

Digital Humanities at LSU



WHAT WE DO

As computers infiltrate every aspect of human society, new fields of study emerge. A good example is digital humanities, which combines computing with traditional humanities—history, philosophy, literature, art, archaeology, music, and cultural studies.

It applies computational tools in a new domain, using techniques such as data visualization, information retrieval, data mining, statistics, text mining, and publishing.

However, digital humanities is more than just applying digital tools to humanities research. This field can look at the entire human record, from

prehistory to the present.

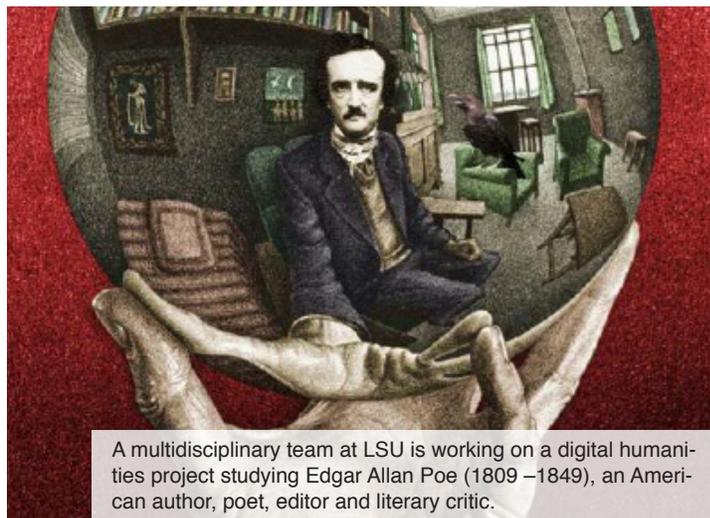
People have been using computers in the humanities since the late 1940s, when Roberto Busa used an IBM mainframe to generate a concordance to the work of Thomas Aquinas.

The advances in textual analysis and the proliferation of imaging technologies in the 1980s and '90s led to a number of important digital archives, further accelerating the trend.

In 2006, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the federal granting agency for scholarships in the humanities, launched the

Digital Humanities Initiative—two years later formalized into the Office of Digital Humanities—acknowledging the importance of digital technology in research.

To find out what LSU is doing in this new field, *Inside CCT's* correspondent spoke with members of a multidisciplinary team working on a project involving Edgar A. Poe.



Chris Branton
IT Consultant at LSU CCT

What are you currently working on?

Since 2011, I've been involved with a digital humanities project called "Edgar A. Poe, Magazine Editor" collaborating with J. Gerald Kennedy, a Boyd Professor of English at LSU

who is an internationally renowned expert on Poe and the author or editor of seven books about this great American writer.

The project centers around Poe's pivotal role in the print culture of antebellum America. In addition to writing the short stories and poems that have made him an American cultural icon, Poe had great impact as a magazine editor, critic, and proponent of literary culture.

One thing that fascinates me about this project is how much I learn that is directly applicable to our scientific work at CCT. This may also be a reason that our project has attracted a number of full-time LSU IT special-

ists, including CCT's own Phoenix MacAiodh.

What are the objectives?

The aim of our project overall is to allow modern readers to understand more of the cultural and historical context in which Poe's works originally appeared. Like today's films and television series, Poe's work was loaded with references to politics, social movements, and current events. For example, Poe's "The Mystery of Marie Roget" was based on the actual murder of Mary Rogers in New York the year before. Readers of the time would have made the connection implicitly, while most modern readers would not be aware of the background.

We have applied for two NEH grants so far to support this work.

The first, submitted in December of last year, focuses on creating richly contextualized versions of about 30 Poe's tales, four poems, and some 125 letters, all from the years 1841-45, the zenith of Poe's productivity and public reputation as a magazinist.

Our plan is to align paintings, magazine illustrations, political cartoons, and relevant newspaper or magazine articles from the period, and modern graphics (maps and timelines), with reliable, annotated texts of Poe's works. An analysis of topical references in these

writings will direct research into the newspapers and magazines likely available to Poe in Philadelphia and New York during these years. This phase of the project is expected to last three years.

The second grant we submitted in mid July, also three years in length, focuses on Poe's work as a magazine editor. The LSU Libraries will digitize issues of four different magazines that Poe authored and present them online as readers saw them in the 1840s. Today's readers will be able to see the world's first detective story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," immediately preceded by a romantic engraving of a lovers' tryst and a hand-painted illustration of women's fashions. We will also be marking the contents of the magazines with XML metadata, allowing the type of contextualization that is

the goal of our first project.

How does your multidisciplinary team function?

Our work is divided into three overlapping specialist groups: humanities, metadata, and technical. The humanities group analyzes literary texts, identifying cultural connections and procuring material for the site. The metadata group defines the archive's metadata fields and vocabularies, choosing appropriate standards, auditing content, and developing new resources such as controlled vocabulary sets for meta-concepts, and RDF Triples. The technical team, which includes Derick Ostrenko and me, manages the architecture of the digital resource, locates and procures the tools required, and creates a look and feel for the website. The website will be open to the public and provide anybody who is



interested with comfortable ways to view print artifacts and annotations, visualize information, and interact with both the content and the work of scholars.

What are the challenges?

Culture and terminology are always challenging in highly interdisciplinary projects. It takes time to build a shared understanding of our various strengths, objectives, and concerns. We have reached a point now where we all value and trust each other for what each person brings to the project, and we are starting to enjoy the work more than ever. Personally, I have learned something almost every day about history, culture, literature, curation, and data management – the list goes on.

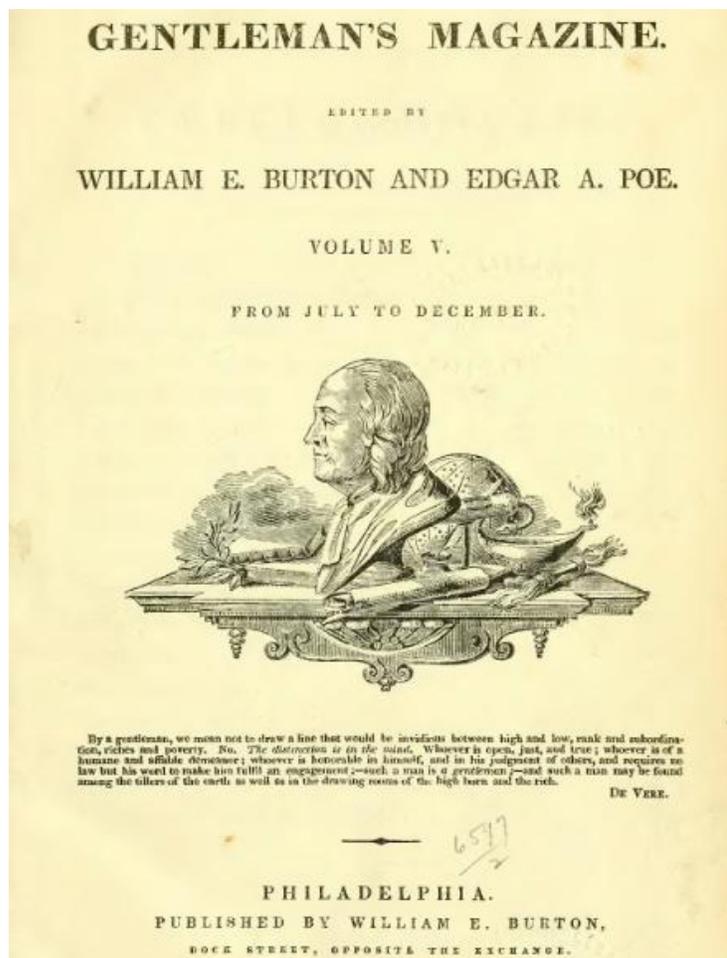
On the academic side, basic research into the relationship between literature and history forms the immediate challenge. The project's literary scholars and historians, working closely with graduate assistants in those disciplines and in geography, will focus on a set of inter-related questions: What was Poe's specific involvement as a magazinist and cultural critic in the emergence of "American" literature? In what ways was his fiction and poetry "American" and responsive to the cultural

and political conflicts of the Jacksonian era? How did he envision the place of literature in the work of nation building?

For nearly twenty years now, scholars have been reexamining Poe's relationship to antebellum sociocultural experience to correct the misperception that he was un-American. Even though Poe insisted that writers should appeal to a global audience, he was intensely patriotic in his resistance to British criticism, in his promotion of an "American" literature, and in his advocacy of copyright laws to protect the property of authors. However, there has not been a systematic reassessment of Poe's writings in relation to the events that helped to shape his unusual sensibility. This is what we hope to do.

What do you hope to achieve long-term?

By building outward from Poe's works and ultimately connecting our efforts with teams elsewhere working on other authors and themes, we hope to make more intelligible the literature of the United States and the complications of cultural change during the crucial epoch of American nation-building and self-making from the end of the War of 1812 to the end of the Civil War in 1865.





J. Gerald Kennedy
Boyd Professor of
English at LSU

How did you get interested in this project?

The idea of a broad antebellum print culture digital resource, built around Poe, was proposed at a Poe symposium in Charlottesville in April 2009, and as co-organizer of the event, I imported the idea to Baton Rouge. In the fall of 2009, I extended an invitation to faculty in the departments of English, history, computer science,

and the School of Library and Information Science to discuss the project.

When the University's financial crisis slowed work in 2010-11, Joel Tohline and CCT came to the rescue, with funding support that let us hire two graduate assistants and—most instrumental—add Chris Branton to provide sorely needed technological expertise.

Our team has really come together, and the interdisciplinary problem-solving has been exciting to participate in. We have learned from each other and have now devised an ideal project to put Poe's Republic of Letters on the map of innovative digital humanities research.

What is the significance of digital humanities?

We do not intend to imply

that digital representations are more understandable or enjoyable than their physical precursors. Rather, we intend to utilize the unique capabilities of digital resources to put a number of organized and

catalogued resources at the fingertips of readers. We will contribute to new knowledge by bringing to light connections and associations taken for granted at the time but mostly forgotten today.



Poe's memorial grave in Baltimore, MD.



Phoenix MacAiohd
Multimedia Specialist at CCT

Why is this project important to you personally?

I joined the project in April 2013, because I myself am a good example of how humanities can be united with computation. My undergraduate degree was a combination of history, philosophy, and literature. My professional background is very diverse, but specifically includes information technology. Finding a way to merge my academic background with my professional

interests is important to me. This is why a year and a half ago I started a master's program in LSU's Library and Information Science Department. This is also why I am interested in digital humanities.

How will this project benefit readers of Poe's literature?

I find it fascinating that people will be able to look at many different materials brought together and think of them as a unified body of work. When things are spread out, it makes it hard to pick up on themes and ideas that might be woven throughout them. By bringing them all together in a single digital location, people will be able to see the influence these materials had on Poe and Poe, in turn, had upon the intellectual nature of the United States in the period of identity exploration. I like the

idea of increased physical and intellectual access that digitization allows.

What did you learn while working on this project?

Digital humanities is a growing field, but at the moment, there is no such course at LSU, not in my program, nor in any other. By participating in this project, I am being exposed to how the field actually works. Also, this is my first time actually participating in a grant writing process.

I am a fan of Poe, but prior to working on this project, I was unaware that he was also a magazine editor and contributor. This project introduced me to a broader concept of who Poe was and, therefore, the influence that he would have had on antebellum America.

What are your career

goals?

CCT has committed to hire a digital humanities professor into my department. Unfortunately, that process won't finish until after I graduate, so I will never get to get a chance to take a class with that person, but I am excited for other students.

In the long run, I would like to be part of a digital humanities collection, which is what they are attempting to start with this project. There are collections at other universities that focus on different things, authors, thematic concepts, and regional ideas. I would enjoy actually taking physical documents, turning them into digital documents, helping optical character recognition being done on them, cleaning up the text, and then marking the text so that it becomes more searchable in a digital format.



Jordan Von Cannon
PhD candidate
LSU Department of English

When did you start working on the project and what do you actually do?

Before starting in October 2011, I had only a cursory knowledge of what people “do” in the digital humanities, but during that first year I quickly learned the exciting opportunities that exist when you combine digital tools and humanities research.

My day-to-day work on the project has more recently focused on writing and helping to prepare the group’s application for an NEH

Collection and Reference Resources grant. Normally, my work includes researching the authors and metaconcepts related to the periodicals in order to flesh out a network of these antebellum America connections. I also serve as the liaison between the humanities, metadata, and technology teams, and the keeper of the project’s short-term “task list” for the project manager (Branton) and project director (Kennedy).

What are the main challenges of digital humanities?

One central challenge is staying abreast of the ever-evolving field as new literary-based digital projects are added to the fold. In the working group, we’ve watched as our plans for the project’s website have expanded to include a site that works as effectively on a regular computer monitor as it does on a tablet or phone, maybe even creating an app

in some future version of the project.

Slowly, the way humanities scholars access and exchange information is

changing. It’s thrilling to be part of the process, as I consider the way the digital tools and site we create will change the way I do my own research and teaching.



Derick Ostrenko
Assistant Professor, School of Art / CCT Cultural Computing

How different is it for you to be working with materials and styles from more than 150 years ago?

Working with material that was printed in the mid-1800s has proved to be a fulfilling challenge. I want to find innovative ways to navigate scanned text and images in our digital archive while

preserving the character and purpose of the original documents.

The context of what we work with is sometimes difficult to grasp without a background in literary culture. I’m privileged to be working with a group of scholars knowledgeable about this slice of history. I re-contextualize works by placing them in a living archive so we can more easily juxtapose what was important 150 years ago today.

Why did you get involved?

This project is significant to me because I get to create new modes of exploring a part of literary culture that operates in ways surprisingly similar to today’s. The digital humanities has

always been an interest of mine. I am fascinated by how technology can augment the experience of ingesting fields such as art, literature, and history. This project has allowed me to start building an online framework for reanimating otherwise static content so others can view, contribute, share, and add to it.

My background is in the intersection of art and technology. Much of what I do involves physical museums, galleries, and festivals. I see this project as a way to explore the issues of creating virtual counterparts to cultural collections. Our recent projects have involved literary applications but there are interesting correlations to the visual

arts that I am interested in exploring further.

What is your role on a day-to-day basis?

My role in the digital humanities initiative is to design the user experience for our various projects. I focus on front-end development and try to come up with new interfaces for serving content in ways that engage our public depending on their interests. We want to provide a meaningful experience to a variety of visitors from novices to scholars. This is a complex challenge that calls for intuitive design so users will feel comfortable interacting with our project on their level. I try to visualize our content in new ways for a fresh perspective on a part of literary history.