

Introduction

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Abstract

This is the introduction to the issue of *DHQ* that grew out of the October 2006 Digital Textual Studies: Past, Present and Future Symposium held at Texas A&M University.

This issue of *DHQ* grew out of the October 2006 Digital Textual Studies: Past, Present and Future Symposium held at Texas A&M University. The symposium brought together pioneers in the field and emergent scholars, who, through a series of talks and an evening poster session, responded to our charge to address the current state of the field and to muse on important issues that continue to challenge digital textual scholarly work. As Peter Robinson recalls, “This was an opportunity to refresh the community, and to consider, collectively, where we are and where we are going.” The symposium was invigorating and exciting, the more so because of ample opportunities for broad and wide-ranging discussions among participants and attendees. At the close of the symposium our focus on the future of digital textual scholarship took a more immediate and practical turn as we considered how best to bring our discussions to the broader digital humanities community. The then-new journal *DHQ* presented an ideal venue through which we could provide a more dynamic view of the energy and ideas generated at the symposium by inclusion of the full range of presented materials: both the invited speakers’ formal essays and the more informal posters.

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A keynote talk by Jerome McGann, though not reprinted here, helped to frame the symposium’s central concerns, situating our particular moment within the rich, if still surprisingly recent, history of digital innovation in the world of textual and hypertextual studies. Much of what has happened in the field of digital textual studies has happened in localized environments, supported by innovators like McGann who took advantage of reputations developed in print work to advocate for digital work, convincing recalcitrant disciplines and colleagues to support and accept experimentation in the digital, and urging us to see the necessity of continued engagement on the part of humanities scholars in the remediation of our cultural heritage. The development of digital humanities centers and working groups has helped to provide infrastructure to nurture work that often resists standard modes of humanities scholarship. In retrospect, even the largest of scholarly digital projects, produced independent of publishers and in collaboration across multiple disciplines, still seem to represent a space that is not only quantitatively but qualitatively distinct from the projects such as Carnegie Mellon’s Universal Digital Library, which aims “to capture all books in digital format” (<http://www.ulib.org/ULIBAboutUs.htm#visionBkMark>). Our attention is increasingly drawn to questions of scale, of what humanities scholars might do, or do differently, with a million (or a few million) books, rather than to questions about how to define, implement, support, and engage with more focused collections whose value lies in careful management of the details of remediation. These questions, expressed both in practical and theoretical terms, remain central to the work of digital textual scholars, but it would be a mistake to assume that they are not equally relevant to mass digitization or to the myriad commercial full text databases that try to offer the best of both worlds through some measure of focused selection, technological transparency, and scholarly oversight.

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In considering the various “ends” – understood not only as aims or goals, but also in terms of shifts in editorial methods, concepts, and media – that have reshaped the field, Peter Robinson traces the emergence of digital editing from the larger field of textual studies, establishing a history of the conflicts of theory and practice within the digital environment and pointing to the continuing challenges that digital work presents for humanists who embark on a digital scholarly

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edition. Editorial work, especially digital editorial work, is both labor intensive and dependent upon access to expertise and resources that are often scarce or unsuited to the needs of humanities scholars. Specifically, in the absence of easily mastered digital tools, humanists have depended upon access to “technical experts” in order to carry out their work – a “broken model” that has restricted the development of digital editing to a few scholars at a few institutions that can provide the level and continuity of technical expertise that this work requires. Robinson calls for freely available texts and robust digital tools that empower humanities scholars to engage in digital work, and allow for collaborative textual scholarship.

Focusing on the specific technological and institutional concerns presented by digital imaging, Morris Eaves traces the history of the incorporation of images into digital materials through his work with the *Blake Archive*. As Eaves observes, our everyday and scholarly lives increasingly unfold within a “sea of images, most of them digitized”; it is now impossible to imagine textual scholarship without high-quality images, yet digital images present a variety of challenges for digital projects. Intellectual property restrictions complicate the acquisition of images for open access electronic projects, while technological concerns include the particularly knotty question of the outdated jpeg format, as well as the problems of appropriately attaching metadata and search terms to images, and maintaining image quality in the face of another sea of “image robbers: service providers, operating systems, browsers, video cards, display settings, displays, and the user’s own highly variable eyes and brain.” Eaves, like Robinson, recognizes the need for further development of technologies that support digital textual scholarship, a problem made more complicated by the degree to which “[i]n technical areas we are, much of the time, pathetically dependent on the expertise of others whose investments are elsewhere.” Compromise remains a practical editorial necessity.

In Kenneth Price’s discussion of naming, the shifting technical boundaries of digital work are mirrored by the shifting vocabularies with which we attempt to define and explain that work. As Price argues, terminology matters: “The shorthand we invoke when explaining our work to others shapes how we conceive of and also how we position digital scholarship.” Interestingly, Price discovers that the technological limits that emerge in this context have to do not so much with digital tools but with framing mechanisms that derive from the technologies of print. Drawing examples from the *Whitman Archive* and other digital projects, Price considers whether our reliance on terms from print might curtail the possibilities of the digital, weighing the implications of using terms such as *edition*, *project*, *database*, *archive* and *thematic research collection* to describe text-based electronic scholarship. He suggests that we should adopt a new term to represent the possibilities for exploration within the new environment and proposes *arsenal* as a term that conceptualizes our common and collaborative endeavors and reflects the ways in which humanities scholars are repurposing commercial and (in the case of the Internet) military technological tools to serve our own needs and purposes.

Like Peter Robinson, Peter Shillingsburg acknowledges the need for better digital tools and a collaborative editorial environment, and advocates making digital editions and archives more accessible and “convenient” for readers and editors. But Shillingsburg offers a cautionary approach to digital editing, arguing that to date, the model for most digital humanities projects has been to solve problems in ways that are “local, limited, proprietary, and/or inapplicable to the problems of others.” Shillingsburg imagines a future in which “instead of having electronic editions conceived, constructed, and completed by an editor and published like books to sit neglected on the shelf, electronic textual scholarship will occupy a communal space where the intellectual work of the future will be built on the textual foundations laid down electronically by the present generation,” and proposes the creation of a centralized editing space for communal work to create holistic projects.

Julia Flanders’s essay reminds us that the lack of appropriate tools for digital humanities research exists alongside an unprecedented technological abundance that has shaped the way we think about digital scholarship. Noting the ubiquity and unprecedented capacity of computers --quickly becoming “not a specialized tool but part of the tissue of the world,” -- as well as the successful development of specialized tools such as XML text encoding, Flanders recognizes that while the digital humanities often participate a generalized narrative of technological progressivism, resistance to that narrative produces an “unease” that constitutes a productive force for critical inquiry. These disruptions in our understanding of the significance of medium, of the institutional structures and scholarly protocols that shape our work, of representation and scale, promise to give us new ways to think about our world.

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The posters included in this issue shift our attention away from the history, theory, and intellectual positioning of digital textual studies to speak instead to the engagement of textual studies with emergent trends in digital humanities, including mapping, visualization, recovery and more. For example, a number of posters suggest how digital “add-ons” might benefit the more static representations of manuscripts, such as Olin Bjork’s audio and annotation program attached to *Paradise Lost*, Eugene Lyman’s Elwood viewer, or the representation of Quixote Iconography under development by Eduardo Urbina, Richard Furuta, and Steven E. Smith. Mapping is used for innovative purposes in Amy Roundtree’s rhetorical and ethical analysis of Hurricane Katrina, while Amy Earhart experiments with Google map hacks to develop an interface for literary materials. Wesley Raabe and Laura Mandell’s poster suggests that the digital is a way to correct and recover literary texts. Raabe’s work with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* deconstructs the myth of the flawed digital text, demonstrating that the electronic version of the text is the most accurate available for scholarly use, while Mandell’s poster demonstrates the creation of the Poetess archive, a digital project that recovers the crossnational history of women’s popular poetry.

While some of the poster participants are attached to major digital humanities centers, such as IATH, a surprising number of poster participants are working on small scale projects at institutions that have little institutional structures to support digital humanities work. While we praise the work occurring in the multiple areas, it does serve as a note of caution that the institutional frameworks to fully support this work have not kept pace with the rapid emergence of this developing field. Still, much has changed since 2006: the National Endowment for the Humanities now sponsors an Office of Digital Humanities, and a growing number of foundational documents, such as the final report of the ACLS Commission on Cyberinfrastructure in the Humanities and Social Sciences released in Fall 2006, and the Council on Library and Information Resources’ *A Survey of Digital Humanities Centers in the United States* (November 2008), point to an encouraging level of attention, and of focused discussion, of support needs within, across, and beyond institutional boundaries. We present these essays and posters in recognition that the past is indeed prologue to a bright, yet unpredictable, digital future. And we call for continued exploration into this future, asking as does Peter Robinson, “We are moving, certainly: but where are we moving? Do we know where we want to go, and how we are going to get there? And where, exactly, are we heading?”

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