My Life as a Programming Historian

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My recent participation at McMaster's #MACBIG event has brought memories of how I got to be a programming historian. See also www.igartua.ca.

1967 at Michigan State: FORTRAN on punch cards; what a drag! I thought I could use it in my dissertation, but was soon disabused for lack of data.

1974-1978 in the Social Science Computing Lab at Western: punch-card 10 statement FORTRAN on a Control Data CYBER mainframe; doing text processing on a DEC 10 mainframe; BASIC on DEC PDP 8s and 11s; SPSS on the CYBER. Gave up learning to program in binary code. Wrote a data entry BASIC app on the PDP for tabular data (published census data on South-Western Ontario) for storage on the mainframe. No Excel then!

1978-1996: dabbling in INGRES databases at Université du Québec à Chicoutimi and later at UQAM, to access the Saguenay demographic data. A week's toying with APL: seriously elegant, but required a special keyboard with Greek characters. And not easy to use on data sets, as I recall. Taught computing to History undergraduates and MA students.

1981: Moved to UQAM, which had a terrific research computing support team.

Used SIR hierarchical database software (command language modelled on SPSS) for various research data. Later UQAM switched to relational ORACLE databases; in the 1980s and 1990s became very proficient in SQL for my book on Arvida. SPSS on that data.

In December 1981, bought my first IBM PC: 48k of RAM and two floppy drives for $5000; no hard drive! Better keyboards and screens than Apple II. Could program in BASIC at home! First used email programs on an Amdahl (IBM 360 compatible) mainframe. Programmed interfaces between PCs and the mainframe for data upload and editing. Used the PC as terminal to the mainframe. I could compute on the mainframe from home! WordPerfect the first PC word processor that handled footnotes. WYSIWYG too! No more text processing on UQAM's DEC 10.

1990s: UQAM moved from IBM mainframe to Unix servers for research data. All my ORACLE databases followed. Learned Unix OS. Even installed ORACLE on a home PC. The dawn of the Web: HTML, Apache servers. Created, with a stellar team of colleagues, Histoire-Hypermédia (www.h-h.ca), a training tool for history undergraduates learning to do library research. Learned to read PHP and do simple PHP code mods for the Histoire-Hypermédia project. Did SQL on MySQL databases for that project. Started the CHA History and Computing committee in 1989, and chaired it to 1997. Organized

the 1995 International History and Computing conference in Montreal. Developed an interest in computer-assisted history learning. Discovered I was getting out of my depth (history education, programming) with all this stuff.

Late 1990s: Had a look at Microcosm hypertext mark-up software from Southampton University and the Kleio database system designed specifically for historical research: commands in Latin! Learned it's easier to rely on commercial software.

2000s: worked with professional Web programmers, notably on the CHA's short-lived Canadian History Portal.

2005-2008: discovered Prospéro, a sophisticated, chronological text analysis package produced by a group of French sociologists. Used in my 2008 article in the *Journal of Canadian Studies / Revue d'études canadiennes*, 42, 3 (Fall 2008): 106-132. See a brief description of Prospéro here. Had a look at Python; reminded me of BASIC… Used MapInfo's UQAM site licence in teaching computer tools for history M.A. students. SPSS on PCs!

Retired since 2008. Dabbling in Facebook, and now Twitter!

Installed Xubuntu OS (a variant of Linux) on some elderly laptops, to explore the OS. All app software free and the OS was faster than Windows XP on these machines. The GUI is very well done (I was using the French-language distribution). However, resizing disk partitions to enable booting either in Windows or in Xubuntu is not for the faint-hearted!

"Take-away": Software evolves, comes and goes, but basically, all computers do is execute algorithms that a scholar designs to answer a research question with data. It the QUESTIONS and the quality of the data that matter! But learning programming gives you an idea of what goes on beneath the nice-looking user interfaces.