The Charrette Project: Manipulating Text and Image in an Electronic Archive of a Medieval Manuscript Tradition

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Abstract

This paper concerns the Charrette Project, a multimedia electronic archive of a medieval manuscript tradition. In this paper, we argue that the computer’s strengths in manipulating complex and varied resources should be an important organizing principle in the conception and construction of electronic text projects. Specifically, we describe the elements of the Charrette archive, its architecture, and its potential for scholarly research and pedagogical applications.

Introduction

As computing humanists, we must prepare studies that better exploit electronic media, studies preferably that take advantage of the computational and interface capabilities of computer technology. One way we can accomplish this is by using the computer in new and creative ways to bring together complex and heterogeneous materials and resources. “New and creative” echoes Mark Olsen’s forceful argument in an earlier volume of this same journal that scholars involved in computer-aided literature studies need to change their theoretical models so as to take advantage of the computer’s particular strengths in analyzing large corpora of texts (1993). As we have argued in that same volume, however, medieval textual studies furnish us with adequate models of analysis; it is more a question of adapting than of changing the models to a computing environment (1993). In this paper, however, we would like to focus on more practical concerns and, through a description of an archive of medieval manuscripts currently being developed by the authors at Princeton University, emphasize the computer’s strength in manipulating multiple and varied resources. After a brief exposition of the nature and purpose of the project, we shall describe each element of the archive in detail and explore the delicate question of bringing together all of the elements into a single, coherent whole which is useful to researcher and student alike. Although, as we shall argue, the question of complex media is integral to medieval studies, we believe that other disciplines are often confronted with similar textual issues, and could benefit from this discussion of computer-aided analysis of medieval textual traditions.

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The Medievalist and the Computer

As our introduction suggests with its focus on “creativity” and “media,” the popular notion of computers has changed in recent years. While the computer was once viewed primarily as a computational tool, it is now recognized that the computer can organize information in ways that make it easier to understand and manipulate. The computer is no longer simply an arcane number-crunching machine; it has become, on the contrary, a way to provide information in clear, yet complex, ways. The popularity of CD-ROM and multimedia education and reference tools testifies to this new paradigm. Scholars need to recognize that this new technology has more to offer than “bells and whistles.” If utilized properly, the computer can become a true tool in addition to a provider of information.

We believe that this technology is a genuine boon to the medievalist. The scholar studying a medieval text such as the Romance of the Rose or the Canterbury Tales is usually confronted with a large mass of handwritten manuscripts prepared by different scribes one or several generations after the composition of a missing authorial version. In such cases, there are inevitably variations from one manuscript to the next, some of which can be quite significant. The medievalist’s task, fortunately, can be simplified by the use of a variety of scholarly resources such as printed editions and/or diplomatic transcriptions that have been prepared by previous scholars. Ideally, then, a student or scholar studying a text will want to consult a wide range of materials, in both printed and manuscript form. This is the case not only for a traditional student or scholar working on a new edition or philological study of a single text, but it is also true for many pursuing more theoretical questions in contemporary medieval scholarship such as manuscript variation and intertextuality.

As cogently argued by Dino Buzetti in “Image Processing in History: Towards Open Systems,” computers can provide us with a means of manipulating and managing such information (1994). With current technology, we can in fact present a variety of materials – images of as well as interpretations of a source – from which scholars or students can construct their own interpretations of the source. As Buzetti states:

A computer treats both the source and its transcription as data to be processed; therefore it changes, from a conceptual point of view, their very nature and purpose, and brings about remarkable methodological consequences in most historical disciplines. [...] both the image and the transcript are not regarded as physical reproductions referring back to the original document, but rather as analytical data pointing towards a new logical representation of the source. Computers enable new forms to representation, which can have a considerable impact on the methodology of textual scholarship (1994, 48).

The “Charrette Project”

The authors of this paper, along with Prof. Karl D. Uitti of Princeton University, have been working for some time on what we call the Charrette Project, an electronic archive of the thirteenth-century manuscript tradition of Chrétien de Troyes’s twelfth-century courtly verse romance, Le Chevalier de la Charrette. The aim of our project is to provide an environment where any student or scholar connected to the Internet can come close to doing the type of work we describe: consult and manipulate the variety of materials relevant to the manuscript tradition. We also want students and scholars to be able to interact with the material, to be able to suggest and comment, and to exchange ideas with others working on the same texts. Ultimately, we hope and expect that such uses of the computer will lead to new avenues of textual research for the medievalist and modernist alike. In the shorter term, however, we are confident that the project will be of interest both to medievalists, as a powerful research tool for studying one of the most seminal of Old French romances, and to computing humanists in general, as a model of how to apply the computer’s capacity to manipulate a variety of source materials.

The Charrette Project seeks to furnish the user with a set of materials organized in such a way as to allow him or her to examine them and form his or her own interpretation of the manuscript tradition of Chrétien’s Charrette. Ultimately, we expect to create a resource that gives the user on Internet the materials necessary to work with and to understand that textual tradition, which consists of eight manuscripts, several of which are only fragments. The complete poem contains approximately 7,100 lines, and the entire manuscript tradition offers a total of approximately 36,000 lines. The eight manuscripts, listed by traditional sigla followed by the full library reference, approximate date and length, are: Ms. A, Chantilly 472 [Musée Condé], end of the 13th century, 5850 lines; Ms. C,