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12/8/2020

**The Palantír Project: Final Reflection**

When I began working on this project, I knew that I wanted to conduct distant reading analyses of Tolkien criticism in order to assist students like myself who are daunted by the task of hunting through databases for the appropriate Tolkien criticism to match their research. To that end, my analyses of distant reading tools assume that users have at least some prior knowledge of Tolkien’s legendarium and prominent critics. While I make an effort to define certain aspects of the legendarium (such as languages of Middle-earth), I do acknowledge that I could have made the decision to include an “About the Legendarium” page in order to help visitors to my site become better acquainted with Tolkien’s work. However, given the primary goal of my project—to assist students conducting academic research on Tolkien—I chose to forgo this option.

Determining which distant reading tools to use and which to leave out was challenging at first, but I noticed as I began looking at different corpora that I naturally gravitated toward particular tools and found some to be more helpful than others. I ultimately created a set “process” of tool usage (outlined on my “Distant Reading Analyses” page) that helped me stay consistent as I compared different corpora - I used each of the tools in a particular order. One major decision I made was using only the Topic Modeling Tool from the Gale Digital Scholar Lab. This was in part due to the fact that I had so many tools to use from Voyant, but it was also due to the fact that I liked the presentation of Gale’s Topic Modeling Tool and found it to be clearer than Voyant’s tool (which laid out terms in a given topic horizontally rather than vertically, making it harder to read).

While I did not include an explanation of why I used certain tools over others on my website, I did decide that including an introductory photo and brief description of each tool would be very helpful to people who visit my site. It enables them to gain a basic understanding of how the tools work so that they do not feel lost when they read through my analyses. The “Distant Reading Analyses” page is also the place where I explain why some tools are embedded and some are presented as screenshots. As I discussed in my presentation, this depended upon whether or not I felt that embedding a tool would enhance or detract from people’s understanding of my research findings. This project is styled as a presentation of research as opposed to an interactive user experience, so I had to make the decision to make certain tools (particularly the Contexts Tool) into images so that visitors can more easily see how I drew specific insights from these tools. Making each tool interactive may have been more effective for some users, particularly those who learn by “doing” and those who might want to challenge my research findings. In order to compensate for negative consequences associated with this decision, I give people the opportunity to replicate the project by giving them the option to contact me and giving them access to the articles I used.\*

I had to make another significant decision regarding which research questions/research findings to display on my website and which ones to omit. Each Google Sites page can only fit so much material before taking too long to load, and given that I wanted to create an enjoyable user experience for my site, with clear, well-spaced images of my tools, I could not envision cramming every single research finding into it. I opted to repeat two research questions across the corpora, one of which was about how critics’ perceptions of C.S. Lewis changed and one of which was about how critics’ perceptions of evil characters changed. I chose to address these questions based on my personal interest in them and based on the fact that both are related to subjects I know are generally popular in Tolkien criticism. However, for people who may have been interested in research questions I chose to omit, such as “How did critics approach the relationship between Tolkien’s work and his Christian faith?”, my project may not be as useful to them. I ultimately decided, though, that it would be best to focus on just a couple of consistent, predetermined questions and leave room for  questions that came up during my analyses (for example, questions about critics’ interest in language arose when I saw that “language” is a frequently-mentioned term in the 1980s corpus). I also could have divided my website presentation into research questions, not corpus decades, but I decided that going by decade would provide visitors with a clearer understanding of how Tolkien criticism changed across time.

Additionally, I chose to arrange my corpora by decade instead of analyzing how criticism changed within each decade.\*\* Going with the latter option would have enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of how critics may have responded to particular events or publications, but I did not feel that I had enough data to make my analyses more specific. If I had had the time to collect 500 documents for each decade instead of 85-100, I certainly would have looked into the option of basing my corpora on 1 or 5–year periods of time.

Design-wise, my site is set up so that my “About the Project” page and all of my corpus pages are very detailed, but my more global page—“Cross-Corpus Comparisons”—includes bullet points that briefly summarize my main findings for each corpus. I could have gone the opposite way, putting bullet points on each corpus page and more detailed analyses on the global page, but I was operating under the assumption that users would gravitate toward the corpus pages first and then seek out the “Cross-Corpus Comparisons” page for a refresher on what they just read about. There was also the concern of space on the “Cross-Corpus Comparisons” page; including too much detailed information on each corpus might make for a more difficult reading experience. I wanted to avoid too many dense blocks of text. My “About the Project” page may be a bit dense, but that is because I felt it was important to be as transparent as possible with people about my data, research process, and design decisions given that I am displaying the project like a research presentation and therefore describing trends in Tolkien criticism in a more subjective way.

I was excited to put graphs on the “Cross-Corpus Comparisons” page to give people a visual of how mentions of scholars in the “Inklings” group and mentions of specific evil characters varied across the different corpora. I felt that it was important to give users some kind of global visualization after they had spent time looking at images of all of the tools I used, but again, the question of what subjects to address in these graphs came up. I decided to look at the Inklings and evil characters because these subjects directly connect to my two bigger research questions. If I had had more time, I would have created graphs that address issues such as the number of times specific female characters are mentioned in each corpus.

While setting up my website, I realized that I had not been including any alt text for the screenshots of different tools I was posting. This was a major oversight, and one that is rooted in my subconscious assumption that everyone visiting the site will automatically be able to read and process the images I post. I corrected myself by adding alt-text to each of my images, but this experience served as a reminder that I cannot present research findings that are heavy on visuals without taking into consideration that some people absorb information in a non-visual way. Additionally, I placed images of tools with a lot of white space against a gray background so that they would stand out more easily. This also helps break up the information I lay out on my web pages so that people do not become fatigued as they scroll through it.

\*I took the feedback about potential copyright issues with posting library database documents on Google Drive into account. I emailed Mark Paris at the library and did not hear back, so I am turning in the project with the links to the articles I used set up as they were before I did my presentation. However, I can always change this and simply tell visitors to my site to contact me if they would like access to any articles. Right now, the Google Drive folders with the articles in them are set so that only members of the Brandeis community can access them. If this project were to become public, I would certainly make changes to respect any regulations around reposting library database documents.

\*\*I realized during my presentation, based on Jason’s question, that I did not provide a definition of what a corpus is. Because this is such a widely-used term in my project and it is important to define it, I added a brief definition to my “About the Project” page.