

Introducing Issues in Humanities Computing

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Abstract

This is the introduction to the inaugural issues of *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, on “Issues in Humanities Computing”.

The feature we are introducing in this inaugural issue of *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, called “Issues in Humanities Computing”, is one end of a road that began forty-five years ago in the old Reading Room of the British Museum. (The other end of that road is the *Encyclopedia of Humanities and Social Science Computing*, which I am organizing with Vernon Burton under the auspices of the National Center for Supercomputer Applications at the University of Illinois and scheduled to be published by Idea Group in 2008.) My immediate impetus to consider computers as a means of solving a scholarly problem was the difficulty I experienced in locating the significant echoes of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* that Shelley had embedded in his *Prometheus Unbound* in order to enhance its resonance as a master statement of poetic truth. Once back at Queens College, the quest for assistance from computers led to the IBM Watson Laboratories in Yorktown Heights, New York, where the language group, relieved of responsibility for creating machine translation but not formally dismissed, created for me a crude mechanism for locating some of those echoes.

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That initial effort was reported in September 1964 at what was probably the first conference on computers and humanities research, the so-called Literary Data Processing Conference organized by Harry Arader of IBM and chaired by Stephen M. Parrish of Cornell and Jess B. Bessinger of NYU. Among the other speakers, Roberto Busa expatiated on the problems of managing 15 million words for his magnum opus on Thomas Aquinas. Parrish and Bessinger, along with the majority of other speakers, reported on their efforts to generate concordances with the primitive data processing machines available at that time. In light of the current number of projects to digitize literary works it is ironic to recall Martin Kay’s plea to the audience not to abandon their punch cards and magnetic tapes after their concordances were printed and (hopefully) published.

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My discovery of the number of scholars from around the country who were engaged to some extent in using computers for humanistic research inspired the thought that we should keep in touch with one another, and after two years I persuaded IBM to fund what at first I called *Computers and the Humanities: A Newsletter*. Even after original articles started to come in and this publication was exalted to the status of a scholarly journal, it maintained as a primary function the exchange of information in this new and perilous environment. I have been told that our biennial “Directory of Scholars Active”, later compiled into a book published by Pergamon Press, helped many recent initiates into humanities computing to find their footing and locate collaborators. Even more satisfying was the knowledge that several young assistant professors, coming up for tenure, succeeded in retaining their grip on an academic career by publishing in the pages of CHum. An offprint on the chairman’s desk or the dean’s, looking as dignified as one from any of the older established journals, reportedly had the weight to outbalance the strangeness of the activity that had attracted these young persons.

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By 1975, Bob Dilligan of the University of Southern California, co-editor of a Keats concordance, offered to organize a conference as a sequel to one held two years previously at the University of Minnesota, and being there on sabbatical, I helped with that effort. That involvement led, in turn to my participating in the organization of similar conferences at Dartmouth and Rutgers. Sensing a need to broaden our view of humanities computing and recognizing the growth of

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databases as a resource in their own right (rather than as simply the raw material of concordances), I began a series of International Conferences on Data Bases in the Humanities and Social Sciences at Dartmouth, Grinnell and Auburn at Montgomery. The growing number of attendees at these conferences seemed to require a permanent organization to sponsor them, and in 1978 I convened the session at the annual MLA meeting that created the Association for Computers and the Humanities. After two years as president, I turned that operation over to Mary Dee Harris and then Nancy Ide, so that younger people could gain whatever academic credit they could through that position and so that the operation would have an independent stature.

When New York suffered its financial crisis in 1974, and it was no longer possible to publish under the aegis of Queens College, I entrusted the journal to two commercial publishers, neither of which saw much importance in either humanities or humanities computing and treated this publication with consequent lack of concern. In 1984, therefore, I took early retirement and set up my own small publishing operation in Sarasota, Florida. I was thus able to publish several collections of essays on databases in the humanities and social sciences and to start up two new journals, *Computers and the Social Sciences* (later combined with the *Social Science Computing Record*) and *Computers and Translation* (renamed *Machine Translation* and published now by Springer). Like so many small businesses, this one proved less than financially viable, and by 1987, I had sold off the various titles and returned to my more congenial academic environment.

In this situation I am now able to concentrate on the encyclopedia project and the “op-ed” page of DHQ. It is our hope that this feature will provide a forum for discussion of the larger issues that confront us as we continue our effort to bring computer technology up to what we consider its proper status in academe and scholarly activity. The initial offering is my own take on the problem of achieving the same respect for online publishing that is held now by print. My hope is to set a tone of serious reflection that will be adopted by those who submit future contributions to this section of the journal.

Rather than brief comments, we are hoping for thought-out and substantially developed opinions on all the aspects of our developing discipline. Responses to these discussions are equally welcome and will be tagged to establish a continuous flow along evolving threads. Of course, publication will depend on the approval of the Editorial Board. A few possible topics are suggested below, but we hope these will prompt contributions on a much wider range of issues and questions.

- Can software development, rather than conventional research, serve as a step up the promotion ladder?
- Are there better ways to organize our information than the current search programs provide?
- How do we confront the trend toward English as a universal scholarly language in the face of objections, such as those from France? How far need we go in accommodating other world languages — Spanish, Russian, Chinese?
- How concerned should we be about the consequence of Web accessibility undermining the status of major research centers in or near metropolitan cities?
- Has the availability of the Internet as a scholarly medium enhanced the academic status of women and minorities?
- Will humanists' dependence on computer-generated data lead to a scientific search for objective and reproducible results?
- Can we learn anything about today's resistance to new technologies from studying the reactions in the Renaissance to the introduction of printing?
- Will digital libraries make today's libraries obsolete?
- Are the concepts and development of artificial intelligence relevant to humanistic scholarship?



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