

Conversations with collections

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Notes from a talk I gave at the Digital Treasures Symposium, 21 June 2013, University of Canberra.

Over the last couple of weekends I've been building a bot. Let me introduce you to the [TroveNewsBot](#).



TroveNewsBot is just [a simple script](#) that periodically checks for messages from Twitter, uses those messages to create queries in [Trove's newspaper database](#), and tweets back the results.

[@TroveNewsBot](#) Grant Featherston

— Michelle Mortimer (@chelle_mortimer) [June 17, 2013](#)

Possibly the greatest bot ever “[@TroveNewsBot: @chelle_mortimer](#) 14 Dec 1952: 'good design' <http://t.co/no39oTANTc>”

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— Michelle Mortimer (@chelle_mortimer) [June 17, 2013](#)

[TroveNewsBot's birth](#) was, however, not without some pain. I ran into difficulty with Twitter's automated spam police. At one stage everytime my bot tweeted, its Twitter account was suspended.

Twitter's bots didn't like my bot. [:(]

The problem has since been resolved — I think I must have done something when I was testing that upset the spam bots — but it did lead me to read in detail Twitter's policies on spam and automation. This sentence in particular caused me to reflect:

The @reply and Mention functions are intended to make communication between users easier, and automating these processes in order to reach many users is considered an abuse of the feature.

So what is a *user* and what is *communication*? I read this sentence as suggesting that communications between individual human users were somehow more real, more authentic than automatically generated replies. But is a script tweeting someone a link to to a newspaper article that they might be interested in really less authentic than a lot of the human-generated traffic on the net?

Amongst the messages I received when I revealed TroveNewsBot to the world earlier this week was this:

[@wragge](#) I love Mr. Trove Bot - nice work! Not an object talking, its a whole database.

— Alli Burness (@alli_burnie) [June 17, 2013](#)

And later from the same person:

[@wragge](#) Bugs are ok, nice to watch Trove Bot flicker to life. Always thought clxns have a personality, look forward to seeing Trove's.

— Alli Burness (@alli_burnie) [June 17, 2013](#)

Even as we live an increasing amount of our lives 'connected', still there remains a tendency to assume that experiences mediated through online technologies are somehow less authentic than those that take place in this space that we often refer to as 'the real world'.

In the realm of cultural heritage, digitisation is frequently assumed to be a process of loss. We create surrogates, or derivatives — useful, but somehow inferior representations of ‘the real thing’.

Now let’s just all admit that, yes, we like the smell of old books, and that we can’t read in the bath with our iPad, and move beyond the sort of fetishism that often accompanies these sorts of discussions.

Yes, of course, digital and physical manifestations are different, the point is whether we get anywhere by arguing that one is necessarily inferior to the other.

A [recent article](#) in the *Times Literary Supplement* expressed concern at the money being spent on the manuscript digitisation programs that the author argued were ‘proceeding unchecked and unfocused, deflecting students into a virtual world and leaving them unequipped to deal responsibly with real rare materials’. Yes, there may be aspects of a physical page that a digital copy cannot represent, but [as Alistair Dunning pointed out](#) in response to the article, there’s no simple binary opposition:

The digital does not replace the analogue, but augments it, sometimes in dramatic and sometimes in subtle ways.

In his keynote address to the ‘Digital Transformers’ conference, [Jim Mussell similarly argued](#) against a simplistic understanding of digital deficiencies.

The key is to reconceive loss as difference and use the way the transformed object differs to reimagine what it actually was. Critical encounters with digitized objects make us rethink what we thought we knew.

I’m very pleased to be an adjunct here at the University of Canberra, but I’ve always felt a bit of a fraud around people like Mitchell when it comes to talking about visualisation. I’m actually much more comfortable with words than pictures. So why am I here talking to you today?

I think it’s because what we’re discussing today, what the [Digital Treasures Program](#) is about, is not just visualisation. It’s about transformation. It’s about taking cultural heritage collections and changing them. Changing what we can do with them. Changing how we see them. Changing how we think about them.

It’s about creating spaces within which we can have ‘critical encounters with digitized objects’ that ‘make us rethink what we thought we knew’.

And that to me is very exciting.

What might these transformations look like? Who knows? This is research, it should take us places we don’t expect and can’t predict.

However, for the sake of convenience today I’ve tried to define a few possible categories — most, admittedly, based on my own work. But I do so in the hope that the achievements of the Digital Treasures program will soon make my categories look ridiculously inadequate.

Analysis

When we have stuff in digital form — and by stuff I mean both collection metadata and digital objects — we can isolate particular characteristics and add them up, compare them, graph them. We can start to see patterns that we couldn’t see before.

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- [Google Ngram viewer](#)
- Digital humanities — growing number of tools
- Not just texts — [ImagePlot](#)
- Can be simple — [history thesis titles](#) from Trove viewed in Voyant Tools
- [QueryPic](#)
- [The Front Page](#)

Assembly

Putting a lot of similar things together in a way that enables us to see them differently.

- [Series Browser](#)
- [The real face of White Australia](#)

Juxtaposition

Putting different things together in a way that enables us to find connections or similarities.

- [Sembl](#)
- History Wall

Serendipity

Displaying something unexpected or random.

- [The Future of the Past](#)
- [Headline Roulette](#)
- TroveNewsBot — use #luckydip for a random article

Mobilisation

Putting things in new contexts, new conceptual spaces, new physical spaces, new geospatial spaces. Creating interventions and explorations.

- [The People Inside](#)
- TroveNewsBot - [Today's news yesterday](#)
- [Pixtory](#)
- [Kits for Cultural History](#)

This is a very limited catalogue of possibilities, but meagre as it is I think its enough to demonstrate that the overwhelming feature of digital cultural collections is not loss or deficiency, but opportunity and inspiration.

In fact I'm less worried about the deficiencies of digital representation than I am about the possibility that we might end up doing too much — that we might become so skilled in design and transformation that we end up overdetermining the experience of our users, that we end up doing too much of the thinking for them.

It seems to me that when it comes to digital cultural collections an important part of the transformation process is knowing where to leave the gaps and spaces that invite [feeling](#), reflection and critique. We have to find ways of representing what is missing, of acknowledging absence and exclusion. We have to be able to expose our arguments and assumptions, to be honest about our failures and limitations. We have to be prepared to leave a few raw edges, some loose threads that encourage users to unravel our carefully-woven tapestries.

As I was developing the TroveNewsBot I realised I needed some sort of avatar. So of course I started searching in the Trove newspaper database for robots — there I found Mr George Robot.



The Courier-Mail, 7 November 1935, page 21

George Robot, 'described as the greatest electro-mechanical achievement of the age' toured Australia in 1935 and 1936. As [one newspaper described](#), he:

risers and sits as requested, talks, sings, delivers an address on the most abstruse topics, gnashes his electric teeth in rage or derision, while he accentuates his remarks by the most natural movements of arms and hands

But it wasn't just George's technical sophistication that inspired comment. Articles also appeared that described [George's love for Mae West](#) and his [admiration for Hitler](#).

Robots provide us with an opportunity not just to marvel at their technological wizardry, but also to think about what it really is to be human.

[@wragge](#) Bugs are ok, nice to watch Trove Bot flicker to life. Always thought clxns have a personality, look forward to seeing Trove's.

— Alli Burness (@alli_burnie) [June 17, 2013](#)

In the same way, as we start to have new types of conversations with online collections, to explore their many-faceted personalities, we will of course be exploring ourselves.

The digital transformation of cultural collections is not about showcasing technology but about creating new online spaces in which we can simply be human.

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