Mimesis to poiesis in the digital humanities

Willard McCarty
Department of Digital Humanities
King’s College London
www.mccarty.org.uk/
APPLICATION
in academic departments
by computing centres, libraries & other non-academic units

from work done in

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Computer Science & Commercial Development Research

ca 1950-1995
The result: many good things, but on the whole little advance on mimetic mechanisation of the codex – hence by analogy with the mechanisation of music, the knowledge jukebox.
Eero Hyvönen (Helsinki), ‘Culture Sampo – Finnish Culture on the Semantic Web’, Digital Humanities 2008, Oulu, Finland
Andrew Webster, “Computers: The New Age of Miracles”, Toronto Globe and Mail, 16 November 1965

Little conceptual advance in ca 40 years

The entertainment system was belting out the Beatles’ “We Can Work It Out” when the phone rang. When Pete answered, his phone turned the sound down by sending a message to all the other local devices that had a volume control. His sister, Lucy, was on the line from the doctor’s office: “Mom needs to see a specialist and then has to have a series of physical therapy sessions. Bi-weekly or something. I’m going to have my agent set up the appointments.” Pete immediately agreed to share the chauffeuring.

At the doctor’s office, Lucy instructed her Semantic Web agent through her handheld Web browser. The agent in a few minutes the agent presented them with a plan. Pete didn’t like it—University Hospital was all the way across town from Mom’s place, and he’d be driving back in the middle of rush hour. He set his own agent to redo the search with stricter preferences about location and status securely verified by other means, “(Details?)”

Lucy registered her assent at about the same moment Pete was muttering, “Spare me the details,” and it was all set. (Of course, Pete couldn’t resist the details and later that night had his agent explain how

Formation of a discipline centred on methods: the digital humanities as keepers of a "methodological commons". But how is this of the humanities?
Difficult questions & tentative answers

• What are we trying to do?

  – Simply to be useful to the older disciplines? Become the perfect servant, and so be without a life of our own?

  – Found a new discipline on the basis of a methodology which provides cogent explanations of phenomena that cannot be obtained by any other means? Thus Latour’s moral quandry (in “The Politics of Explanation”):

    • “If the work of explaining something is that of empire-building, should we explain something?.... Do we want to add yet another discipline and profession to the many that we study?.... Do we lust for power and recognition?....”

• This lust is wrong because it distracts. Explanation and its concrete instantiation in methods are not a desirable goals because they divert us from that which we study. They become things in themselves, distancing us from that which give them meaning. Computational methodology is a house built on sand.

• Again Latour: replace methodology by style (by playing a role rather than following a rule).
Apart from theories and imperatives, what actually do we find going on in this space of the digital humanities?
Computing in the humanities
Computing in the humanities

Simulating

Publishing

Modelling

Actions, not things
Simulating, Modelling, and Publishing for Computing in the humanities
Basics: modelling

modelling for

modelling of

residue

Cantwell Smith 1985.
Simulating is mimetic of computing in the humanities for modelling might be creative.
Basics: simulating

real city

simulated city

New, unpredictable behaviours

?

• I suggest: “No computing (in the humanities) without experimenting and comparing”.


The humanities
Computing in the humanities

Simulating

Publishing

Modelling
Like a thief in the night

• Joseph Weizenbaum: “…the direct societal effects of any pervasive new technology are as nothing compared to its much more subtle and ultimately more important side effects” (“On the Impact of the Computer on Society”, 1972).

• What, for us now, are these?

  – Wide & interdisciplinary rather than deep & specialist;
  – Argumentative rather than evidential;
  – Probabilistic rather than determined;
  – Conjecturally scientific – when it suits the research;
  – and…
“We may compare a man in the process of computing a real number to a machine which is only capable of a finite number of conditions....” A. M. Turing, 1936 (after George S. Boolos and Richard C. Jeffrey, *Computability and Logic*, 2007: 21, Fig. 3.1)
Oracle on 57th Street

Shell Oil advert, *Saturday Evening Post*, 16 December 1950, showing IBM World Headquarters, 57th Street and Madison Avenue, which then displayed the Selective Sequence Electronic Calculator (SSEC, nicknamed “Poppa” by passers-by) in the front window.

McCulloch-Pitts model of the brain, based on the Turing Machine, 1943-48

Commercial communications interface between neuronal cells and silicon-based electronic devices, the Golden Brain project, November 2004.