From "Individual Tinkering" to Collective Practices in Digital Humanities

A Critical Look Back at the Earliest Stages in the Creation of an ACTiF (American Contemporary Theatre in France) Database

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Abstract : This article offers a reflective account of the early stages in the development of the ACTiF (American Contemporary Theatre in France) database – a digital platform designed to document and analyze the circulation of American theatre in France since the 1960s. Emerging within a broader landscape of proliferating yet often fragile digital humanities initiatives, ACTiF confronts the challenges of sustainability, interoperability, and methodological coherence. Drawing on recent scholarship in digital theatre historiography, metadata design, and interface theory, the article situates ACTiF as both a technical project and a collective epistemological endeavor. We explore how the lack of in-house technical expertise shaped our cautious, community-oriented approach, emphasizing reuse over reinvention and the importance of shared standards and infrastructures. Key concerns include hosting and preservation strategies, rights management, the use of controlled vocabularies, and the tension between descriptive precision and cross-project interoperability. We also examine the interface not as a neutral surface but as a structuring device that models scholarly practices and user engagement. This article hopes to contribute to a wider conversation about how humanities researchers can move beyond "individual tinkering" by fostering shared practices, open documentation, and collective investment in the future of digital theatre studies.

Keywords : Digital Humanities, Theatre Database, Interoperability, Sustainability, Collaborative Scholarship.

1 Yet another theatrical database ?

> Let's face it : for years, the inclusion of a "digital humanities" component in research projects has facilitated the acquisition of funding. As a result, a number of researchers with often limited technical knowledge have courageously rethought their approach to include a digital component. This situation has led to a wild proliferation of projects. This provides the scientific community with valuable new resources, but it also means that many projects are unfinished, quickly abandoned or difficult to use, and leads to a lack of interoperability, coordination and mutualisation between projects that are sometimes very similar (Roussillon and Schuwey 2020)[1].

In this text entitled "Bases de données et histoire des spectacles : le temps d'un bilan ?", presented as the introduction of a recent issue of the *Revue d'Historiographie Théâtrale*, Marine Roussillon and Christophe Schuwey give a precise and frank assessment of the development of theatrical databases over the last two decades (in the wake of the *CESAR* database[2] and insist on the need to "encourage reflexion on – and understanding of – what we are doing, to explain the challenges of a practice that is becoming more widespread, and to contribute to a collective reflexion on the challenges involved, instead of individual tinkering" (Roussillon and Schuwey 2020)[3].

This observation highlights a paradox shared by many digital humanities projects – especially those emerging from fields not traditionally aligned with computational methods. The inclusion of digital humanities elements can unlock funding, spark innovation, and expand the accessibility of research – yet too often, projects face premature abandonment, technical decay, or a lack of meaningful integration with existing resources. The ACTiF[4] (American Contemporary Theatre in France) project was launched in March 2024 by Emeline Jouve (Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès) in this ambiguous context. One of the main deliverables set out in the initial project description was the creation of an interactive "digital library", conceived to meet the needs of scholars, practitioners, and amateurs – and aiming to centralize the scattered, ephemeral traces of American theatre circulation in France since the 1960s (scripts, productions, reviews, institutional data, diplomatic entanglements, audience reception materials, etc.), while making them accessible and searchable in a fully interconnected digital space. This "digital library" project has gradually evolved into a database project, which is still in its early stages of design and implementation.

[1] « Il faut bien le reconnaître : depuis des années, la présence d'un volet "humanités numériques" dans les projets de recherche facilite l'obtention de financements. En conséquence, plusieurs chercheuses et chercheurs disposant d'un bagage technique souvent limité ont courageusement repensé leur démarche afin d'y intégrer un volet numérique. La situation a conduit à une démultiplication sauvage des réalisations. Elle offre ainsi de nouvelles ressources précieuses à la communauté scientifique, mais elle véhicule également son lot de réalisations inachevées, rapidement disparues ou difficiles à utiliser, et conduit à un manque d'interopérabilité, de coordination et de mutualisations entre des réalisations parfois très proches. » Unless otherwise stated, all translations are done by the author of this article.

[2] *Calendrier électronique des spectacles sous l'Ancien Régime et sous la Révolution* [Electronic calendar of performances during the Ancien Régime and the Revolution] : https://cesar.huma-num.fr/cesar2/publications/publications.php?fct=edit\&publication_UOID=159468),

[3] « [...] nourrir la réflexion sur – et la compréhension de – ce que nous faisons, d'expliciter les enjeux d'une pratique qui se généralise et de contribuer à une réflexion collective sur ses enjeux, en lieu et place des bricolages particuliers ».

[4] See https://actif.hypotheses.org/

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The ACTiF project is carried out by an interdisciplinary group of researchers whose fields include U.S. theatre and literature, performance studies, translation, political sociology, cultural diplomacy, and communication sciences – a vibrant mix of expertise that reflects the multifaceted nature of the project itself. Yet, like many humanities-led digital initiatives, the project began without a dedicated engineer or specialist in digital humanities. This lack of in-house technical expertise has shaped our process from the outset, prompting us to seek advice, borrow tools, and adopt a deliberately cautious, iterative approach to digital design and sustainability.

This article offers a critical reflection on the earliest stages of the ACTiF database project, drawing from our modest experience of conceptualizing, designing, and beginning to build a (hopefully) sustainable, interoperable, and usable database. It aims to share a narrative of learning, adapting, and problem-solving, while emphasizing the crucial importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, shared standards, and mutual support among digital theatre initiatives – in the hope of moving beyond "individual tinkering" toward sustainable, networked digital scholarship.

2 The ACTiF project : Ambitions and Initial Design

Why has the impact of American theatre on French stages remained limited, despite the US's booming performing arts industry and leading soft power in other fields ? Funded for four years by the French Agence Nationale de la Recherche, ACTiF is an action-research project which aims to investigate this unexplored paradox, thus filling a gap in performance studies and international cultural policy studies, and building bridges between ongoing research on French and US theaters. Rather than focusing solely on the translation and production of American plays on French stages, it seeks to shed light on the broader cultural, aesthetic, economic, and diplomatic logics that have shaped the transatlantic trajectory of these works, from their creation and production process to their distribution and reception by French audiences. This ambitious scope demands a tool capable of capturing, organizing, and articulating a wide array of heterogeneous data types : from archival traces (contracts, press kits, stage scripts, reviews, programs, posters, photographs) to oral history (interviews with translators, directors, cultural attachés), from critical articles to digitized performance materials.

The ACTiF database was therefore conceived as a centralizing platform to house and interconnect these materials, allowing researchers to approach them not as isolated artefacts, but as relational nodes within complex networks of meaning and exchange : rather than mimicking a traditional library or static digital archive, the platform should ideally function as a semantic and navigable environment, where users can explore connections across documents, events, entities, and people. A single performance might link to a play, a venue, an author, a translator, a review, and a festival – each connection representing a research avenue and a metadata relation. In this way, the database would act not just as a container for data, but as a dynamic interface for critical exploration.

Furthermore, the ACTiF team envisioned a platform that could grow and evolve over the long-term : future contributors (researchers, students, archivists, or even audience members) should be able to suggest additions or corrections to entries, and

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the database should continue to be completed and maintained beyond the four years of project funding. The question of the platform's sustainability has therefore been at the heart of ACTiF's concerns right from the start of the project. However, as the team did not include an engineer, humbly aware of our ignorance and the scale of the task we were facing, the early phases of the project were defined by an intensive period of methodological exploration and knowledge acquisition, through multiple consultations with more experienced colleagues in the digital humanities field. These discussions – marked by outright generosity, technical insight, and often brutal honesty – helped us reshape our understanding of what we intended to build, how we could go about it and, most importantly, the risks and dangers involved.

3 Learning from the Field : Networking and Avoiding Reinvention

It quickly became clear that we were neither the first nor the last team to embark on the perilous adventure of building a theatrical database. Some of these projects were launched with great promise but never fully developed ; others became inaccessible or obsolete once funding ended or key contributors moved on ; others still have to rely on a never-ending quest for funding in order to stay afloat : for instance, "*CESAR* is not dead, and the renovation of the site, supervised by Marc Douguet, is in progress. But this long interruption is indicative of the precarious nature of digital research tools" (Roussillon and Schuwey 2020)[5]. This realization was sobering. It served as a reminder that even with a well-defined academic vision, the success and sustainability of digital humanities projects depend on infrastructure, documentation, and long-term planning.

We therefore sought aid and guidance from peers who had already confronted similar issues. For instance, conversations with Chloée Fabre and Roxane Mauillon[6] (Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès) helped us understand the need to first store our raw datasets in a digital warehouse such as Nakala, to ensure their long-term preservation ; and then use these data to build a modular database interface, in order to make these materials searchable, browsable, and analytically useful. Our exchanges with Pierre Willaime[7] and Anne-Lise Christmann[8] (CENHTOR, MSH-Lorraine) led us to select Omeka S as our primary platform, because of its open-source and modular architecture that can be adapted to a variety of research needs. Most importantly, Omeka S allows for the expression of complex relationships between multiple entities – which is one of the primary concerns of the ACTiF project, namely to better understand the intricate pathways of cultural and theatrical circulation across the Atlantic.

At the same time, these choices brought with them a host of new questions. Should we rely solely on Dublin Core or Qualified Dublin Core (QDC) to describe our do-

[5] « CÉSAR n'est pas mort, et la rénovation du site, supervisée par Marc Douguet, est en cours. Mais cette interruption longue est révélatrice de la précarité qui caractérise les outils numériques de la recherche. »

[6] Chloée Fabre and Roxane Mauillon are Open Science Support Officers at Toulouse – Jean Jaurès University.

[7] Pierre Willaime is a CNRS research engineer, head of the AHP-PReST laboratory archives, and leader of the 'Digital Humanities and Heritage Collections' research group at the Henri-Poincaré Archives. He is also Scientific Director of the Cenhtor platform at MSH-Lorraine, and President of AUFO (the Association of French-speaking Omeka Users).

[8] Anne-Lise CHRISTMANN is Operational Manager of the Cenhtor platform at MSH-Lorraine, as well as Huma-Num correspondent and Nakala moderator.

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cuments, in order to ensure the best interoperability of our data, in compliance with the FAIR[9] principles (Wilkinson *et al.* 2016) ? Or could we draw upon other existing ontologies like FaBiO (the FRBR-aligned Bibliographic Ontology) for bibliographic data, or FOAF (Friend Of A Friend) for social and biographical connections ? This opposition between interoperability and descriptive precision is also at the heart of the discussions surrounding the establishment of a thesaurus and a controlled vocabulary to describe our data – and again, we are far from the first to confront these issues. As Natalia Wawrzyniak points out : "The difficulties in developing a thesaurus are due in particular to the tension between the need to universalize these classifications so that they can be used across databases, and the need to adapt them to the specific geographical and historical features of a given field" (Wawrzyniak 2024)[10]. These preoccupations are also at the heart of the ongoing conversion of the *CESAR* database to comply with Semantic Web standards : "This work raises both scientific questions (which fields are relevant for representing the information ?) and technical questions (which standard should be used ?), and therefore requires collective reflection by the various members of the project" (Douguet and Roulet 2024)[11].

As we soon understood, these were not merely technical issues, but epistemological ones. Metadata design is a form of theorization : to decide whether a performance or a play should be linked primarily to its author or its director, to its production date or its reception context, is to make an interpretive statement about what matters in the historical record. Ontology, in this context, becomes a form of historiography. We do not yet have any definitive answers to these questions, of course – but we hope to be able to take part in the discussions led in particular by the WG Theatralia, aiming to "initiate work on the creation of a computer model of knowledge and description related to the performing arts field [… and to develop] language models for describing and representing the performing arts"[12]

Legal and administrative considerations also surfaced early. As Anne-Madeleine Goulet (CNRS, *PerformArt*[13] wisely reminded us, building a digital platform today means confronting a range of rights management and compliance issues. Who holds the copyright for digitized archival material ? How do we ensure that our metadata complies with GDPR and French data protection laws ? Who owns the rights to collective translations, or even to the very architecture of our database ? Through consultations with university open science advisors, legal advisors, and data protection officers (DPOs), we began assembling a roadmap for data documentation and usage, including a clear Data Management Plan (DMP) – a crucial step toward ensuring transparency, ethical compliance, and sustainability.

[9] Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable.

[10] « Les difficultés de l'élaboration d'un thésaurus sont dues notamment à la tension entre la nécessité d'universaliser ces classifications pour pouvoir les utiliser entre les bases et le besoin de les adapter aux spécificités géographiques et historiques d'un champs donné. »

[11] « Ce travail pose des questions à la fois scientifiques (quels sont les champs pertinents pour représenter l'information ?) et techniques (quel standard utiliser ?), et suppose donc une réflexion collective des différents membres du projet. »

[12] See https://www.dariah.eu/activities/working-groups/theatralia/.

[13] See https://performart.huma-num.fr/)

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These encounters and exchanges, among many others[14], also helped reinforce a principle that is now at the core of our digital strategy : reuse rather than reinvent. Whenever possible, we rely on existing vocabularies, standards, and tools developed by others. We seek to draw upon the architectural principles of other projects like *CESAR*, *PerformArt*, or *Prethero* (Wawrzyniak 2024), integrating what we can and learning from what we don't understand ; and to follow the recent developments of projects like *Dramabase*, which aims to establish shared ontologies for theatrical performance data. The lesson is clear : while every digital humanities project has its own contours, "determined by the particular interests of researchers, and […] conditioned by their respective capacities (material, financial and human)" (Galleron 2017)[15], no one should have to start from zero. By learning from other initiatives – both successful and stalled – we hope to avoid repeating common mistakes and instead build upon foundations already laid. This does not guarantee success, of course, but it improves our odds. It also reinforces a broader ethos of mutualization and open science : sharing tools, standards, and experiences so that other researchers might, in turn, build on what we've done.

4 Sustainability as the Core Challenge

As the ACTiF project progressed from its conceptual phase into early technical planning, one concern increasingly structured our discussions : how to ensure the long-term sustainability of the database. The reality of many digital humanities projects is a structural mismatch between their long-term ambitions and their short-term, project-based funding. As Marine Roussillon and Christophe Schuwey bluntly put it : "The sustainability of digital tools and publications requires stable teams, at a time when the academic world is becoming increasingly precarious and unstable. […] How can we guarantee the long-term viability of digital achievements when funding and posts are precarious ?" (Roussillon and Schuwey 2020)[16]. ACTiF is no exception. Funded for four years by the ANR[17], it faces the same tension : we have set ourselves the objective of building a digital tool intended to last, evolve, and remain accessible far beyond the lifespan of the project, but without any guarantee of sustained financial, technical, and human support.

The first practical question we tackled was that of hosting. The most reliable solution identified was Huma-Num, a national infrastructure providing stable, secure, long-term hosting conditions for digital humanities projects in France – even though "one might wonder about Huma-Num's capacity to absorb the growing number of projects, in a context marked by a crying lack of staff" (Roussillon and Schuwey 2020)[18].

[14] We would also like to extend our thanks Patrice Terrier (Professor and Vice President for Digital Technology at UT2J), Hugues Samyn (Head of the Digital Department at the Joint Documentation Service at UT2J), Sara Tandar (Research engineer responsible for scientific data processing at Huma-Num) and Mylène Maignant (ENS Ulm, Data and AI Consultant at WENVISION).

[15] « […] déterminées par l'intérêt particulier des chercheurs, et sont conditionnées par les capacités (matérielles, financières et humaines) des uns et des autres. »

[16] « La pérennité des outils et des publications numériques exige des équipes stables, alors même que la précarisation et l'instabilité du monde académique s'accentuent. […] Comment garantir la pérennité des réalisations numériques quand les financements et les postes sont précaires ? »

[17] Agence Nationale de la Recherche.

[18] « On peut cependant s'interroger sur les capacités d'Huma-Num à absorber les projets qui se multiplient, dans un contexte marqué par le manque criant de personnel. »

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This was the choice made for the *CESAR* database, as well as for the *PerformArt* project. However, using Huma-Num is not without its constraints. On the one hand, opting for a simple, "vanilla" installation of Omeka S on the Virtual Machine provided by Huma-Num ensures low-maintenance stability, but drastically limits the options available for researchers ; on the other, adding customized modules or plug-ins – often needed to accommodate the specific needs of a project like ACTiF – can dramatically increase the work of versioning, testing, and upgrading. Each update to the core system risks breaking critical functionality, especially when modules are maintained by third parties or abandoned altogether.

Considering this, we committed ourselves to a principle of minimalism in design, prioritizing simplicity over sophistication. This means relying as much as possible on native Omeka S functionality, carefully assessing the necessity of each additional module, and resisting the temptation to over-engineer the platform in its early stages. This commitment also influenced our approach to training and skill development. Recognizing that we could not depend on external engineers beyond the duration of ANR funding and anticipating the challenges of maintaining the platform beyond that time, we made the decision to build internal capacity. Two members of the team[19] have begun training in Omeka S administration, as well as in managing databases using MySQL, to make sure that we will be able to maintain and update the database ourselves. We benefited from an introductory session led by Pierre Willaime and Anne Garcia-Fernandez[20], both members of AUFO[21] (Association des Usagers Francophones d'Omeka), which offers expert support in Omeka customization, Linux administration, and open-access tools. We aim to establish a long-term collaboration with this invaluable association.

The question of sustainability also intersects with that of rights management and data migration. Even if the platform were to become technically obsolete one day, the datasets it relies upon must remain preservable, extractable, and reusable in other environments. This is why we treat the database and the digital warehouse as two distinct but complementary entities : the warehouse (hosted *via* Nakala) will store raw, standardized files and metadata in open formats, while the database will function as an interpretive and exploratory interface. Should the Omeka S instance eventually be retired, the core data can still be retrieved, migrated, and redeployed in another framework. We also take care to document every step and every design decision taken in the development of this platform, in order to create distributed, maintainable knowledge within the project, and to ensure that future contributors (even those not yet imagined) can understand and build upon our work. In a field where digital tools are too often abandoned due to undocumented complexity, good documentation is in itself a sustainability strategy.

That being said, sustainability also depends on collective commitment and institutional embedding. A database's afterlife depends not just on its codebase, but on

[19] John S. Bak (Université de Lorraine) and Samuel Lhuillery (Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès).

[20] Anne Garcia-Fernandez is a CNRS research engineer in digital literary humanities. She is deputy director of the Litt&Arts joint research unit (UMR 5316), responsible for data processing and analysis, the design and development of data exploitation and visualisation tools. She is also head of the Digital Arts and Humanities (DAHU) platform.

[21] See https://omeka.fr/fr/

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whether anyone remains invested in its upkeep. In our case and as things currently stand, once the ANR funding comes to an end, the maintenance and updating of the database will rely entirely on the goodwill, time and energy of the most technically-inclined team members. This situation – where the long-term survival of the database may ultimately depend on the dedication of a few committed individuals – illustrates a deeper issue that extends beyond ACTiF : the vulnerability of digital research infrastructures when they are not collectively supported. Sustainability is not just a matter of stable hosting or code maintenance ; it also requires a shared investment in documentation, transparency, and long-term collaboration. In this light, the emphasis placed on sustainability in the early design of the ACTiF database is closely tied to a broader ethos of openness, reflexive practice, and scholarly humility.

5 Interface Design and Interoperability : A Community-Oriented Concern

Finally, as we begin to shift from conceptual modeling to interface design, a new set of questions emerges – no longer about what data to include, but about how it will be presented, structured, and made meaningful to others. The interface is not merely a technical surface : it deeply “conditions the way in which the data is apprehended and the operations that can be carried out : by linking the data and the users, it models research practices and the relationship between researchers and their subject” (Roussillon and Schuwey 2020)[22]. In this light, the design of the ACTiF platform becomes a future-oriented concern – shaping not only what the database does, but how researchers might engage with the histories it represents.

Our recent discussions and readings (see for example Masure 2017 and Schuwey 2019) have made us realize just how far from neutral the design of interfaces can be. The predefined fields and navigational paths they establish can guide discovery, but also constrain it : “The comfort of an interface is therefore, in a way, synonymous with a certain loss of freedom and inventiveness on the part of the researcher, who implicitly accepts that they will only be able to follow well-trodden paths, to the detriment of the byways they could devise” (Galleron 2017)[23]. To avoid this, ACTiF will strive for an interface that is easily navigable but open-ended, offering varied entry points (by person, place, date, institution, or keyword) and enabling users to chart their own trajectories through the data. This requires a delicate balance between usability and flexibility.

Yet the flexibility of the interface also depends on the robustness and interoperability of the data model beneath it. One of the major challenges we face moving forward is to ensure that ACTiF’s data can meaningfully converse with other initiatives – whether focused on American theatre, cultural transfers, or performance history more

[22] « L’interface conditionne la manière dont les données sont appréhendées et les opérations qui peuvent être réalisées : en mettant en relation les données et les utilisatrices et utilisateurs, elle modèle les pratiques de recherche et le rapport des chercheuses et des chercheurs à leur objet. »

[23] « Aussi le confort d’une interface est-il, d’une certaine façon, synonyme d’une certaine perte de liberté et d’inventivité du chercheur, qui accepte implicitement de parcourir seulement des sentiers balisés, au détriment des chemins de traverse qu’il pourrait construire. »

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broadly. The question is not just whether the data can be shared, but whether it can be understood in shared terms, as Ioana Galleron asks :

> But what about the possibility of compiling composite datasets, drawing on different resources for cross-disciplinary projects and curiosities that transcend the dividing lines often set by traditional historiography ? […] The data would still have to be comparable and freely accessible and downloadable, something that the Websites accompanying the initiatives do not always provide information on (Galleron 2017)[24].

Sharing raw data is undoubtedly a cornerstone of both technical sustainability and epistemic openness – but it is equally vital to reflect on the ways in which we describe what we share. The movement from *CESAR* to *Dramabase* reflects a growing awareness that standardized vocabularies and shared ontologies are indispensable if we hope to make our data discoverable, reusable, and meaningfully comparative in the context of the Semantic Web (Douguet and Roulet 2024). This is not a purely technical concern : it raises fundamental questions about what constitutes a "work," a "performance," or an "event" – concepts that remain contested even within a single scholarly field. Interoperability thus requires not just technological alignment but conceptual negotiation : collective, often time-consuming discussions across projects and disciplines about what categories mean, and what they leave out.

What all these concerns have in common – from interface design to ontology, from rights management to metadata granularity – is the need for shared practices, as Galleron put it : "even more than technical skills in the use of software and suites, what we lack is the gradual calibration of tools and methods that has taken place over time in the experimental sciences, and which humanists must now tackle in their turn" (Galleron 2017)[25]. She then concludes :

> We can familiarize ourselves with the manipulation of interfaces based on statistical knowledge, which "return" results and significant correlations to us "at the click of a button" […] but we only have our own communities, our own reference points for creating a discourse on "what this means" (Galleron 2017)[26].

It is in these communities – and in these shared efforts to define what digital theatre studies might become – that we place our trust and hope. Designing a sustainable and

[24] « Mais qu'en est-il de la possibilité de constituer des jeux de données composites, en piochant dans les différentes ressources en fonction de projets transversaux, de curiosités dépassant des lignes de clivage souvent fixées par l'historiographie traditionnelle ? […] Encore faudrait-il que les données soient comparables et librement accessibles, téléchargeables, un aspect sur lequel les sites Web qui accompagnent les initiatives ne donnent pas toujours d'information. »

[25] « […] plus encore que de compétences techniques, concernant l'utilisation des logiciels et des suites, on manque d'un étalonnage progressif des outils et des méthodes, qui s'est produit au fil du temps dans les sciences expérimentales, et auquel les humanistes doivent s'atteler à leur tour. »

[26] « […] on peut se familiariser avec la manipulation d'interfaces reposant sur des savoirs statistiques, qui nous "retournent", "en un clic", des résultats et des corrélations significatives, […] mais on n'a que nos propres communautés, que nos propres repères pour créer un discours sur "ce que cela veut dire" […] ».

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usable database is not simply a technical undertaking ; it is a collective, situated, and deeply human endeavor. It demands time, humility, and sustained attention to the needs of others – not just those within our project, but future users, collaborators, and critics. Although we are still in the early stages of developing the ACTiF database, we have already measured how essential it is to rely on an open and generous scholarly community in order to move beyond “individual tinkering” toward durable, shared practices – and we would like to reiterate our sincere thanks to all the individuals and institutions whose support continues to shape this journey.

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