudios lingüísticos), nos hemos inclinado por el uso de transcripciones semipaleográficas etiquetadas según el modelo diseñado en los años 1970 por el Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies. Este modelo codifica toda la información relativa a la *mise-en-page*, las erratas, errores y enmiendas de los escribas (en el caso de manuscritos), y ciertos rasgos gráficos como la presencia de letras superescritas y cómo se han desarrollado las abreviaturas. No hemos creído pertinente, sin embargo, conservar la información referente a los alógrafos que son meras variantes gráficas de una misma letra (*s* frente *f*; *r* frente a *z*; *d* frente *ð*) que, aunque pueden ser elementos para la datación de los manuscritos o determinar los impresores, son difíciles de representar en el mundo digital, y de accesibilidad y permanencia mucho más compleja. Además, como se ha mostrado, la posibilidad de no ser absolutamente rígido en la marcación de ciertos alógrafos abreviativos (*ver-* y *vir-*), ofrece mayores seguridades que desarrollar equivocadamente una abreviatura.

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