

What Are You Trying to Say?

The Interface as an Integral Element of Argument

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We contend here that user interfaces are a language through which arguments are made. As such they reflect the interpretations of the materials they are supposed to represent. They also reflect the politics and motives of their designers. However, interface development is generally treated as a piece of design independent from the interpretative thrust of the actual content, and thus considered to lie well within the domains of engineering, interaction design, and aesthetics. These are considered essential to communicate content to the user, but they are also usually considered neutral and non-interfering, as being explicitly divorced from the argument. Thus when we are building interfaces we generally fail to account for the argumentative aspect of the user interface that we provide.

The idea that an edition is a theory (and thus an argument) has been around for decades (Cerquiglini 1989; Shillingsburg 2013), but in practice this insight has not had much overt influence on how editions are presented, particularly in paper form. Perhaps the greatest innovation of the digital space is that it gives us a tangible means to express our argument and theory in entirely new forms. And yet the *language* of this expression through user interface has barely begun its development.

Artifacts, editions among them, can accommodate politics (Woolgar & Cooper 1999), though it might be more precise to say that the *creators* of artifacts have or are influenced by ethics, politics, motivation, and rationale. These aspects can be reflected in artifacts and may thus impact the context of these artifacts, that is: users—although, of course, that impact need not necessarily match with the intent of the creators. Digital editions are driven through code, which itself has a certain agency that may amplify that impact (Van Zundert 2016). Just like the edition itself, the computer code used to produce a digital edition can be read as an integral expression of the edition's argument. Thus interfaces as integral coded parts of the digital scholarly edition affect and are affected by this argument.

Far from being neutral information channels, then, interfaces are a kind of lens: they represent a certain non-neutral perspective on a model. Just as there is not a single data format that will be able to satisfy all use requirements (Vitali 2016), it is hard to imagine that there can be one neutral satisfying interface for a scholarly edition, even when a shared underlying model is used. While a particular group of scholars may agree, for example, on a graph-based model as a good representation of text, the interface preferences of each will be an expression of what they individually intend to do—what argument they intend to make—with that model. For instance, the presence of an interactive collation tool is linked to the argument that the collation is a changeable thing, or a matter of interpretation for the scholar-user. Should the text be read, and examined, in the form of a graph? Such an interface relates to the argument that a graph model is essential to understand the nature of the text. Yet another form may incorporate Jupyter and D3 notebook views for scholars to use and tweak as they will, which stresses a meta-argument: that the editor's own argument belongs solidly in the constitution of the data and access to that, and has no place interfering in the user experience.

Thus the possible interfaces for a scholarly edition differ, sometimes radically, even though they are all expressions of the same underlying model. Nevertheless as soon as we consider our requirements for an *interface* to the edition, the user requirements and certainly their aesthetics start to differ, and even conflict. And they justifiably should as these conflicts in our view represent various possible arguments about the text. As a consequence we advocate in this paper, not for a set of guidelines or requirements for digital scholarly editions or their interfaces, but rather that editors explicitly consider the semiotic significance of any interface element they provide—to reflect on what aspect of the argument it express, and how that is adding, or perhaps subtracting, from the argument they want to make.

References

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