



Société pour les Espaces Publics d'Information
Society for Public Information Spaces

Position paper of co-ment® for the W3C workshop on annotations

Date : 5 March 2014

Contact : philippe.aigrain@sopinspace.com

Background

co-ment is a Web-based text annotation system whose development by Sopinspace started in 2006 and that was commercially exploited from 2008. The full software base of co-ment is COMT, a free software under the AGPLv3 licence, distributed at www.co-ment.org. Sopinspace commercializes co-ment as a web service through www.co-ment.com and provide software services for its integration into information systems. co-ment is a registered trademark of Philippe Aigrain.

The main use cases of co-ment are in education, digital humanities, editorial processes, legal analysis and collaborative writing. co-ment has commercial users in 15 countries. co-ment manages texts as well as annotations: it is not an annotation engine for any Web page. Its annotation interface and client-server interaction have been designed for performance on large texts and large number of comments. co-ment's underlying formats for storage and editing are XHTML itself and a number of wiki formats in particular markdown. co-ment has extended import and export facilities. Annotated texts can presently be exported to and imported from and ad-hoc open XML format. Technologically, co-ment uses the Django framework on the server side and various AJAX technology on the client side, in particular JQuery. co-ment has a REST API given access to most of its functionality and a Drupal client module for this API.

For more information on the use cases, application domains and features, refer to the user guide at www.co-ment.com or just try co-ment at the same address.

Interest for a more structured approach to annotations

Our philosophy is to position co-ment as a solid contributor within an ecosystem of annotation and collaborative writing software and practices. We look forward to interoperability at various levels with other systems: exchange from open and if possible standardized formats, annotation exchange through APIs, integration of co-ment within translation systems or reading interfaces, mashups, etc.

4, passage de la Main d'Or
F-75011 Paris - France
Tél. : +33 1 55 28 37 60
Fax : +33 1 55 28 37 69
www.sopinspace.com

Contribution to the workshop topics

Robust anchoring

co-ment does not have to maintain a robust anchoring to unrelated third-party documents. However, co-ment is used for collaborative writing, including in CMS that use their own editors, and we have to handle consistency of anchoring across versions of a co-ment text. We have made the choice of not trying to guess the scope of an annotation when the content of its scope has been deleted or modified. We simply offer the users with the choice of keeping the corresponding annotations “detached” and possibly redefine their scope. We would be interested in systems providing hints for this scope redefinition, but are slightly skeptical of automated maintenance of anchoring in our type of use cases. Co-ment offers a robust versioning and version comparison system. This can be useful for repositioning detached comments.

Styling selections and annotations

The co-ment team works with various digital studies centers designing annotation systems and practices. Up to now, we have tried to drastically limit the types of annotations. Each annotation must have a scope, a title and contents. Annotation styling is limited to user-definable annotation categories that are viewed through colored vertical marginal lines. Any segment of text (including a single character) can be an annotation scope. We use extensively tags and other metadata for filtering annotations and processing them. Of course, we have no opposition to the definition of more diverse and stylable annotation and selection types.

Use cases

We have a broad set of use cases, in particular for education (collaborative annotation in the classroom or in longer term projects, collaborative annotation by teachers of curriculum texts), in digital humanities (collaborative annotation by scholars), in legal analysis (annotation of the legal corpus applicable to some domain), for design and revision of charters, contracts and licenses, and for editorial processes with a small number of drafters and a much greater number of commentators. Some are described on <http://www.co-ment.com> and in the user guide accessible on this site. However, the majority of use remains unknown to us as it is conducted in private.

Web storage and management of annotations

We are keen to see standardized or commonly accepted open formats for annotations and import/export of annotated texts. By open formats, we mean freely accessible and shareable, free from any copyright or patent restriction (at least royalty-free non-discriminatory licensing), free of DRM/TPM or secrete encryption keys.

Client-side APIs and methods for the implementation of annotation systems

We are producers of an API (including a client-side implementation) and potential users of API

for other annotation systems. The main difficulty in writing client-side APIs lies in the propagation or mapping of user rights and roles. As for methods of implementation of annotation interfaces, we hope that the maturation of AJAX libraries will lead to a simplified setting. We nonetheless are careful to avoid any excessive dependency on libraries associated with a particular provider, even when these libraries are open source.

Practical experience with annotation systems

See above.