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ARCHIVES' GATE CONNECTS ARCHIVES WITH POTENTIAL USERS

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Abstract. How could web users, who seek history related information, be guided to the archives? This is a question we pondered at the National Archives of Finland in 2009, when we wanted to create something new to increase archives' recognizability. This led to implementation of Archives' Gate, a MediaWiki-based finding aid tool that is easy to use, inexpensive and easily found by search engines. Now this National Archives' best liked online service receives some 130 000 visits a year - in a nation of 5,5 million. The path has been both teaching and rewarding and it's now leading to a new level of bringing archival information to potential users.

Keywords: national archives of Finland, Archives' Gate, archives

Two fortunate problems

In 2009 we were facing a tricky situation at the National Archives of Finland: we had two fortunate problems. On one hand Finnish military's Second World War diaries were going online. Those diaries were kept in each unit during the war and their digitization was about to be completed. We were wondering how we could manage the tide of inquiries, once the news of the digitization was published and the public wanted to know how to get access the diaries they particularly were interested in.

On the other hand, we noticed that more and more debate about the use and accessibility of archival material was taking place at discussion forums beyond our reach. Sometimes the advice given by the participants on these forums was rather good but more than often it lacked information or even contained false information.

As mentioned above these problems were, however, fortunate. They proved that archival material still had significance to the public, since there was no question that the publication of the war diaries was going to be a news story. And the ongoing online discussion itself was a proof of archives importance, although the conversationalists didn't always at first know that the answer to their question was going to be acquired by studying the archives.

We started to solve both of these newly emerged issues: we wanted to provide online finding aid for people who wanted to find the war diary they were interested in. We also wanted to be part of discussion on archival material and to provide proper information on how to use archives, where to use them and what invaluable information could be obtained by visiting the archives' reading room.

The next question therefore was how these aims could be reached.

From planning to first experiences

Our aim was to find online service platform which would meet four kinds of criteria. It should be easily used by archives personnel, easily tailored to meet our demands, easily located by search engines and it should also be inexpensive. We decided to compare educational platform Moodle with MediaWiki platform. In the end we decided to go with wiki for various reasons. First of all, it was easy to tailor. Big changes were not necessary but we wanted to include a link list that would allow us to present the archival entities as a network with links between related material. (Picture 1)



Picture 1. Tailored mediawiki environment offers not only the customary table of contents (1) but also a link list (2) in the beginning of each article. Links in the list forward the user, for example, to related articles in the Gate or to online exhibitions presenting examples of the material that is discussed in the article.

Secondly a lot of people knew how to use wiki, since they had experience in using Wikipedia. And in most cases you could refer to Wikipedia user guide, since the two systems were so much alike.

We also learned that Google quickly picked up information that was published in Mediawiki. Nowadays more than 50 percent of Archives' Gate users come from Google. At first we called this new finding aid the Gate to the National Archives

but later we changed its name to Archives' Gate (*Arkistojen Portti* in Finnish). In this article I call it simply the Gate. In the beginning the Gate consisted of only one article which was about the war diaries. We directed users to that site and noticed that it was working: we didn't see any large rise in phone or email enquiries although the diaries themselves were very much in use. But we saw how the people in discussing forums started to refer to the Gate instead of providing the information themselves.

Towards larger audiences

Soon it was evident that the Gate should be used more widely. First we thought that we should use it to cover all digitized material but then we realized we shouldn't stop there. In order to provide satisfactory understanding of what information could be found at the archives we should, of course, cover also non-digitized material.

It was now 2010 and something important considering the development of the Gate happened: the government decided to grant the archives some extra funding from the national lottery fund. The purpose of this action was to make more documents available online and to improve their usability once digitized. Using that fund we hired six almost graduated history students to create more content to the Gate. We trained them to understand the structure of the Gate and then we provided them with existing information concerning the archival material. Then they started to write articles archive by archive beginning with most frequently used materials, or materials we thought should be more commonly known.

This way we managed to get about a hundred articles into the Gate. Before this project there had been less than ten articles available. At the same time the Gate got more users: first their number per day sometimes exceeded one hundred and provided us joy. Then later the figure was seldom less than hundred and more often closer to two hundred. Now it's normally between two and five hundred and in 2013 the Gate was used about 130 000 times. That is a pleasing number in our league as a memory organization in a country with population of 5,5 million.

One of the ways of increasing the audience was to link Gate's articles to our archival database. For example, if you search for the archives of Finnish Government, with the search result you also get a link to its article in the Gate. The same applies to *Finna* (<http://www.finna.fi>), which is a brand new information search service for Finnish archives, libraries and museums. Using these links you get more information on specific archives than by just using archival database.

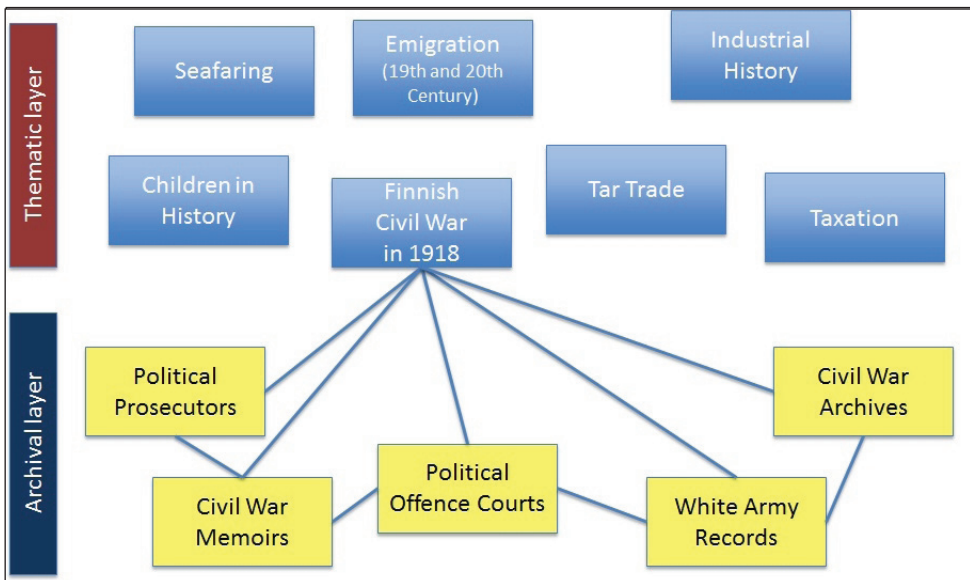
The structure of the Gate

Gate's structure was not cemented until its content started to increase during the digitization project in 2010. It doesn't contain the actual archival material but tells how to reach the material and what to expect to find in it. First the tool consisted of articles describing individual archives within the National Archives. Then the

archives that had a connection between them were linked together. Then it was thought, that the Gate should consist of two layers in order to provide a two-way service: first it should inform the public about the contents and use of individual archives and secondly it should provide a picture on what kind of archives there were considering certain topics in history.

The upper layer of articles is called thematic layer. It simply lists archives that have to do with a certain topic (say Finns in St. Petersburg in the beginning of the 19th Century). The theme provides just enough information on individual archive to help one decide whether one is interested in it or not. All other information is included in bottom layer in order to avoid revising and doubled work when updating the information.

The bottom layer of articles is called archival layer. It describes an individual archive, such as the Evangelical-Lutheran parish of St. Mary in St. Petersburg. That archive has a keen link to Finns in St. Petersburg in that time period, since a large number of Finns belonged to that parish during that time period. (Picture 2)



Picture 2. Example of the Gate's structure is shown here. Each theme (blue boxes) has several archives (yellow boxes) under it. Relating archives are connected with each other.

Whereas there is little structure in thematic layer, the archival layer is strictly structured. Every article in archival layer should have four to five chapters, which are the following:

1. How was the archive created?
2. What kind of information does the archive contain?
3. How could one utilize the archive?
4. How does one get access to this archive?
5. (Literature)

The topic of a chapter doesn't need to be a question but the content of each chapter should answer it and contain nothing else but the answer. That way the users doesn't have to read the entire article in order to find the information they are searching for. After reading few articles they begin to understand where to find certain information. All articles should concentrate on essential and consist of short chapters and paragraphs. The articles shouldn't aim in covering historical events but to focus on archival materials.

The fifth topic is in brackets because it is a voluntary chapter. The archivist doesn't have to search books or online links related to specific archives but if one knows any, one should pass that information to users.

Images are only used when they serve educational purpose. They are often screenshots from archival database.

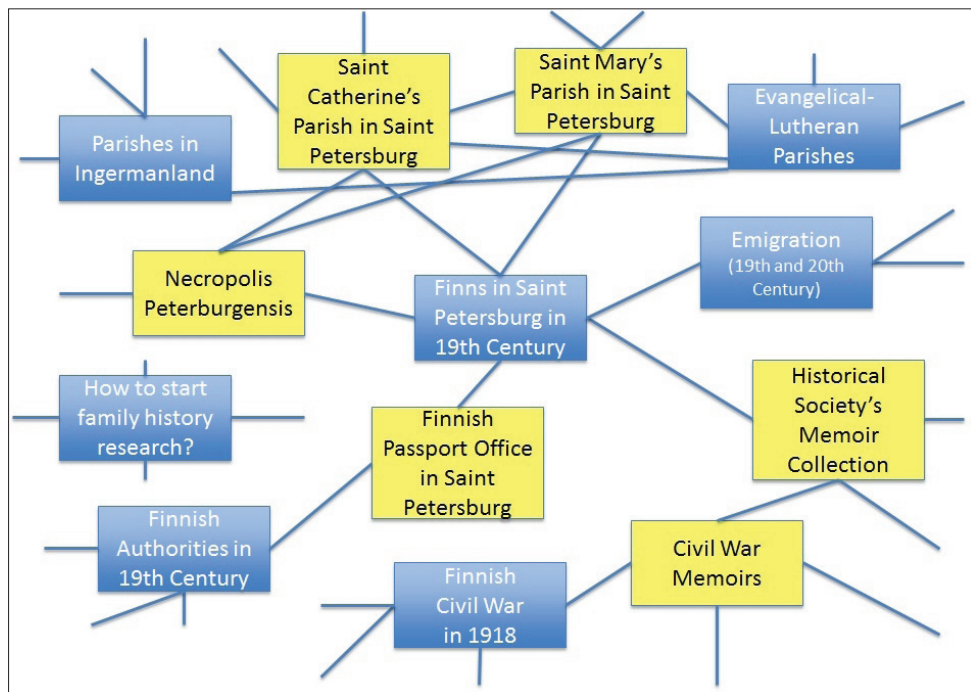
It is common that new organizations tend to think that providing archival layer articles is a lot of work. But experience has shown otherwise: person already familiar with certain archive can easily provide answers to question mentioned above. Creating thematic layer could (there are also short ones) be more laborious but in the end there is little more to it than listing materials. And you don't have to cover it all in one time. The amount of information can grow over time.

In a way the only exception to this structure is the Russian version of the Gate. It consists of only one theme (Finnish archives that are in Russian or contain information on Russia, former Soviet Union or their citizens) and all articles in its archival layer are connected to it.

We think that by using this kind of structure individual articles form a network that in most archival databases could be obtained only with considerable effort. (Picture 3)

The public opinion about the Gate

In National Archives customer survey in 2012 Archives' Gate was our best liked online service. Some 80 percent of its users were either satisfied or extremely satisfied with it. The Gate even beat the Digital Archives (then containing about 15 million images) with few percent's. One in every four customers in reading room had been using the Gate at least once. How many of them *came* because of the Gate is not known but obviously it must be something between 0 and 25 percent. In my opinion both extremes are equally unconvincing but if it was, say, 10 percent it would be a sensation.



Picture 3. If you land, for example, to a theme concerning 19th Century Finns in Saint Petersburg (in the middle) there are several ways for you to move forward.

In first phase you learn that there are numerous archives (yellow boxes) and one theme (blue box) relating to that subject.

You can either settle to this result or expand your knowledge on archives by moving to direction of your choice.

Other way of measuring website's success is to estimate the number of links leading to it. Some links we have planted ourselves, practically all of them in Finnish, Swedish and Russian Wikipedia (since the Gate is available in those languages). For example, the Wikipedia-article on St. Mary's parish in St. Petersburg has a link to its article in the Gate. And Wikipedia-articles on Finnish Passport Office in St. Petersburg have corresponding links to the Gate, both in Finnish and in Russian. Having done that, we now get about 300 visits a month from Wikipedia.

Most of the links, however, are created by web users and information specialists working online. If you google Archives' Gate's address <http://wiki.narc.fi/portti> you get dozens of results. Many of the links are provided by librarians, who run their own answering service online. They aim to answer all questions the public has

and they tend to refer to the Gate when archival information is concerned. But still most links are created by individuals who have found the Gate worth linking to.

Defining the path for the future

In 2012 we decided to go further and opened the Gate for all Finnish public archives. We thought that more search engine accessible information in any finding aid service would mean more users. That way all parties could win, since more users at the Gate would ultimately mean more users for our articles and the users would benefit when the archives are linked together over organizational boundaries.

We decided to offer the Gate free of charge but we expect all parties to maintain the Gate's structural pattern. Therefore each party is tied to two layers and to a set structure within the archival layer. So far Helsinki City Archives and Finnish Sports Archives have joined us in the Gate. And only today I learned that the University of Oulu (in Northern Finland) is considering of spreading information of its archives using this tool.

Apart from waiting for new partners to join we have continued increasing the number of articles within the service. At the moment there are about 15 articles on thematic layer and little over 230 articles on archival layer. Not all articles in archival layer are connected to a theme at all, but usually they are connected to other archives by internal links. One of our goals is to increase the number of themes over time.

One of the future challenges of the Gate is to connect with new archival database that is going to be in use during the next year. This new database (currently known by its project name AHAA) connects several Finnish archives and introduces new features such as searching, for example, by author, place, historical event or time period. How the Gate will fit to this puzzle is yet to be decided but it seems that the Gate will survive both because of its size and the number of its users.

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