

Postmodern Culture and More: an Oral History Conversation between John Unsworth and Anne Welsh

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Abstract

John Unsworth recounts that he first became involved with computing in the Humanities c. 1989 as a new faculty member at North Carolina State University where he was hired to teach post-World War II American literature. He and his colleagues wanted to set up a new journal as only one other journal existed in that area. They were introduced to the recently released LISTSERV software and the first issue of the journal was circulated on email lists and bulletin boards. It was called *Postmodern Culture* and twenty-two years later is still published by Johns Hopkins University Press. It was the first peer-reviewed electronic journal in the Humanities; nevertheless, not all senior colleagues were in favour of it and, as a junior faculty member, his participation in it. He recounts that was not able to avail of formal training in computing but he did have technical knowledge of computing, mostly picked up while procrastinating on this PhD. By the early 1990s he was reading Humanist and attending conferences that focused on electronic journals where he encountered a range of academic and non-academic projects. In 1993 he moved to the University of Virginia where he directed the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities (IATH). He reflects on the wide range of people and projects that he worked with and that it was around this time that he became involved with the community now known as digital humanities. He reflects in detail on the first digital humanities conference he attended in Paris in 1994 and concludes by discussing some of the changes that the advent of the Web has heralded.

Preamble

Dr John Unsworth is Vice-Provost for Library and Technology Services and Chief Information Officer at Brandeis University. From 2003-2012 he was Dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. In addition to being a Professor in GSLIS, at Illinois he also held appointments in the department of English and on the Library faculty; also, from 2008 to 2011, he served as Director of the Illinois Informatics Institute. From 1993-2003, he served as the first Director of the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, and a faculty member in the English Department, at the University of Virginia. For his work at IATH, he received the 2005 Richard W. Lyman Award from the National Humanities Center. His first faculty appointment was in English, at North Carolina State University, from 1989 to 1993. He attended Princeton University and Amherst College as an undergraduate, graduating from Amherst in 1981. He received a Master's degree in English from Boston University in 1982 and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Virginia in 1988. In 1990, at NCSU, he co-founded the first peer-reviewed electronic journal in the humanities, *Postmodern Culture* (now published by Johns Hopkins University Press, as part of Project Muse). He also organized, incorporated, and chaired the Text Encoding Initiative Consortium, co-chaired the Modern Language Association's Committee on Scholarly Editions, and served as President of the Association for Computers and the Humanities and later as chair of the steering committee for the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, as well as serving on many other editorial and advisory boards. More information is available at <http://www3.isrl.uiuc.edu/~unsworth/>.

At various stages in this interview Unsworth reflects on the changing shape of the field of digital humanities, along with his initial impressions of it. For example, he recalls the segregation that he observed between English and French-speaking sessions at the first Digital Humanities conference that he attended in Paris (ALLC-ACH 1994). Further, while he found those at the conference to be friendly he also had the sense that the community already knew each other and had developed a set of mores and codes, albeit for the most part unspoken. In order to categorise the way he feels that the community has changed and developed over the past years he chooses the interesting metaphor of a spiral staircase: “you pass the same point but at different levels over time, so the community gets bigger and there are moments when it seems more homogeneous and then there are other moments where it seems to be opening up”.

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Click for the accompanying audio interview.

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Interview

Anne Welsh	Could you tell us a little bit about how you first got involved in what we now think of as digital humanities? And what was then Computing in the Humanities?
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John Unsworth	<p>So, the first step in that direction was not really intentional. I was a new faculty member at North Carolina State University, and I'd been hired to teach post-World War II American literature. There weren't really many journals, academic journals, in that area, there was just one actually, called <i>Boundary II</i>, and so with a couple of friends, one was a friend from graduate school, who also ended up on the same faculty a year later, we decided to start a journal in that area. NC State was in a budget crisis, public higher education always is as far as I can tell, so there was no money for printing and there was no money for mailing. So, we consulted with a university librarian, a woman named Susan Nutter, who I think is still head of the libraries at NC State, she introduced us to people in the Campus Computing Organization, who introduced us to some brand new software that had just come out, called LISTSERV. This was in 1990, and actually probably '89, and so we put together the first issue that we circulated on email lists and bulletin boards and stuff [as well as] Information about the journal. We solicited contributions. We actually then went out and recruited contributions from people who had nothing to lose professionally by publishing in a new journal in a new medium. And we had quite a good line up in the first issue and there was no mark up, you know we could have distributed files in a word processing format but we wanted to have them be broadly accessible, so we didn't want to limit our audience to people who used a certain kind of hardware or software.</p>
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	<p>So, we just distributed the articles in plain text, one article per message, we were actually very doctrinaire about formatting though, we maintained a sixty-five character line because in sixty five characters in Courier ten point, you could print out on an eight and a half by eleven page and the lines would break correctly. And we had two spaces after every period, so you could distinguish between sentences and ellipses, which only have one period, one space, and so on. And our big innovation was we numbered paragraphs, actually, because we wanted people to be able to cite this, but there wouldn't be page numbers, or the page numbers wouldn't necessarily be consistent. So we mailed the first issue out, all ten articles, we had a popular culture column, and we even had some ad exchanges with print journals and pretty much that crashed everybody's mailbox, who got the first issue of the journal because nobody had any capacity at all in their mailbox and to get, you know, like a journal's worth of text, even though it's just plain text made — you know, their mailboxes were essentially inaccessible to them until they contacted their campus computing people and said “Help, my journal has crashed my mailbox.” So after that, we just sent out the table of contents with instructions for people on how to retrieve articles from LISTSERV and then later when FTP came along, we put it up for FTP and</p>
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when Gopher came along and gave you a menu for FTP, we put it up on Gopher and when the web came along, we put the back issues up on the web and I think our first issue that was designed for the web was in January 1994. And it actually proved to be very useful that we had been doctrinaire about formatting 'cause we could write shell scripts to go back and mark up the back issues. So that was a good thing. I didn't mean to get into electronic publishing, it was sort of fiscal necessity and also being at a technical university, where there were people around who were interested in this kind of experimentation but it was *Postmodern Culture*, still published by *The John Hopkins University Press*, it's in its twenty-second year now, I think, currently edited by my brother-in-law and it was the first peer-reviewed electronic journal in the Humanities.

Welsh Wow, that's amazing. How much technical knowledge did you have yourself at the point when you were starting off?

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Unsworth Not that much, certainly no formal training. Most of my technical knowledge came from procrastinating in the course of writing my dissertation. So, I wrote it on a word processor — Sanyo CPM machine with WordStar — and I learned a little bit of BASIC, I would go in and edit the compiled code to change the messages on my splash screen. We're talking about ways to waste time instead of writing your dissertation.

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Welsh That sounds entirely sensible to me.

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Unsworth And I had started using email as a graduate student at Virginia and there weren't a lot of people to exchange email with, but that was kind of interesting.

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Welsh And culturally? What you're saying really chimes there, I can remember email coming in and just how amazing it was, but culturally, did you feel that you were ahead of a curve or were you just really focused on getting this product out or what was the kind of attitude to the whole computer side of things, can you remember how you felt about it? Was it "oh this is really exciting" or-?

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Unsworth Yeah, I thought it was interesting and it was pretty clearly against the advice that any sensible senior person would have given me, I mean beginning with editing a journal as a junior faculty member cause that's service, not research and putting your time into editing a journal that didn't get printed ... [A senior faculty member] at NC State, at one point this guy took me aside and told me, I won't name any names, told me it was inappropriate for a junior faculty member to be running a peer-review process in which we passed judgement on our seniors in the profession...

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Welsh Completely different culture ...

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Unsworth I said "thank you very much for that perspective." But we were convinced that just for financial reasons, that all academic journal publishing would quickly follow suit and five years on the outside, all academic journals were going to be electronic.

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Welsh That was the year of the paperless office — everything was going to be electronic. So in terms of meeting other people, you said that on your campus because it was very tech-focused you'd met a lot of people who were good technically. So in terms of meeting other people, maybe off-campus, who were using computing in the Humanities, do you

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remember your first encounters of that kind?

Unsworth

Well, mostly in that period from '90 to about '93, when I was at NC State, most of the people that I was meeting were in conferences organized by libraries and focused on electronic journals. And, you know, I was reading things in *Humanist* also, but the people that I was meeting at conferences were pretty much other people involved in doing electronic journals in an academic context and that was a very small and heterogeneous group of people. We had a guy who had a journal in hospitality research, there was Paul Ginsberg from the High Energy Physics Archive Project — I think he still works on that, Stevan Harnad was at some of these conferences and people from completely different disciplinary backgrounds, who, you know, the only thing they had in common was that they were trying to do electronic publishing, electronic scholarly publishing. And they had very different ideas about, you know, what was the best business model and should you charge for it, or should it be free. I remember the guy from the hospitality research, he was adamantly opposed to what we didn't then call open access but publishing things for free, he was like, "people only value what they pay for; you gotta charge for it."

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Welsh

Old school. One of the things that we have noticed as younger scholars in the field, is that when people talk about that particular era, it seems like this kind of heterogeneity was a lot more prevalent. Recently, there seems to be move towards trying to open up and become more heterogeneous, but we're not sure whether that observation on our part is myopic and restricted to just standing where we are and looking back at something we don't know. So, how do you feel about the field and with regard to that, how it's developed. This idea of the randomness, brought together by a need for the particular technology that you were just describing.

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Unsworth

I think you still see that around emerging technologies. So, people will pick up some new technology, and people who have very different disciplinary backgrounds, if you look at it in the post-recession what people are doing with text mining now, these people would never meet at any other conference, because the content that they're working with is extremely different, but they meet here, because there is a shared interest in the method. I think the digital humanities community as a whole goes through phases of consolidation and diversification. You're not circling, [it's] more like a spiral staircase: you pass the same point but at different levels over time, so the community gets bigger and there are moments when it seems more homogeneous and then there are other moments where it seems to be opening up. One of the problems that we have right now is that there is more ... we have a conference format that can't accommodate all of the interested people we have in participating, so there is a lot of pressure right now to open things up.

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Welsh

Yeah, that makes sense, it's a cyclical thing, it's a perspective you can only have when you've been in any field for a long time really. It's quite interesting. One thing I'm interested in, or that we're both interested in really, is the other people who were around at the time and in terms of your own research, who you would look back to or look up to and think "I want to adopt their methods", or has everything that you've done been along the same model that you mentioned: you had something that you wanted to do, you found a tool that could do it and developed your career along that way?

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Unsworth

Well, in 1993, I moved from North Carolina State to University of Virginia, and that was a much broader job. I was also in the English department, and on a tenure track, so I had four years in rank at that point at NC State, but I got hired to direct the Institute for

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Advanced Technology in the Humanities at Virginia, much to their surprise, I have to say, I'm not sure they meant to hire me, they just, everybody else pissed somebody off and I was the last one standing, so they said well, give that one a try. And there, you know, I worked with Jerry McGann, I worked with Ed Ayers, I worked with Thorny Staples, who now works for Fedora Commons/Duraspace Group. I worked with a bunch of faculty at Virginia and at other places who were early adopters, the people from the Whitman Archive over here, that project started at the institute, the Blake Archive Project started at the institute, Jerry's Rossetti archive, the Whitman in the Emily Dickinson project that Martha Nell Smith runs. There's a myth actually that it was a sort of spin off in some ways of the institute as was the centre of Nebraska. I worked with a lot of great students: Matt Kirschenbaum was a PhD advisee; Steve Ramsay was a student in the English department and an employee at the institute, when he was a graduate student; Amanda French was there; there's just tons of, you know there is a real sort of Virginia diaspora from that place and that moment, where you can trace people who are now all over the field who were there as faculty fellows or were there as graduate students. So, that was a real opening up in terms of projects and topics and disciplines and methods and for me it was great. My interests are in scholarly communication ultimately, so that was the best lab you can imagine — all these people many of whom had a long history doing book scholarship figuring out how to sort of reinvent that, you know in an electronic form a lot of their projects were electronic textual editing projects, they ended up. For a chunk of that time I was chair of the Modern Language Association's Committee on Scholarly Editions. We produced a book that they still sell called *Electronic Textual Editing* which was to bring the kind of principals of scholarly editing that the CSE represented together with text encoding principles from the TEI to give people fairly practical guidance actually about how to do electronic scholarly editing. We re-did the guidelines for the CSE so that they would be able to review electronic editions, which they did, they reviewed the Blake Archive and gave it high marks, so that was just you know from 1994 to 2004, when I was at Virginia, that was a real opening up into a much broader world of people, that's when I started coming to this conference actually, in 1994, it was my first, in Paris. So, that's, you know, when I took that job and a broader horizon opened up. That's when I really became involved in this community.

Welsh

And how did you find the community when you first encountered it? Because going to any new conferences can be quite daunting; so how did you find it when you arrived on to this international scene?

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Unsworth

It was a small conference, it was pretty friendly but there was also the sense that, you know, there were a lot of people here who knew each other quite well, and had a sort of established value system, that wasn't necessarily obvious. So, some of the early experiences was, you know, I'm not sure if I'd just stepped in something. Maybe I did. So, there was a little bit of that, which is inevitable, I think. But it certainly wasn't an unfriendly place. The first conference was a little weird. It was half in French and half in English, it was strictly segregated, you know, the French sessions and the sessions in English. We had just set up a web server, which was big deal in 1994, and we set it up for these projects that we were going to do in Virginia, it was a sort of decision. When I got there actually, they thought they were going to build the scholars' workbench, and I had been working with the web at NC State, a little bit before coming to Virginia, I said "no, no, the point is communication and a hermetically sealed software environment is not, no matter how good it is, is not what you want. People, scholars, want to communicate with each other, and the way they are going to do that is through the web. So we should put our

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efforts on finding durable ways to do things, because the web is going to change really quickly, but we need to translate things for the web and that needs to be the medium of distribution. ” So, we'd set up a webserver, we had a Unix laptop, an IBM Unix laptop, which probably weighed about thirty-five pounds, I don't know, it probably wasn't even a one GB driver, probably five hundred megabytes, but that was huge, and it ran all the software for the website right on there, so you could just address the website from localhost, and we kept communicating with the people at the Sorbonne, “we want to bring this over, we want do a demo as part of our session, show the website”. We didn't actually start with the laptop idea, the first question was, does the Sorbonne have a network jack, like can we get on a network and show this at home, and the guy at the other end would write back saying “the Sorbonne, she is an old lady.” We'd write back and said, “Does the old lady have a network jack?” Eventually it became clear that the old lady did not have a network jack, so we put together this laptop and said, “OK, we want an overhead projector. Can we get an overhead projector?” He said, “Yes, you can get an overhead projector.” So, we lugged this thing through airport security, they were very interested, we had to take the external hard drive apart and show them that it wasn't a bomb, and we got it all the way to Paris, set it up in the room, and out comes ... we had an LCD panel, remember those? That you'd put on an overhead projector, and that was just like a see-through LCD screen, and it would display, you know, it was before they had data projectors, so the LCD panel that sat on an overhead projector, the light shines through and then you get an image through the overhead projector of what was going on on the screen. So, this was what we had and they brought out their overhead projector and it was an opaque projector, which is completely useless, from this point of view, cause an opaque projector just bounces light down and back up off the thing, it doesn't project through the bottom. So opaque projectors are what you use if you have a piece of paper and you want to write on it and have people see what you're writing. It's not orientated for transparencies. So, we looked at that, and we put everything away, got the marker out, and went to the whiteboard instead and said, “See, this is what a webserver is like.” We started drawing things. So, the whole conference experience was a little strange, but it was Paris, and I do think part of the appeal of this conference is that it happens in interesting places, and so I clued into that pretty early. It took me a while to understand the importance of the social programme of this conference, you should always attend but then every year since going, I've hosted it twice ...

Welsh

Thinking outside academia, can you tell us a little bit about how you think the general public perceived the computer in the era that you were working in — because you're moving from the eighties right through to the mid-nineties in the projects that you've been talking about today. So, was there any kind of perception there? It's really the era of the birth of the web, isn't it?

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Unsworth

Right, the computer was a sort of specialized piece of office or research equipment for the early part of that time, not that — it wasn't that uncommon, I mean, the computer that I had was a hand-me-down from my Dad and I also had another hand-me-down of his, it was a little TRS-80 that kept its data on a cassette recorder and ran basic programmes. So, you know, people had these things but they were usually only people in sort of academic or business settings who would think of having them at home really, because they had them at work. And there was the web. In 1994 really, is when people started talking about the web in the New York Times and suddenly, then very rapidly [it] became something that was for everybody, and that was a huge game changer for academic computing because we would never have had the same impact on our colleagues as that did, because that swept

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up everybody. And also, because the information resources that it presented were so large and so varied, not right away, but even at the beginning they were various enough to be interesting. But the skill was really different at the beginning, and when the first graphical web browsers came out, when Mosaic first came out it had a what's cool list built into it, it was like a bookmarks list that was built into it, and *Postmodern Culture* was on that list, because there were so few cool things that we were on it.

Welsh	Coming back to what you initially said about distributing through LISTSERV and how that made it more available, I mean, I guess that opens up the whole question about email and what the state of play was with email in that period, how many people actually had an email account?	25
Unsworth	By the mid-nineties, most people on university campuses had email, at least the universities that I dealt with, but it was not really until the web swept everybody up that it was common to have, you know, for your grandmother to have an email account. But people had email at home, people had AOL, [...] there were bulletin boards and chat rooms and other kind of things. I belonged to one of the first network discussion groups that I found was called tattoo, and it was on body modification and I subscribed to it, because it was like the only thing out there, and I was like "I wanna see how this works". So I learned a lot about body modification and discussion groups. And they were very active.	26
Welsh	It must have been a very different environment. Nowadays, we talk an awful lot on campuses about public engagement and the independent scholar and the scholar outside the walls of the campus and back then, the electronic thing was quite gated in a way?	27
Unsworth	Well, the universities ran it and it wasn't privatized until the early nineties. So, it really was-, there was initially, you know, a military and research network, then an academic network, and then a public network.	28
Welsh	A huge change to have lived through, really.	29
Unsworth	I remember BITNET!	30
Welsh	I think that's really good as the first interview. I want to thank you ever so much and shut the recording down at that point.	31



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