

WHAT WOULD HARRY SAY?
DIGITAL ANALYSIS, TEXTUAL RESULTS,
LITERARY CRITICISM, AND *HARRY*
POTTER FANFICTION

Megan Suttie, PhD Candidate

McMaster University

18th May, 2018

STANLEY FISH, “MIND YOUR P’S AND B’S: THE
DIGITAL HUMANITIES AND INTERPRETATION”

“how do the technologies wielded by digital humanities practitioners either facilitate the work of the humanities, as it has been traditionally understood, or bring about an entirely new conception of what work in the humanities can and should be?” (n.p.)

STEPHEN RAMSAY, “STANLEY AND ME”

“nothing ... authorizes the leap from data to interpretation.
And when nothing authorizes the leap, you can leap anywhere
you like” (n.p.)

THE BIG QUESTION

Could digital tools which produce textual results be easier for literary scholars with only limited experience to use and interpret in order to engage with digital tools in the work of traditional literary scholarship?

THE CASE STUDY

- Test group: Me
- Digital tool: Predictive text software algorithm
- Source texts: *Harry Potter* fanfiction
- Methodology: Thematic criticism
- Goal: Demonstrate an ‘authorized leap’ of interpretation

THE DIGITAL TOOL: PREDICTIVE TEXT SOFTWARE ALGORITHM

“pt-voicebox” by jbrew on *Github*

“At each step of the sentence, the script uses the n most recent words to determine a list of the m most likely words to come next. The Markov determination of this list is a weighted combination of several lists, with higher weights given to lists of words that followed larger n -grams that constitute the immediate context”

THE DIGITAL TOOL: SOFTWARE AS “BLACK BOX”

Software as “black box”

Requiring an understanding of the digital tool beyond how to employ it as an end-user as part of accepting the validity of conclusions drawn from analysing the results creates a significant barrier to access that will serve to further distance digital analysis from traditional literary criticism.

SELECTING THE SOURCE TEXTS: *FANFICTION.NET* AND *AO3*

- Active sites: *Fanfiction.net* and *Archive of our Own (AO3)*
- Establishing popularity: *Fanfiction.net* “favourites”; *AO3* “kudos”
- Short format: *Fanfiction.net* <5,000 words; *AO3* manually excluded >1 chapter
- From each, took 50 most popular rated below “mature” and 50 most popular rated “mature” or above (total 200 texts)

ANALYSING THE SOURCE TEXTS: 8 GROUPINGS

Grouping Contents

AO3 less than mature (50 texts)

AO3 mature or higher (50 texts)

AO3 all works (100 texts)

Fanfiction.net less than mature (50 texts)

Fanfiction.net mature or higher (50 texts)

Fanfiction.net all works (100 texts)

All less than mature (100 texts)

All mature or higher (100 texts)

ANALYSING THE SOURCE TEXTS: PROCESS OF ASSEMBLY

- Three considerations:
 - finding most common themes
 - avoiding extreme repetition
 - maintaining enough sense to be readable as sentences

ANALYSING THE SOURCE TEXTS: “HIGHEST RATIONAL CHOICE” SAMPLES

- Final system – “highest rational choice”
 - Selecting highest ranked option that maintained readability while avoiding a previous phrase
 - Each sample 20 sentences long, with each sentence beginning with each of the 20 most common words in descending order

“A BIT OF A MAN”:
“HIGHEST RATIONAL CHOICE” SAMPLE OF 100 AO3
TEXTS

Of the other man, Malfoy scribbled something on the floor, and then he was sure that he could feel his heart racing – and Hermione, on the other side of the bed, was empty. ...

You know what to do with the rest of the day. That was all that he would need: someone who would want him to be with him, and Draco was already there. Was that the man who had taken him to the floor and then the door?

ANALYSING THE SOURCE TEXTS: “FREE CHOICE” SAMPLES

- Constructed with explicit intention of developing theme throughout
- Using each of three *A03* groupings
- Beginning with “Harry Potter,” assembled initial sentence using choices from high in the list, then constructed passage to develop the theme suggested

“THE NEXT MOMENT”:
“FREE CHOICE” SAMPLE OF 100 AO3 TEXTS

Harry Potter was dead, and Draco has been the one who had been there for him while he waited for the next moment. Draco had always known that Voldemort would be defeated, but he didn't think that Harry could be taken from them forever. It was the worst thing that had happened in his life.

INTERPRETING THE RESULTS: THEMES FROM TRADITIONAL SCHOLARSHIP

- Most commonly theme: “romance and sexuality”
 - Heteronormative relationships
 - Issues of adolescent sexuality
 - Homosexuality and other non-heteronormative romances
 - Fetish and sexual deviance
- Common “slash” pairings: Harry/Draco and Harry/Snape

**“A BIT OF A MAN”:
“HIGHEST RATIONAL CHOICE” SAMPLE ANALYSIS**

Of the other man, Malfoy scribbled something on the floor, and then he was sure that he could feel his heart racing – and *Hermione, on the other side of the bed*, was empty. It was just a hint of a smile spread across his face, but he knows that he is not a bad person. In front of him was the first thing he had ever felt so good at.

You know what to do with the rest of the day. **That was all that he would need: someone who would want him to be with him, and Draco was already there. Was that the man who had taken him to the floor and then the door?**

“HER NEWTS RESULTS”:
“FREE CHOICE” SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Harry nods seriously and waves his wand with a flick that she had made him like. It doesn't seem to change anything; Hermione laughs softly and shakes her hair back from her face.

...

In that moment, Harry wanted to kiss her, like he had thought about for more than a little while – but he didn't want to take the dare.

BACK TO THE BIG QUESTION

Could digital tools which produce textual results be easier for literary scholars with only limited experience to use and interpret in order to engage with digital tools in the work of traditional literary scholarship?

THE ANSWER

Yes

- Evident how thematic criticism “authorized” interpretation of samples, which developed the same issues identified in traditional scholarship
- Scholar with only basic familiarity was able to make use of a digital tool and analyse textual results

AN ADDITIONAL ANSWER

Predictive text algorithms are perhaps not ideally suited for 'objective' analysis – better considered subjective process of creation

- Analysing “deformed” samples provides results applicable to original “only if we believe that the new organizations ... are revelatory of something inherent in the text before the act of interpretation” (Ramsay)

Potential to illuminate inherent aspects of original, but also significant potential for “loss, corruption, and illegitimacy” (Ramsay)

THE FULL PROJECT

To see the full project, please visit:

whatwouldharrysay.wordpress.com

To contact me:

suttiem@mcmaster.ca