Creating a Prize for the Best Digital Editions / Online Archives
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Abstract
Although the web has had a profound impact upon scholarly editing in the humanities, the profession has been slow to recognize digital editions. This paper proposes a prize for an online edition, and then tackles the issues of selecting and judging, including criteria for inclusion, usability, and assessing the work in its critical context. The article provides a useful contribution because no such prize exists, and because discussions about how to critically assess digital editions are sparse. References are drawn from a range of sources including reviews and inside accounts of current projects, studies of scholarly editing, colloquia about digital editions, and studies of usability guidelines.

Keywords: digital humanities; humanities computing; online edition; online archives

Introduction
The availability of digital technology and the worldwide web has had profound effects upon the ways that we think about texts. Western society is driven by texts: shaped by philosophical and critical essays, coloured by fiction, moved by poetry, and deeply self-identified with the writings of authors from its formative periods. Humanist values like individualism and self-determination derive from authors like Shakespeare, Erasmus, Dickinson, and Joyce, but in order to read their texts, we need the secondary scholarship of an editor in the form of a prepared edition. Electronic editing is now opening a field shaped by long traditions of praxis and intellectual argument to new possibilities of interpretation and availability, but the practice faces the twin challenges of academic credibility and the availability of appropriate skills. This article proposes the creation of an annual prize for the best online scholarly edition. Although funding from government and foundations is available for online editorial projects, and prizes exist for scholarly editorial work that appears in print, there is currently no prize for editorial work designed for the worldwide web. This prize would recognize and reward work already underway, inspire young scholars to learn the necessary skills, and provoke further investigation into ways to mesh the needs of the text with the opportunities provided by the technology.

1a. Defining an “edition”
In theory, editing sounds simple: one examines the text, transcribes it, and explains what one sees, in order to allow the reader to understand it as clearly as possible (Hunter, 2003). However, editing is usually made more complex by the availability of multiple textual variants and by a wealth of secondary information about the context in which the original was created. An edited text is a new version, created by the scholar with the intention of fairly representing the original, accompanied by a critical apparatus designed to clarify the process by which the scholar made his or her decisions (Ore, 2004; Rasmussen, 2004; Shillingsburg, 2006). Editions may be produced for a variety of types of text, such as literature, historical documents, or correspondence. A ‘digital edition’ is one which is presented as a product in digital form, rather than as a printed artifact. Because many such projects take the larger form of an ‘online archive’ by providing extensive supporting materials alongside the edition, this term will also
be used where appropriate.

1b. A brief history of editorial practice
Editing got its start early in the sixteenth century with the advent of the printing press, when humanist scholars like Joseph Scaliger went back to the sources with the rallying cry of ‘ad fontes’ in order to correct the errors that had collected in manuscript transmission. Editions of classical and biblical texts stimulated the development of ‘synthetic’ editing, which brought a number of variant texts together into a single one. The problem was that this resulted in the creation of a text that had never previously existed, so in the early twentieth century, the focus shifted with McKerrow’s ‘versioning’ approach: instead of trying to bring every available variant together, he identified the most convincing one, and used that. He was followed by Bowers and Greg, who differentiated elements in the copy-text they considered ‘essential’ from those that were ‘accidentals’, calling the result a ‘critical’ edition. In the early 1980s, McGann’s revisionist ‘bibliographical’ approach took the field to task for its unwillingness to consider the contextual details of publication and book history. German ‘developmental’ editors like Zeller and Gabler attacked the idea that there must be a single monolithic version, and instead incorporated variants right into the body of the text in order to demonstrate its development. All of this presents the modern editor with a dilemma:

[W]e have available to us scholarly editions presented in four different ways: the eclectic text, the critical and bibliographic text, versioning, and developmental text. Post-modern critical theory with its emphasis on aporia, breaks, subversion of intentionality, and constructness, mitigates against the adoption of any one of these avenues as the “correct” way to edit (Attfield, 2003, p. 5).

1c. Digitization and the possibilities for editing
We arrive at an odd period, when shifts to scholarly editing approaches are being forced to move faster by technological change than by changing intellectual landscapes. Digital information makes new kinds of editorial practice possible: by storing all variant texts in one place, by providing facsimile images of the original, and by hyperlinking annotations within the text, an editor can offer readers new opportunities for understanding (Buzzetti & McGann, 2006, p. 58). Digitization also makes secondary editorial projects like collation and indexing much faster. Smith (2004) argues that digital editions provide new opportunities for collaboration: “While print editions are containers for static objects, artifacts that are by definition unchangeable once produced, the world of digital surrogates practically demands new models for editorial praxes in which editors and readers work together.” (306; Gants, 2006, p. 128.)

In recent years, scholarly editorial projects have begun to explore the possibilities for digital editions in various ways. Three such projects, which demonstrate the possibilities offered by the new technology, are:

1995- Folsom, Ed and Price, Kenneth M. (eds.)
Walt Whitman Archive
www.whitmanarchive.org University of Virginia: Institute for Advanced Technology.

The Whitman Archive contains electronic editions of each of the major early editions of Whitman’s poetry, including work published in Spain and Russia; it also contains transcriptions and page images of his manuscripts and notebooks with a guide and finding aid, editions of Whitman’s correspondence (in process), reviews, criticism, a bibliography, and sound and image recordings of Whitman reading his own work aloud. Reviewed by Shramm (2005); Brett et al. (2005). It is a particularly rich resource for study of Whitman’s place and time because of the availability of so
much contextual information in his letters and notebooks.

http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/index.html  
University of Victoria.

This site provides new editions of Shakespeare’s plays and poems (and some materials that are questionably attributed to him), facsimile images of early variant texts, and a wide range of contextual materials including information about performance, publication, and cultural history. This site is unusually helpful in the study of the early print history and reception of Shakespeare’s work because one can examine images from a large number of rare and inaccessible early editions side by side, close-up, and in colour.


Rossetti was a painter and a poet, and this project presents high-quality images of his art alongside the poems they were meant to illustrate. It also includes complete editions of his writings, nearly-complete image-file editions of his art, image files of his manuscripts and material designs, a substantial bibliography, a search engine, and explanatory essays with each category. This site is especially lovely because it matches the writings with the paintings, giving the student a simultaneous view of Rossetti’s development as an artist and author.

These projects demonstrate that good online editorial practice includes not only detailed attention to publication history and textual clarity, but also the addition of related images of early print copies and manuscripts, and of related work in non-textual media, such as paintings and sound recordings, and of short essays about contextual details. The package as a whole assembles far more than would be offered in a scholarly edition in print, and can be used for activities ranging from professional scholarship in multiple disciplines to support for schoolteachers and students.

**1d. Why is Digital Editing so important? Why does it need a Prize?**

The development of scholarly digital editions / online archives is important because it follows the movement of library resources away from print and into cyberspace. “In the next 50 years, the entirety of our inherited archive of cultural works will have to be re-edited within a network of digital storage, access, and dissemination” (McGann, 2002, p. B7). Digital editions and online archives permit editors to exercise more flexibility in determining what kinds of secondary resources (not merely print, but sound and visual images as well) are appropriate and necessary to the study of their edition; the result is a richer and more accessible experience of the texts than a print edition could provide. Additionally, the availability of these projects allows researchers to reach materials more quickly and cheaply, and from more distant locations, than would ever be the case with print; and finally, these materials can serve in the classroom as teaching texts for high school and undergraduate courses, in addition to being tools for the advanced researcher. Making these materials more available encourages more study in the humanities, and enhances the discipline as a whole (Smith, 2004, p. 308).

However, the obstacles facing these projects are substantial. The worldwide web is viewed with some suspicion as a medium for scholarly exchange: Scholars need to be reassured that hard-earned expertise on manuscript examination, on textual variants, on annotation, can be presented in a digital medium not only adequately but in a manner of equal prestige to the scholarly
Seimens (2005) discovered that the credibility gap for online publications in scholarly circles is discouragingly wide, with “85% of all respondents agreeing that ‘publishing in non-electronic outlets is more credible than publishing in electronic outlets’”. In spite of the fact that the world is becoming increasingly digitized, humanities scholarship has been slow to accept the medium as a viable alternative to print. In addition, the work of editing holds the promise of little glamour and years of toil for young scholars, and the critical skills necessary for editing, “philological practices in language study, textual scholarship, and bibliography… preserve but a ghostly presence in most Ph.D. programs” (McGann, 2002, p. B8). To put it simply, there is not enough recognition available for the amount of scholarly work required by an electronic edition (Robinson, 2004). These projects are expensive; they are normally collaborative and institutionally sponsored. The prestige of official recognition conveyed by a substantial prize would assist in assembling the resources of training, funding, and support they require.

1e. The Prize and its Rationale
This report proposes the creation of a substantial annual cash prize for the best digital edition/online archive in the Humanities. The prize will provide formal recognition for the scholarship that went into the creation of the edition, and it will also encourage the creation of projects designed to meet the specialized needs of researchers in the humanities (Toms & Flora, 2006). Indirectly, it will encourage young scholars to develop the skills necessary for editing, and it will promote studies in the humanities by making its primary texts more accessible to a wider range of users. No such prize currently exists. The Modern Language Association offers a biennial cash prize of $1,000 for Distinguished Scholarly Edition, but online editions have a hard time in getting consideration;¹ their Committee on Scholarly Editions awards non-cash emblems to qualifying editions as a quality-assurance logo.

2a. Criteria for Inclusion: Scholarly standards
Whether an edition appears in printed or electronic format, the most basic criterion is accuracy. The Modern Language Association provides detailed guidelines (Burnard, O’Keefe & Unsworth, 2007) for evaluating scholarly rigour in matters of the technique, production, and apparatus of electronic editions.

Another consideration, almost as basic, is the question of whether it “provides something that would not otherwise be available” (Hunter, 2007, p. 36). The edition should add something to existing knowledge: an inaccessible text, or a newly created collation of many versions of it, or a well-informed commentary about the text and its subject. The application will include a question about the contribution to the field provided by each entry.

2b. Criteria for Inclusion: Field
Because the prize is designed to support work in the Humanities, it is necessary to define the disciplinary fields eligible for inclusion. Gibbs (2007) construes the field broadly, as all of the ways we use to make sense of the world: as language, literature, philosophy, religion, art, history, music, politics, and education. By definition, humanities scholarship is interdisciplinary. The prize is therefore open to digital editions in any of the fields named above, and to any other field not specifically mentioned which might reasonably participate in interdisciplinary work with these fields. The application will include a question about the project’s usefulness to the humanities.

¹ The MLA Prize for Distinguished Scholarly Edition was awarded to an electronic edition for the first time in 2001-2002 to the William Blake Archive (Kirschenbaum 2004, 534; see also http://www.mla.org/pastwinners_distsch. The 2005-6 Prize gave Honourable Mention to a hybrid book and CD-ROM edition of Caedmon’s Hymn. The rules for consideration are designed around the parameters of print publication).
2c. Criteria for Inclusion: Technical
The words “digital” and “electronic” are often used in a rather sweeping way to include anything that does not appear in print, and there are a number of different kinds of projects that make use of the new media in various ways. The Prize is designed to encourage the exploration of all of the possibilities for communication that are offered by the worldwide web; for this reason, publications that are intended to imitate the formal structures of print publication are excluded: it should go further than a print edition can go, taking full advantage of the capacities of its medium:

The way to scholarly credibility for the electronic medium is not to try to placate tradition through a slavish attempt to recreate the page and the mechanisms of judging the page, but through daring the medium to do what it can … those things the page cannot do (Best, 2006, p. 2).

For the sake of clarity, the following criteria will apply for applications:

- The edited material must be published first on the worldwide web (“web-born”). Material that was designed for print or microfilm and then digitized will not be eligible.
- The text must feature live links and markup. PDF files are not eligible.
- The project must be available as a whole on a website. Publications as a CD-ROM, or as a hybrid of book-and-CD-ROM or book-and-website are not eligible.
- The website may be either a commercial subscription-based resource, or a free-to-the-public resource. No distinction will be made in judging.

3. Judging Standards
The Prize will be awarded on the basis of two judging factors, usability and usefulness. A panel of five scholars will judge each eligible entry, one of whom will be an expert in the scholarly field of the edition. This balance is intended to counter the politics of one’s own discipline, and to encourage evaluation based on interdisciplinary possibilities.

3a. Usability:
How easy is the site to use? How quickly can it be learned, and once learned, how efficiently can a user perform basic operations? If a user is away for some time, how quickly can it be relearned? How many errors do users make, how severe are they, and can the user recover from errors? How pleasant is it for the user to work with this site? (Neilsen, 2003)

To assess usability, the judges will perform a heuristic evaluation. Using a list of design guidelines (Hvannberg, Law & Larusdottir, 2007), they will work through the site’s functions on a screen-by-screen basis to identify problems. The judges will write a heuristic evaluation for each site, revisit the site at least one week later, and then compose a final usability report that includes the heuristic evaluation and an assessment based on the questions above.

3b. Usefulness:
What is the scholarly context of this edition? How does it compare with the most recent printed edition? What opportunities for interdisciplinary research and for classroom teaching does it offer? What are its outstanding features? How appropriate is the fit of technical choices with the needs of the text; i.e., how does the medium contribute to the message of this work?

To assess usefulness, the judge who has expertise in this field will write a full usefulness report based on all of the questions above. The remaining four judges will write shorter reports that exclude the first two questions. Reviews of the site published in scholarly journals may be taken into consideration. The most difficult factor of evaluation is the fit of the material with the form of its digital edition. This question is not just a matter of whether the edition has taken
advantage of every available technological option, but of the sensitivity shown by the editors to the philological demands of the text in making decisions about markup policy, particularly for poetry. Buzetti & McGann (2002) argue for the profound significance of markup in defining the text’s structural properties. Galey (2008) shows how the drive in the humanities as a discipline toward individual specificity is often at odds with the drive of technology toward uniformity: “as digital textual studies takes shape as a field, it finds itself caught between these divergent trends in computational practice and literary theory” (p. 2). There is a tension here, especially for literary texts, between leaving interpretation more open, and making it more defined (Stroud, 2006). A good digital edition should walk this line in ways that are sensitive to its subject matter. This question is likely to generate dissent as varying theoretical approaches come into play, but the ensuing discussion about the ways that reading is affected by presentation will be fruitful for the field.

4. Conclusions
The Prize is meant to encourage the development of web-based editions that make the most of the opportunities offered by markup, linking, and media files. These editions should maintain at least the level of scholarly rigour that a print edition would have, but they offer the additional bonus of being able to keep up with research: if a new document is found, it can be immediately added, and its implications can be included with the work as a whole, instead of languishing for decades until another edition is undertaken. Online editions / archives also offer an entry point for scholars in other fields by making original documents accessible: for example, the Whitman Archive includes Civil War correspondence of interest to military historians and the Rossetti Archive includes materials designs of interest to cultural historians. The best online editions are characterized as much by their scholarly integrity as by their friendly and engaging interdisciplinarity: they make their field interesting both to experts and to amateurs.

Encouraging the development of such projects is the most effective way to help the humanities to thrive in a digital future:
The larger goal of an electronic scholarly edition should be not only to meet the current needs of the scholarly researcher, but also to stimulate and challenge scholars of various kinds, including teachers and students, even poets and specialists in digital media, to use the text in order to make new knowledge – which is to say, to use it in ways none of us has yet fully imagined (Friestant & Jones, 2006, p. 118).

Works Cited


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