

VERSIONING MACHINE v3.1

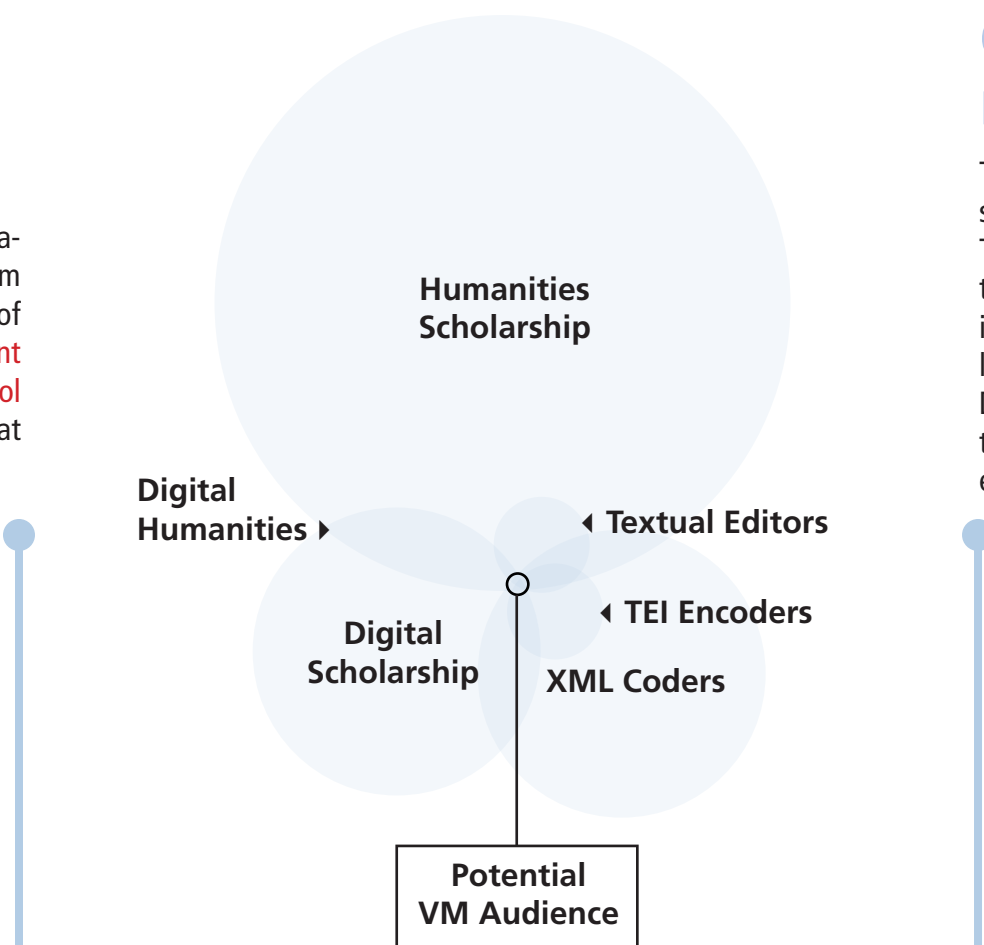
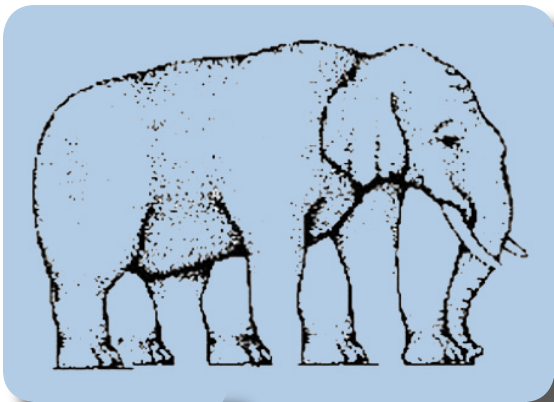
A TOOL FOR DISPLAYING & COMPARING DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF LITERARY TEXTS

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Is digital humanities tool development worth the effort?

Scholars in the digital humanities express a desire for more tools. Paradoxically tools are frequently not widely adopted. As the Venn diagram suggests, the Versioning Machine is of interest to a limited subset of scholars. **What then, is an appropriate model for determining the amount of time and resources to devote to developing a digital humanities tool whose potential utility is so constrained?** How can we measure what "worth the effort" means?

73% of survey respondents say the VM could enhance their scholarship...
60% say they will use the VM in the future
however...only 16% have downloaded it
...and there is only 1 live implementation beyond that of the developers



Can tools help scholars reimagine their own work?

The fairly tiny field of textual editing is the beneficiary of two open-source tools that serve a similar need: The Versioning Machine and Juxta. The VM uses TEI, XSLT, HTML, and Javascript, which allows the texts to be repurposed, but complicates building cross-browser compatible interfaces. Meanwhile, Juxta uses a proprietary encoding scheme that limits usage of the texts but allows for an elegant Java-based interface. Despite their respective limitations, VM and Juxta both allow scholars the opportunity to reassess their own work and create productive spaces for scholarly inquiry and further development.

70% of the potential VM audience use Firefox to browse the internet...
whereas only 33% of general Internet users prefer Firefox.
Such differences have important implications for interface design and coding.

Survey respondents' comments on the VM's potential to aid their scholarship revealed broader concepts about the scholarly and pedagogic utility of viewing and manipulating multiple versions of text online:

- "expanding the manner in which other documents are displayed online, including archival finding aids and other index and reference tools"
- "a framework within which to conceptualize access to various components of digital editions"
- "studying how authors and poets write"
- "teaching students about the writing process by visualizing it"

The value lies in exposing people to a new paradigm.

John Unsworth's 1997 article "The Importance of Failure" suggests that we hold projects to the "standard of science...the rhetoric of invention, discovery, and progress..." **The process of development itself becomes the scholarly project, rather than solely the end product.** Is a goal to create a dialogue—to invite scholars to participate in reconceiving their own work?

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: Does the academic marketplace reward developing and implementing digital humanities tools?

Many of the activities the *MLA Report on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion* singles out as "devalued" by promotion and tenure committees are particularly well suited to digital humanities tools—translations, bibliographic scholarship, and producing scholarly editions. Still more alarming are the *Report's* findings regarding experience with digital scholarship and digital tools among those who serve on tenure committees: "40.8% of departments in doctorate granting institutions report no experience evaluating refereed articles in electronic format, and 65.7% report no experience evaluating monographs in electronic format." Even most of this work is traditional scholarship in digital form rather than scholarship that has been transformed by digital tools, or the development of digital tools to advance scholarship. How do these facts square with the recommendation of the *ACLS Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences* for "policies for tenure and promotion that recognize and reward digital scholarship and scholarly communication; recognition should be given not only to scholarship that uses the humanities and social science cyberinfrastructure but also to scholarship that contributes to its design, construction, and growth?"