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Versioning Cultural Objects Digital Approaches

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Introduction: Versions of Cultural Objects

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Abstract

The *version* of a cultural object is identified, defined, articulated, and analysed through diverse mechanisms in different fields of research. The study of versions allows for the investigation of the creative processes behind the conception of the object, a closer inspection of the socio-political contexts that affect it, and may even provide the means to investigate the object's provenance and circulation. At a symposium at Maynooth University, scholars from different research areas exchanged ideas about different forms of media, including text, image, and sound, to work towards an understanding of the term *versioning* in the broadest sense. While the understanding of versions and related terminology differs between disciplines, a cross-disciplinary dialogue will highlight the range and depth of existing studies and provide an interdisciplinary understanding of the term *versioning* which will be useful for a more holistic conceptualisation. The present volume tries to contribute to this dialogue by providing eight peer-reviewed articles resulting from the discussion and presentations held at Maynooth University.

The breadth and applicability of the concept of a *version* is at the core of this volume. Questions like: *Can the word version be applied uniformly across disciplines? Does the meaning of the word change?* drove the editorial decisions in bringing together the various participants in the original symposium in Maynooth which was the beginning of this volume. The range of the answers presented here underline the striking multivariance of the term, and the way that different humanities researchers are using it, from music to genetic criticism to *versioning* as it is understood in the management of shared code databases. By choosing these articles, we hope that we can offer not only a sense of the range of the field, but invite the reader to think about the many facets that have to be considered in order to fully understand the semantic lifting done whenever the word *version* is encountered, and how we might begin to form a shared understanding of the fullness of the term, but also where it needs more support and specificity.

1 The genesis of this volume

This volume had its genesis in the work of An Foras Feasa during 2015 and early 2016, The Research Institute for the Humanities at Maynooth University, then headed by Susan Schreibman. Roman worked on the redesign and release of the *Versioning Machine 5.0*, a publication framework for the display and visual analysis of multiple versions of a text. Vinayak worked on a theoretical framework to capture electronic metadata of visual resources (see Das Gupta); it was in that setting that the question arose of how to record reproductions and the context they were produced in. In order to foster an interdisciplinary discussion about the topic, they organized a symposium as a platform to present and discuss the various disciplinary approaches. In addition to the presentation of papers, the participants worked in groups to examine related terminology. This cross-disciplinary exchange can be seen in the finished chapters.

2 Why was the term *versioning* used?

The term *versioning* is more frequently used in the context of software versioning and electronic version control. The *Versioning Machine*, developed by Schreibman et al. in the early 2000s (launched in 2002), introduced the term in the sense of *exploring variation between textual versions of a work* into the digital humanities community (see Schreibman, “Re-Envisioning”; Schreibman et al., “The Versioning Machine”). With the *Versioning Machine*, Susan Schreibman investigated the composition process of Thomas MacGreevy’s poetry by comparison and parallel reading of various versions of the poems.

Taking Schreibman’s work as a point of departure, and the attendant realization that *versioning* means different things to different disciplines and to different practitioners, the edited articles in this volume illustrate the range and depth of existing studies of versions and will (we hope) provide a first step towards a platform for an interdisciplinary discussion and understanding of the concept. The volume engages with *versioning* in the digital humanities in three primary areas: the conceptualisation of versions in different humanities disciplines, the methods involved in the electronic modelling of versions of cultural objects, and the representations of digital versions. Individual articles may cover one or more of these areas in varying depth. Appropriately enough for a book on *versioning*, our volume opens with ELISA NURY’s dissection of the meaning of *variant reading* in textual scholarship. She asks whether the concept of “variance” means the same thing in different disciplines, emphasizing the importance of contextualisation of the term and presents an implementation of a digital representation of a *reading*, which is a first step to conceptualise *variant reading*, using the CollateX JSON data format.

3 Textual versions and digital editing

The advent of the digital age has led to a profusion of digital versions of documents, but problems in dealing with versions are hardly new: palaeographers had to deal with different versions of scripts, numismatists with versions of coins, archaeologists for instance with marble versions of Greek bronze statues or motives on Greek red-figure pottery, textual scholars with versions of written sources, art historians with different versions of artworks. The methodologies developed in a pre-digital context still have validity today and many scholarly discussions have continued and are being adapted in the digital scholarly context. So what does it mean when we, as digital humanists, talk about versions? Where do traditional approaches of the pre-digital age end, and what do new, digital approaches entail?

For instance, digital textual editing discussions about versions go in different directions: in stemmatology and copy-text editing, an editor has to establish which variation between different manuscript witnesses to “trust” in order to establish a “safe text” that comes as close as possible to an author’s original work. Editors following the genetic editing approach try to untangle the various layers of revisions and changes made to a manuscript over time. While genetic editing was the exception in print, the flexibility of the digital medium to represent different layers of a text has led to a substantial increase in the development of such editions (see Pierazzo, “Digital Documentary Editions”). One of the central characteristics of digital scholarly editing is the separation of data and presentation. The data is usually represented using the standard of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) which allows the modelling of versions of a text in concordance with the traditional editing approaches (see Burghart; Pierazzo, “Facsimile”).

Three chapters in the volume, by Martina Scholger, Richard Breen, and Christian Thomas present case studies of digital scholarly editing projects that investigate different kinds of versions and variance.

MARTINA SCHOLGER’s chapter, “Pieces of a Bigger Puzzle,” explores her work on a digital scholarly edition of the notebooks of Hartmut Skerbisch, an Austrian visual artist. The notebooks contain a network of references to music, literature, and other visual art works as well as numerous sketches, constructional drawings, and diagrams of Skerbisch’s installations in various stages of conceptual planning. Lacking the finished installations, Scholger uses a genetic criticism approach to uncover and identify the various versions which are the result of the artist’s creative process and to examine the relationship between sketch and visitors’ reports of the final installation in relation to the genesis of his artistic work.

RICHARD BREEN explores the transmission of the many variants of “The Unfortunate Rake.” We might wonder what “St. James Infirmary Blues” has in common with “Streets of Laredo,” a nineteenth-century cowboy song, or what either has to do

with an Irish folk song. To explore and visually show the motivic similarities, Breen uses the *Versioning Machine* and StoryMapJS to map and narrate the distribution of the song variations across the globe. Versions in this case are similar motives that developed across variations of the song, uniting a seemingly-disparate corpus in one family network.

Like Scholger, CHRISTIAN THOMAS seeks to reconstruct a missing event, in this case, Alexander von Humbolt's Kosmos-lectures from Humbolt's fragmentary manuscripts, lecture notes taken by attendees, and related documents. These fragmentary reports about the lectures can be viewed as witnesses or versions that can enrich and complement our knowledge of the lectures and its contents, but they may also present conflicting information and narratives. The question is how to deal with such a rich and diverse number of primary sources, especially if—like in the case of the lecture notes—their authorship and origin is not always clear.

4 Considering other representational forms as versions

Historians have for many decades made editions where *regests*, short abstracts listing the main information about a text, have been used for extracting and summarising information important for historical research. Focusing on content—rather than wording—allows the creation of versions of texts enriched by external information (in the form of RDF) in order to find connections and support advanced search functionalities governed by a conceptual model (see Vogeler). Consequently, as representations of the information layer, abstracts, regests, or metadata should be considered as expressing a version of the same, each supplementing or replacing other possible versions based upon project and disciplinary needs. In this volume, GEORG VOGELER uses the example of medieval charters to discuss copies and what other kind of versions were added in the digital world: transcriptions and reproductions of a charter in print and digital form, archival and scholarly descriptions, and metadata become part of his model. He suggests a graph-based data model with RDF that allows a more flexible and suitable approach than current XML or relational database solutions.

This focus on the information layer also leads one to think about the various trajectories in the production and commodification of an object, and the meanings and values associated throughout these histories, which can be referred to as *object biographies* (see Kopytoff). Treating the history of objects as a version of what they are, fully in parallel with their content, reminds us that objects and texts, as they come down to us today, may not only exist in different versions (as of, say, a painting), but are usually different versions of themselves, having undergone changes, whether

physical or in terms of their recontextualization, which affect our interpretation, and are themselves, in effect, variant readings of the object. That these changes should have a temporal aspect which needs to be considered is no surprise, and ATHANASIOS VELIOS and NICHOLAS PICKWOOD's contribution to this volume, presenting CIDOC-CRM events for reconstructing the history of binding structures, attempts to address the need to formally document this temporal aspect in digital codicology.

5 Electronic texts and version control

The book concludes with two papers discussing principles of the versioning of electronic documents, comparing versions of electronic documents, and problems when trying to collaboratively work with documents in an online environment. Specifically-electronic considerations for editing should be taken into account, as in GIOELE BARABUCCI's exploration of different abstraction levels of electronic documents which can be described by their content, model, variants, and physical embodiment. The paper describes the problem and presents a formal solution in the CMV+P model. The implementation of this model would enable a user (human or computer) to precisely describe and communicate the type of version of an electronic document the user is interested in. Practical applications include document comparison tools which could operate on a CMV+P based model to compare only the levels of primary interest.

Metacontextual issues around project management and collaboration are considered by MARTINA BÜRGERMEISTER, who discusses the importance of versioning control systems for digital collaboratory research environments. She critically analyses collaborative projects such as Annotated Books Online, Monasterium.net and Wikipedia by exploring how collaboration and versioning control is implemented by these organizations. She concludes that existing collaboratories do not satisfy the needs of humanities research, and suggests conceptual models which will help us to classify the various types of changes happening in electronic documents during collaborative work and the relationships between them.

6 Concluding remarks

In a way, a single thread connects Nury's opening article, which starts the volume with a solid grounding in the text critical concept of versions, to Bürgermeister's closing article, which deals with versioning metadata from current development practices. We proceed from the big, basic question of what a version is, through case studies, to domain-specific formal systems for representing knowledge (discussed by Vogeler, Velios and Pickwood), down to a narrowed and focused exploration of the actual codepoints that represent word information (Barabucci). Another thread

might go from Nury's analogue context, through case studies by Breen, Thomas, and Scholger—which all present material which could be represented in an analogue edition, but where digital methods help to present the complexity of the data more clearly than was possible in print—to the purely-digital representations enabled by graph data and the digital structure of word data itself, and the data about data that is collected by a versioning system. Yet another thread would wind in a convoluted and hopelessly knotted fashion, detouring for all the similarities among the articles. As an example, in both Scholger's work on artists notes and Thomas' work on the Kosmos-lectures, we lack a direct and authoritative version of the “main event” (the installation for Skerbisch and the lectures for von Humboldt), leading to a reconstructed *ur*-version which is itself unstable and subject to variance in interpretation. Here, we see techniques developed for critical textual editing applied to the reconstruction of performance. Vogeler's work on charters highlights similar issues for drafts, as the final, legal version of a charter can be preceded by non-legal drafts, and followed by promulgations and re-issues that are separate legal acts of the same basal charter text. Here, the versions speak to both the textual development of the charter as well as the various instances of its legal effectuation. We hope that these examples will encourage people to give thought to how the concept of versioning changes and with what kind of new versions we are dealing in a digital context.

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