

Dallas Merritt

Dr. David Ainsworth

English 500

24 April 2013

Re-examining the ‘unkindest cut of all’

As the Humanities in general struggle to defend their viability in modern higher education, one small component of the whole is actually thriving. Digital humanities, whether loved or hated by those passionate about the continued existence of the humanities at large, is being funded and developed consistently at major universities across the nation. This emergent field is buzzing with production, and though the hope or threat it poses to the humanist tradition has yet to be fully realized, the fact is that the administration in higher education is actively pursuing digital humanities projects that will put their Universities in the mix of those on the cutting edge of the new trend. Part of the excitement involved with this virtual land-grab is that universities that are not privileged Ivy league members are staking their claims and creating projects that are as powerful and promising as the ones being developed by the upper crust establishments—and they are getting similar funding to develop them. The reality is that higher education is changing, and although many are apprehensive about what may be lost in such a change, it is happening nonetheless. The internet and the digital tools that are being developed daily which put its connective power in the hands of the masses—learned and unlearned—has changed the way we are educated, and the ways we might educate future generations. The technology is here, the money is available, the ‘next big thing’ is actively searching for the next big idea, and I happen to have one.

One of the first things you might learn when researching digital humanities is that the term is practically impossible to define uniformly. In the case of programs like Project Gutenberg, the result of the project is simply a virtual archive of digitally rendered books that are extant in print (though typically in the public domain). If that were all digital humanities had to offer, a digital rendering of media formerly available only in print, then the reality would simply be a bunch of modern scribes transferring information to the newest format. Programs like the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), however, are more interested in harnessing the processing power of modern computers, and coupling that with the communicative power of the Internet to offer tools to modern scholars that push the boundaries of what might be done well beyond previous limitations. By encoding text with metadata, or a subset of unseen information that might be rapidly processed by a computer to more efficiently and effectively present a researcher with significantly more in depth knowledge, the TEI gives the researcher flexibility to manipulate information in ways that would have been time and labor prohibitive previously. The idea of tool development is one which many new digital humanities projects are adapting, and by my estimation is the key to facilitating something more than simply changing a data format; it is the key to unlocking the potential of the human mind of researchers by providing them processing power and speed to which scholars have not previously had access. With this in mind, I suggest that the most effective digital humanities projects will be tool-focused and tool-driven, offering researchers a way to engage with and manipulate data more quickly and effectively. A tool that harnesses such processing power offers scholars research opportunities that are limited only by the ideas and creativity of the individual using the

tool, rather than the limitations of the format. A tool-driven project is an idea, but it certainly is not new. So what is the big idea?

One of the first assignments in a Shakespeare and performance class I took during my Master's studies was to "cut" lines from a scene of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. I was initially appalled to learn that when a Shakespeare play is produced in the modern era, the director will "cut" (delete, rearrange, consolidate, and otherwise generally destroy) the original work of the bard until it fits more neatly into a time frame limited by the attention span of the modern audience. This work is not easy, even beyond the initial resistance any educated person might feel to alter something written by someone as exceptionally talented as Shakespeare. All manner of considerations must be made to produce modern plays, such as scansion, maintaining some cohesive story line, how many players your production actually has, what type of facility is being used, what props or costumes are accessible, budget, and of course how much time you think people will be willing to sit and watch the performance. That list is not exhaustive, and essentially all of those considerations require someone with a fair amount of skill and even more time. Surely, one would think, some standard method of cutting a Shakespeare play would have evolved by now that streamlines the process, or offers shortcuts or timesaving techniques to those who might undertake the task, but that is not the case. The 'modern' version of script cutting is as advanced as printing an electronic version of the text and scribbling all over it with a quill... or pen. Many (probably most) veteran directors still actually cut out lines with scissors and paste them onto a page (presumably using the refined lard of some beast they've felled with a spear). My point is that the methods used to cut scripts are archaic and are certainly not standardized, which means that the reality

of doing this type of work successfully means that your level of skill has to be quite high, and your available time to do so must be unreasonable. It seems to me that these scholars need a tool that streamlines their work efficiently and effectively into something standardized enough to teach new generations the art.

My initial thoughts about this meant very little, as I had zero previous experience with script cutting. Fortunately, however, I live in a community filled with scholars engaged in just this type of work. I met with local directors who have cut scripts for performances by local companies such as The Rude Mechanicals, The Improbable Fictions, and the University of Alabama Theater department. I met with six such directors and spent considerable time, often several hours per director, asking them about their experience and difficulties with script cutting and how the process might be streamlined digitally, were such a tool to be developed. The response was overwhelming support and excitement, and the records I kept of those conversations are chocked full of ideas and possibilities that might be implemented in the development of such a tool. Over those hours, too, developed my realization that if this type of project were to be developed it would take an incredible effort, well beyond the capabilities of one person, and it would require considerable resources of both time and money. The tenacity of those in the local theatre community was obvious, which was wonderful, as they were eager to rigorously test any tool that might be developed for script cutting, but many more people would need to be willing to help, which meant I needed to get some facts together about who else might realistically be interested in such a project—and, more importantly, who of those people might already have sought to develop something similar.

There are numerous apps (mostly for iPhone and iPads) that function in some capacity as an assistant for stage managers (ie. *Rehearsal 2*, *Sides*, *Stagehand Pro*, and *Scene Partner*). Most of what these do is offer ways to annotate existing scripts with more information such as staging, blocking, choreography, lighting, or other types of information. These types of annotation tools are wonderful, and any tool that sought to facilitate script cutting should include such features, but a dynamic tool needs to offer much more, and fundamentally needs to assist with script manipulation at the base level. That said, there are quite a few commercial venture programs that are designed to help with script writing. If you want to create a script from scratch, there are tools out there, such as *ScriptBuddy*, *Celtx*, and *Final Draft* to help you get the job done, for a substantial fee of course. It should also be noted that those programs are focused primarily on screenwriting for television or movie production. An appropriate tool for cutting Shakespeare plays will need annotation features for ease of use and a more streamlined, complete product, but at its core the program would need to be able to publish TEI tagged, formatted scripts based upon cuts, movements, and combinations of lines or characters that directors might make during the process. The inclusion of metadata in both the original and the produced scripts is essential to future scholarship. The surprise is that the tool is not the ultimate goal, but is simply a means to an end. The construction of a database of cut, TEI tagged Shakespeare plays, offered in a standardized format for the free use of production companies and the open access research of scholars is the goal of the project. There is no such database currently in existence, nor have I been able to find any information indicating that such a database is being produced. The tool I hope to design would offer a way to standardize the cutting of Shakespeare scripts, and more

importantly would be used to create the database of TEI-tagged cuttings of Shakespeare plays produced for modern performance. Nobody is yet planning or producing what this project hopes to offer as an open-source repository of knowledge for future generations of directors and Shakespeare Scholars. The next question becomes, then, how such a project might be realistically developed.

My initial research into how digital humanities projects were coded was simply Internet searching and reading forums and information pages for any major extant projects. The information yielded was scant, piecemeal, and generally led to more confusion than clarity. Thankfully, the Digital Humanities Workshop series held in the Gorgas Library here at UA offered a class that proved to be particularly useful and informative. Franky Abbot and Nathan Humpal teamed up (collaboration is also a fundamental principle of digital humanities work) to teach a workshop called “Building Digital Editions,” in which they introduced TEI metadata and how the tagging of text can produce new opportunities for research and scholarship. This workshop showcased examples of extant projects, such as the Folger Digital Texts, that use TEI metadata and XML tagging to encode most of their digital collection, including many of Shakespeare’s plays. Beyond some clarity, direction, and reality checks about the intensive labor that goes into these projects, I was able to book an appointment with Franky and Nathan to discuss my project idea and determine if it was viable, what steps I should take to move forward, and what resources were available at UA that might help. The results of that meeting were affirmation of the project’s viability, information about the considerable resources available for DH projects at our university, and guidance about logical ways to proceed with my research and laying the groundwork for such a project. Another

excellent outcome of the workshop was a chance to meet with other local scholars working on digital projects, and to ask them questions about their own experiences with project upstarts. This proved to be good practice for what the bulk of the next steps would require—networking with and talking to numerous people that might be interested in the project, or that have successful projects of their own, and might be willing to offer help in the form of advice or source code.

As part of the Digital Humanities Seminar I've taken this Spring semester of 2013, I've become acquainted with the concepts of open-source sharing of information and code that is prevalent in the digital humanities community. Part of the drive behind the movement is to move away from capitalist agendas in product development, and towards communities that share the results of both their work and research openly, in an effort to learn as a community instead of as individuals. This crowd-source style of scholarship has proven hugely beneficial already, and encouraged me to share my ideas with other's in an effort to gain an idea of interest, and sometimes support, that might be available for the project. One example of the benefits of shared scholarship is that the good folks at Folger's Library are "delighted to share [their] encoded texts at no cost for noncommercial uses." The reality is that by using the Folger's texts, the time needed to complete my project would be more than halved. As such, after confirmation that the project was viable and might be supported at UA, I felt comfortable sharing the idea with scholars who might have some professional interest in the project. My undergraduate Shakespeare professor, Dr. Susan Willis, also happens to be the dramaturge for the Alabama Shakespeare Festival (ASF) in Montgomery. When our Shakespeare in performance class visited ASF to watch *Macbeth*, I took the opportunity to discuss the

project with her, and was pleased to receive a deeply interested response and considerable feedback about the possibilities of employing such a tool in real world performances, possibly even at ASF. When I found myself alone in the company of Ralph Alan Cohen in his Blackfriars Playhouse in Virginia later the same semester, I took the opportunity to converse with him at length about the project. I was heartened by his considerable interest in the project, but was astounded and delighted to hear that should such a project be developed, he would consider contributing some of his work to the database. These two meetings cemented in my mind the fact that the project was warranted, and if somebody of the caliber of Ralph Alan Cohen would even consider contributing his work to a database were it extant, then the tool to build that database is absolutely worthwhile to create. The digital humanities seminar happened to afford me other opportunities to discuss aspects of the project beyond its viability, including how to obtain funding.

As I learned from my meeting with Franky Abbot and Nathan Humpal, the University of Alabama does have facilities and staff that can help guide and direct digital humanities projects. They will not, however, provide a team to code the project for you, which is one of the main reasons this project, like most other digital humanities projects, will require considerable funding. Although I am working on learning basic practices for TEI, XML, and PHP (all three of which will be extensively required languages for this project) I will never be adequate to supply all of the necessary coding, which means coders will have to be hired at a rate comparable to their market value. Again, this is a common concern for most digital humanities projects. Fortunately, the National Endowment for the Humanities offers generous grants to digital humanities projects both for start up and maintenance of extant projects. The most recent list of awards for digital

humanities start ups from last month (March 2013) cited 23 recipients whose grants were in two denominations, either \$30,000 or \$60,000 with the bulk being awarded the latter portion. The total grants awarded to DH start ups last month was over \$1.1 million. Over the last five competitions the NEH has reported that on average 141 digital humanities projects apply for funding, and on average 24 receive funding per competition, which is about 17% of the applicants. With that type of ratio, a competitive proposal will require both a good idea and an excellent grant proposal. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to participate in a Skype call with Patricia Fumerton, the director of the English Broadside Ballad Archives, who has successfully secured NEH funding totaling well over \$1 million for the past four consecutive years. At the conclusion of that call I requested and was given permission to contact her via e-mail about digital humanities project issues. I already have each of her grant proposals, but am hopeful that any advice she might give would considerably boost my chances of securing an NEH grant for the project.

I suppose some question might remain if the project is worthwhile in any capacity beyond simply being viable, or potentially valuable to some local producers of Shakespeare plays. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni released a report in 2007 entitled "The Vanishing Shakespeare," in which they inquired how Shakespeare fit into the curricula of the English departments of 70 schools, including the top 25 national universities and the top 25 liberal arts colleges according to *U.S. News and World Report*. The same organization published a similar report in 1996, in which they discovered that only 23 of those 70 institutions required English students to take *any* Shakespeare course at all. In their 2007 report, that number had dropped to 15 out of 70. There is a trend moving away from the study of Shakespeare, partially, according to ACTA's report, due

to the cultural irrelevance of the bard's plays. In my own research, I discovered that the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's production of Shakespeare plays constitutes only slightly more than half of their plays, predominantly due to the popularity of modern plays and musicals over the bard's writing—fifteen years ago that was not the case at ASF. Shakespeare is difficult to produce and it is considerably more difficult and expensive to produce *well*. Many small theater companies lack directors who are sufficiently trained or capable of cutting and staging a quality production of any Shakespeare play. The budgets of the companies that do have such directors are often prohibited from Shakespeare plays simply because of the time it requires to adequately cut the script into something workable for their staff or facility. A database of Shakespeare scripts, professionally cut and produced, affords the possibility to produce Shakespeare to smaller companies all over our nation and the English-speaking world. If more theaters produce good Shakespeare plays there is a *chance* that the bard's work could gain more cultural relevance. Beyond this, a database of professionally and academically cut, TEI tagged scripts that can actually be performed for a modern audience offer a wealth of potential research material that has yet to be mined by academics. I hope Shakespeare does not continue to “vanish” from our nation's English departments. I hope to provide a tool that invigorates the relevance of his work for two audiences, one public—that is susceptible to cultural relevance, and one academic—that I hope is willing to delve into new Shakespeare research that might be made possible by a tool I could help develop.

Addendum: Potential Project Phases

Phase 1: The Tool.

The focus of this phase is to develop a web-based tool that allows for a TEI-encoded digital Shakespeare text to be manipulated easily for the purposes of script cutting for modern performance, and that re-assembles the text into a published project that maintains the proper TEI tags, and re-tags cut lines as necessary to maintain accurate metadata.

This phase of the project is foundational, and will require extensive knowledge and use of XML, TEI tags, and PHP scripting to accomplish. The “invisible” component of this phase is developing the infrastructure of the tool, which will require a complex assembly capable of seamlessly integrating future upgrade components. This phase should take 1-3 years, depending on the level of funding acquired.

Phase 2: Tool upgrades. The Database

The focus of this phase is to offer major updates to the tool, which will be based upon user feedback and observations of the tool’s beta functionality. The community required to test the tool and offer feedback is already available and is eager to participate. This phase will utilize the tool’s invisible infrastructure to integrate the major upgrades. Some ideas for these upgrades include: in-program help options, advanced utility options for bundling characters, an improved user interface, and the incorporation of advanced datasets to more fully inform the director’s cutting choices. This upgrade will necessarily include a feature for encoding previously cut plays into the format made possible by this tool.

The major component of this phase is to put a database online that collects projects produced by the tool and organizes them into a database of plays that may be downloaded, launched by browser tool, manipulated by the tool, researched, or simply used for production. This phase opens up possibilities for research that have been previously unavailable, and is arguably the most important goal of the entire project. This phase should take 1 year to develop and launch.

Phase 3: Tool upgrades. Database development.

The focus of this phase will be to implement further upgrades to the tool, but will revolve around making the tool as user friendly and self-explanatory as possible for new users. New interfaces and major changes to the tool or to the tool’s accessibility should be considered based upon the most current technology available. Any major re-design deemed necessary should begin to be processed at this time in an effort to launch during phase 4. Tablet apps or other accessibility options that might have been considered during the initial two phases should be explored at this time in an effort to launch in phase 4.

A new tool should be developed to allow volunteer workers to input and peer-review analog submissions to the database, and to digitize those submissions.