Theory and Practise in Literary Textual Analysis Tools

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Panel Description

Through discussion of several exemplary literary textual analysis tools, participants on this panel explore elements of the literary studies community’s reaction to textual analysis computer tool development -- and, particularly, how theorists perceive the development of tools as an activity that supports, tests, models, and expands upon their work. Panel contributors challenge the oft-perceived disparity between the ‘lower’ criticism (enumerative, bibliographic, re-presentative, &c.) in which most computing tools that we use have their origins and the ‘higher’ criticism often associated with thematically-oriented literary critical theory.

Geoffrey Rockwell, McMaster U (presenter)
Matt Jockers, Stanford U (presenter)
Susan Schreibman, U Maryland (presenter)
Ray Siemens, U Victoria (chair and respondent)

Interrupting the Machine to Think About It

Geoffrey Rockwell

"A machine may be defined as a system of interruptions or breaks (coupures)... Every machine, in the first place, is related to a continual material flow (hylè) that it cuts into." (Deleuze and Guattari 36)

Text analysis tools (and for that matter any form of analysis) perform two types of operations. They interrupt the flow of continuous analog information in order to break it down into samples that can be quantified and then they synthesize new eruptions out of the samples. Even the representation of a text in digital form is a matter of machined sampling and quantitative representation whether you chose to represent a printed page as pixels or characters.

This interrupting and breaking down is a process that constrains what computer-based tools can do and that is the first point of this paper. The sampling and quantization also makes it possible to develop synthetic processes that create new hybrid artefacts like text visualizations or sonoric representations, the second point of this paper.

Finally, the breaking down (and not the transparent functioning) is the (error) message of the textual machine. We know the machine when it fails, when it is in error, and when it delivers monstrous results. To stand back and look at a machine, as opposed to looking through it, is to think through ambitious failure.

Such a thinking through a computer is pragmatic theorizing in a tradition of thinking while tinkering - a thinking often provoked by what is at hand. What is proposed is a theory of computer assisted text analysis that addresses the way such ruptures stress interpretation. Development happens in rupture, both the programming development that scripts computers and the performance of thinking (about machines and texts) called developing a theory.

In the meantime, The Bug that mocks us and interrupts our demonstrations is also what provokes reflection and adaptation. We wouldn't want it any other way, except at the moment of machined interruption, for which reason a demonstration of TAPoRware text analysis tools will interrupt this paper.

Bibliography


Visualizing the Hypothetical, Encoding the Argument

Susan Schreibman

The *Versioning Machine (VM)* <http://www.mith2.umd.edu/products/ver-mach> was launched at ACH/ALLC 2002 as a tool to display multiple witnesses of deeply encoded text. It was designed as a presentation tool so that editors could engage with the challenging work of textual editing, rather than becoming experts in other technologies, such as XSLT, JavaScript and CSS, all components of the *Versioning Machine.* The application allows encoders who utilize the *Text Encoding
Initiative’s Parallel Segmentation method of encoding to view their documents through a browser-based interface which parses
the text into its constituent documents (at present the VM works
best with Internet Explorer 6.0 and higher, but it also works
with Firefox for PC and Mac). The Versioning Machine also
provides several features for the end user to engage with texts,
including highlighting a structural unit (paragraphs, lines, or
divs) across the witness set, synchronized scrolling, and the
ability to display a robust typology of notes.

The TET’s Critical Apparatus tagset (as outlined in Chapter 19
of the TET’s Guidelines) provides a method for capturing
variants across a witness set. This highly structured encoding
brings together in one document n number of witnesses which
an editor considers the same work. The encoding enabled by
parallel segmentation provides a typology for indicating what
structural units of text, or parts of structural units, belong to
each witness. In this way, content which appears in more than
one version of the work is encoded once, with attribute values
indicating which witness or witnesses it belongs to. It is an
extremely efficient way of encoding in that the editor is saved
the repetitious work of encoding the content which persists over
multiple witnesses, as one would do if each witness were
encoded as a separate document.

The apparatus element or <app> acts as a container element
binding together the various readings, which are encoded within
a reading <rdg> element. Attribute values indicate which
witness or witnesses a particular structural unit (a paragraph or
line, for example), or subunit, belongs to (See figure 1.).

<lg n="1">
  <l n="1">
    <app>
      <rdg wit="a1 a2 a3 a4 pub">The sun burns out</rdg>
    </app>
  </l>
  <l n="2">
    <app>
      <rdg wit="a1">The world withers</rdg>
    </app>
  </l>
</lg>

Figure 1. A fragment of parallel segmentation encoding

When parsed in the Versioning Machine, the aforementioned
fragment, the title of the text, along with the first few lines, is
rendered as follows for the first three versions:

In Lessard and Levison’s 1998 article “Introduction: quo
vadimus”, they argue that computational humanities research
has not achieved a level of acceptance because of the differences
in “opposing intellectual paradigms, the scientific and the
humanistic”. The scientific, they argue, is based on formulation
of hypotheses, collection of data and controlled testing and
replication. The humanistic paradigm, they argue is based on
argument from example, “where the goal is to bring the
interlocutor to agreement by coming to see the materials at hand
in the same light” (263).

While the Versioning Machine was designed as a visualization
tool, it is no less importantly an environment within which
editors realize a theory of the text, bringing readers to an
understanding of the work as embodied in its multiple witnesses.
It can thus be seen within Lessard and Levison humanistic
paradigm, as a tool for presenting a reading of the work through
its editing and encoding, itself a primary theoretical event
(McGann 75). Moreover, this primary event can illuminated
and explicated though more traditional scholarly apparatus, such
as annotation, adding an additional layer of textual analysis.

Thus the Versioning Machine provides a venue not only to
realize contemporary editorial theory, but to challenge it. It
meets the requirement that Stéfan Sinclair outlines in his 2003
article “Computer-Assisted Reading; Reconceiving Text
Analysis” in that it is a tool which is relevant to literary critics’
current approaches to textual criticism (178). The Versioning
Machine is an active editing environment: it has been used by
encoders editing texts as different as Renaissance plays and
Dadaist poetry. The Versioning Machine is a tool which takes
as its premise that the goal of much contemporary editing is not
to create a definitive edition, but rather a “hypothesis” of the
text (Kane-Donaldson as quoted in McGann 77), which can be
read alongside an unedited edition of the text (that is, a
reproduction of an image of the text in documentary form;
McGann 77, Siemens). As such, it makes visible encoding as
criticism, providing an environment to challenge our approaches
to complex texts in terms of theories of encoding, as well as
contemporary editorial theory.

Bibliography


Electronic Text Analysis and a New Methodology for Canonical Research

Matt Jockers

Using a combination of 'typical' text analysis tools (concordance and collocation) and other custom tools developed by the author, this paper demonstrates that conventional 'higher' criticism with its fashionable and thematically-oriented theoretical approaches fails as a means of assessing and generalizing about canons and genres of literature. Drawing on a case-study of the canon of Irish-American prose, the paper employs a quantitative and, indeed, scientific methodology to offer a radical reinterpretation of the canon.

In support of this research the author collected, coded, and categorized a database collection of prose literature including over 750 individual works written by some 280 different authors. The collection spans a period of 300 years and nears being comprehensive in terms of its scope and coverage of the prose canon and genre of Irish-American ethnic literature. In addition to the usual metadata associated with electronic archives, each work in the collection is tagged with metadata related to the nature of the work: metadata includes geographic setting (East or West of the Mississippi), regional setting (Northeast, Southwest, Mountain, Pacific, and etc), information about whether the work is set in an urban or rural environment as well as data specific to the author of each text. Using his own Corpus Analysis Tools Suite (CATools), a set of analytic tools developed using php and mysql for doing both semantic and quantitative text-analysis of materials specifically housed within a relational database structure, the author has mined the material in order to reveal latent chronological, semantic, and geographic trends within the overall canon since its beginning in the late 18th century to the present.

The results of this work not only challenge the best available scholarship on the subject of Irish-American literature but further challenge the efficacy of contemporary and fashionable theoretical approaches to literature that are based on the 'close-readings' of texts. In making the case for a re-evaluation of the Irish-American canon, the paper challenges the basic and fundamental methodology of traditional literary study, and demonstrates in clear and indisputable terms that a quantitative and, indeed, scientific analysis of the literary data is not only valuable to the study of a genre or a canon of literature but essential if we are to ever go beyond the mere 'readings' and interpretations of texts.

Response

Ray Siemens