



**DSS 2025**  
DESIGN STUDIES SYMPOSIUM

# **FAILING (well) in Design Writing**

**Edited By**

Deniz Hasırcı

Gökhan Mura

Emre Yıldız

Ali Rıza Bayrak



The fascinating contributions to this volume provide refreshing perspectives on a topic that is rarely acknowledged and less so discussed – failure.

The modern world is very goals oriented – the paradigm and promises of technology are linked to progress – and success. But we must always ask – what *is* success – how is it measured, in what way, when, and by whom? As we are reminded, ‘to err is *human*’ (quoting the famous words of Alexander Pope). We are not machines – nor are we divine – and we make mistakes.

This project’s focus on writing reiterates the need for critical reflection – and increasingly so in our current, technologically driven, yet often unreflective and *inhuman* seeming world. Failure is a mark of our humanity – as imperfect beings. As the provocations and reflections here emphasize - failure *happens*. Failing *well*, is a part of learning, a part of design – and a part of being human.

Congratulations to all those involved in this valuable endeavor of revealing the importance of failure, as an essential component of our development and continued growth.

**Hazel CLARK**, PhD, FRSA

Professor of Design Studies and Fashion Studies

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# FAILING (well) in Design Writing

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The young voices in this symposium reflect a wide range of perspectives on Design Studies. We extend our gratitude for their creativity and courage. The DSS2025 Symposium and book are the fruits of an inclusive and collaborative effort. With tremendous gratitude, we look forward to always learning from our misadventures and pursuing new partnerships.

**Prof. Dr. Deniz HASIRCI**

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# Preface

## About Design Studies



Introduced as the first graduate program in the field in Turkey, the Design Studies Master's and Ph.D. programs are structured under the Graduate School and the Faculty of Fine Arts and Design at the Izmir University of Economics. The programs provide architects, interior architects, visual communication designers, graphic designers, industrial designers, fashion designers and applicants from related disciplines a unique research opportunity. With studies informed by this broad approach, ultimately, students are provided with opportunities to engage with the projects in a theoretical framework and conduct their dissertation, pursuing careers in both design-related professions and academia.

The programs in Design Studies are structured with the goal that the theoretical and practical aspects of successful graduate education can be effectively joined in a constructive way for graduates of various disciplines. Emphasizing the relations between various subjects and approaches provides the students with a broader professional training that equip them with substantial and creative skills, unique experiences, and specialized knowledge.

Design Studies graduate program students conduct their research in a multi-disciplinary/ cross-disciplinary way in the fields of studies and key research topics listed in the website.

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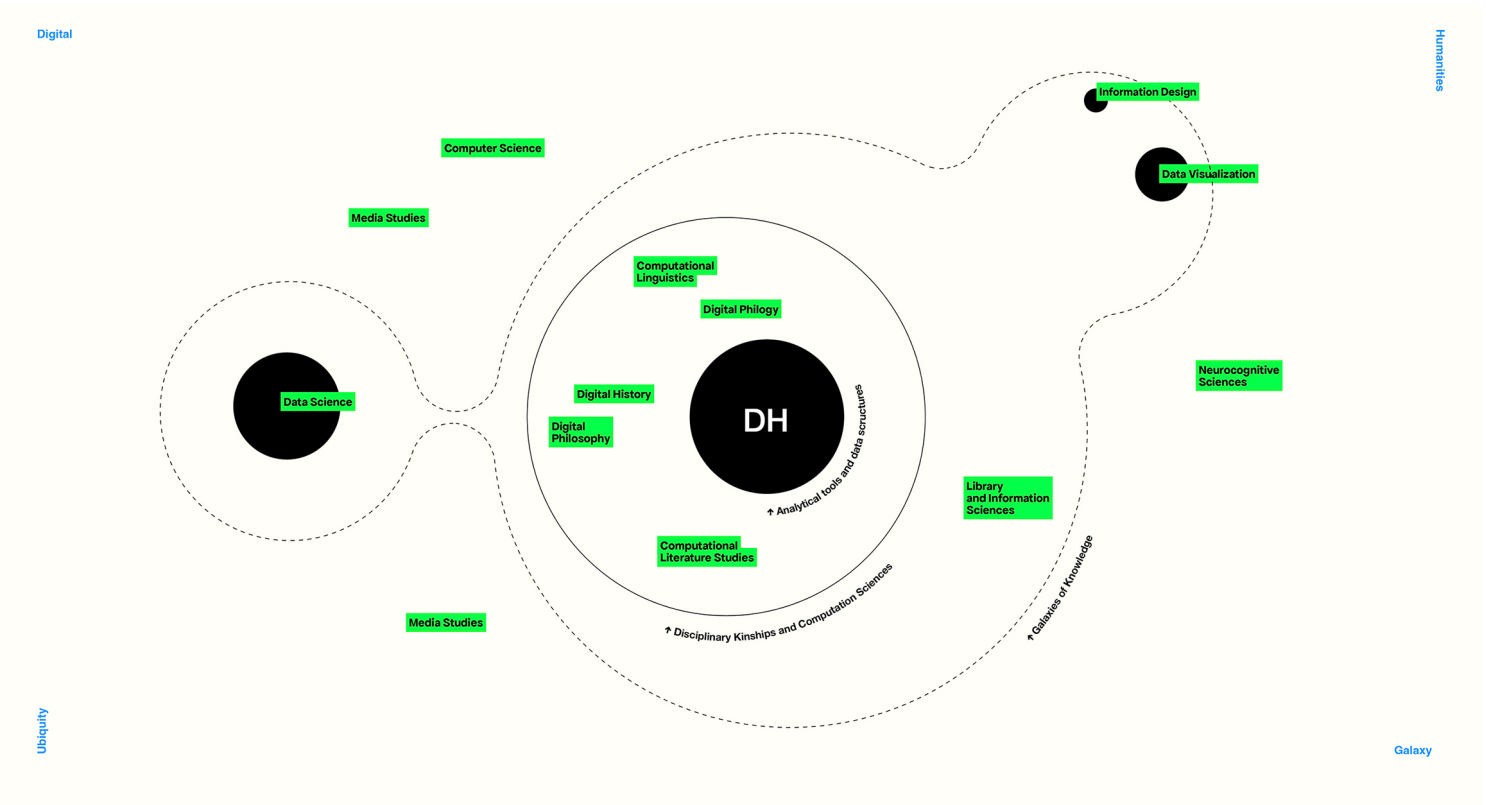
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# From Data to Interpretation: Designing Modular Visualizations for Capta in Digital Humanities

Chiara PALILLO, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Cinzia FERRARA, Asst. Prof. Dr. Daniele SAVASTA, Prof. Dr. Marcello COSTA



Digital Humanities Galaxy. Graphic reworking by author from Ciotti, F. (2023). Digital Humanities. Metodi, Strumenti, Saperi. Carocci.

## Abstract

Digital Humanities represent a continuously evolving research field where the integration of computational methods and the humanities is redefining the interpretative paradigms of knowledge. This paper analyzes the role of Data Visualization in humanities research, with particular focus on the field of Religious Studies. Through the uBIQUity project, developed within ITSERR, innovative strategies for visualizing intertextual references in sacred texts are explored, offering a space for reflection on challenges, failures, and new design opportunities. In this context, the transdisciplinary approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative analysis, emphasizes the need to transcend quantitative visual conventions in favor of more flexible and inclusive interpretative models. The research proposes a methodology based on the design of modular and dynamic visualizations capable of representing the complexity of humanistic phenomena and enhancing the accessibility of religious textual heritage.

**Keywords:** Text Data Visualization, Digital Humanities, Religious Studies, VARK, uBIQUity.

## 1. Introduction

In a transdisciplinary context such as that of Digital Humanities, the increasing intersections between in the transdisciplinary context of Digital Humanities, the blending of diverse disciplines is reshaping models for representing and interpreting knowledge. Fabio Ciotti (2023) defines Digital Humanities as a field at the intersection of computational technologies and the humanities, combining systematic digital methods with critical reflection on their application. The complexity of this field is visualized as a galaxy of interconnected knowledge, with a “core” of methodological research, an “interdisciplinary disk” integrating computational sciences, and an “outer edge” where Digital Humanities engage with other fields like data science and information design. It is in this outer edge where design plays a crucial role in shaping open, non-linear, and inclusive models of knowledge (Latour, 2005).

The combination of humanities, computational disciplines (like Data Science), and design-based fields drives the creation of innovative, inclusive, and decentralized projects, emphasizing collaboration in generating new transdisciplinary artifacts. The ITSERR research ecosystem—focused on strengthening the Italian contribution to ESFRI’s RESILIENCE initiative—aims to develop new tools supporting the Religious Studies community within Digital Humanities. This project adopts a transdisciplinary approach to explore strategies for Text Data Visualization to analyze and interpret texts and the intangible heritage of religious corpora.

A key component of this research is the uBIQUity project, developed within Work Package (WP) 8 of ITSERR. The project focuses on creating a platform to identify intertextual references in sacred texts, specifically commentaries on the Bible and the Qur’an. By working with critical editions of these texts, uBIQUity aims to enhance analysis tools and improve accessibility through the development of multichannel visualizations. These visualizations facilitate interaction with textual content, particularly in identifying and visualizing both literal and non-literal quotations. The integration of space and time within the visualizations offers a new perspective on complex religious texts, contributing to the broader goals of ITSERR.

### 1.1 Interpretative-Exploratory Visualizations: A Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

In recent years, there has been an overwhelming enthusiasm for technological advancements in the humanities, often leading to a focus on quantitative methods at the expense of qualitative depth (Drucker, 2020). As Ciotti (2023) points out, this tendency does not fully reflect the diversity of approaches and perspectives within the Digital Humanities. Traditionally, the text has been the central object of analysis in humanistic studies. However, with the rise of computational methods, it risks being reduced to a mere sequence of data points, processed and analyzed through algorithms. Moretti (2022) describes this phenomenon as a “history of literature without texts,” where words are no longer understood in their full semantic and interpretative richness but instead transformed into measurable units of information.

This shift has created a divide between two ways of approaching textual analysis. On one side, quantitative research focuses on identifying and comparing syntactic patterns, treating texts as formal structures (form-form). On the other, the humanistic tradition emphasizes the subjective, experiential aspects of interpretation, considering texts as gateways to meaning and cultural context (form-world) (Moretti, 2022). Moretti argues that rather than being in conflict, these two perspectives can complement one another: when used thoughtfully, quantitative methods can open new research questions and objects of study,

while hermeneutics can provide depth and critical insight into the results of computational analysis. Ciotti (2023) supports this integrative approach, proposing a model in which qualitative tools—such as digital annotations, semantic coding, and metadata—are combined with quantitative techniques like statistical analysis and machine learning.

However, this blending of methodologies raises an important challenge: how do we design visualization systems that go beyond simple numerical representation and instead capture the complexity of interpretative processes? Drucker (2020) highlights the need for new infographic models that do not simply reflect statistical outputs but also allow for the visualization of subjective, verbo-visual structures. This calls for a rethinking of traditional digital tools, making them more flexible, dynamic, and capable of adapting to the plurality of expressive forms found in humanistic research. Drucker suggests that we should move away from rigid, data-driven approaches and instead develop modular and interactive systems that can accommodate different types of cultural artifacts—whether they are interactive digital texts, multidimensional visualizations, nonlinear narratives, or hybrid materials that blur the boundaries between text and image.

Ultimately, the challenge is not just technological but conceptual. If we want to harness the potential of digital tools in the humanities without losing sight of the richness of interpretative traditions, we need to rethink the way we design and use visualization models. Rather than prioritizing quantification alone, we should develop frameworks that respect the nuanced and evolving nature of humanistic inquiry. This means embracing visualization as a tool not just for organizing data but for fostering interpretation, dialogue, and deeper engagement with texts and cultural artifacts.

## **2. Research Questions and Objectives**

The design of modular-interpretative visualizations that optimize capta accessibility is now essential. This raises key research questions:

2. What visualization characteristics best support the interpretation of qualitative-textual data in Digital Humanities projects for Religious Studies?
3. How can these systems facilitate both close and distant reading, incorporating diverse learning modalities (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) to enhance accessibility and analysis?
4. Can standardized visualization protocols be developed to optimize their use in these contexts?

To address these needs and preserve the material and immaterial heritage within religious corpora, this study explores emerging data visualization strategies. By examining manuscript tradition visualizations, the research highlights their potential in data representation and interaction.

## **3. Textual Figures in the Humanistic Tradition**

Figures have been used since the earliest civilizations as tools for communication and meaning-making (Lima, 2014). Theologians and historians, through hermeneutic research, seek new interpretive tools, with trees, figures, and diagrams serving as metaphors and archives of knowledge (Lima, 2014; Rainini, 2006). Today, these visual forms are widely used for disseminating data and information (Manchia, 2020), but their origins lie in the manuscript tradition (Lima, 2014). Early visual representations often drew on motifs from wind diagrams, cosmic structures, and tree imagery (Lima, 2014). For instance, the *Liber Figurarum*, attributed to Joachim of Fiore, exemplifies medieval diagrammatic culture, where knowledge is organized through color, position, and relationships between graphemes and figures.

Among the most prevalent visualization systems in manuscripts are tree structures, which organize information using branching limbs (figurative connectors) and nodes (verbal statements). While arboreal forms were the dominant form of medieval diagrammatic expression—seen in genealogical trees and Joachim’s *Liber Figurarum*—maps are the oldest examples of textual figures (Rainini, 2006). As historian Jerry Brotton states, “maps elaborate conventional signs ... substitutes for what they can never fully reproduce” (2022, p.38). While based on scientific principles, maps inevitably distort reality (Garfield, 2016). This act of representation is inherently “imaginative,” relying on visual analogies, as seen in *mappemundi*, which Brotton describes as “written and drawn representations of the Christian world” (2022, p.107). The Hereford map, for example, with its circular depiction of Europe, Asia, and Africa, embodies the theological, political, and historical knowledge of the medieval Christian world (Brotton, 2022).

Maps, as human artifacts, serve as archives of history and memory, reshaping reality through cultural and social conventions. In the Islamic tradition, textual data takes precedence over figurative imagery, unlike in Western iconography. This can be seen in the topographical diagrams of *Mirabilia septem climatum usque*

ad finem habitati orbis (Brotton, 2002), where extreme stylization reduces geographic representation to textual elements and a grid of meridians and parallels, introducing a new way of conceptualizing space.

Medieval theological and biblical manuscripts often feature matrix visualizations containing textual rather than numerical or temporal data. Rabanus Maurus, in *Liber de laudibus Sanctae Crucis*, employs textual matrices to visualize Christ's Passion, arranging calligrams of thirty-five to forty-one lines into squares. He highlights figures using saturated colors that contrast with the surrounding text, emphasizing key textual elements.

Unlike contemporary Digital Humanities tools, which are often criticized as sterile and inhospitable (Drucker, 2020), medieval visualizations offer a more interpretive and humanistic approach. The transposition of these pioneering diagrammatic traditions (Lima, 2014) can inspire the design of modern interpretive systems, effectively adapting to contemporary technologies and research methodologies.

#### **4. Research Methodology and Learning Styles (VARK)**

Analysis of previous studies highlights that individuals process and record information through different cognitive modes (Claxton & Murrell, 1987). Learning models—cognitive-personal, info-processual, socio-interactive, and didactic-preferential—help explain how individuals acquire, interpret, and elaborate on information (Curry, 1983). Understanding these learning styles allows researchers to identify the cognitive processes involved in knowledge acquisition. A key framework in this field is Fleming's VARK model (1987), which categorizes learning preferences into four sensory modalities: non-verbal visual (graphics and diagrams), auditory (recordings and spoken explanations), verbal visual (reading and writing), and kinesthetic (hands-on activities and practical engagement). These modalities define how individuals absorb and process new information.

In the transdisciplinary context of uBIQUity, a methodological approach has been developed to integrate techniques from various disciplines. A questionnaire, modeled after Fleming's (1992) VARK system, was designed to assess learning preferences among researchers. The goal is to determine which learning styles are most employed and through which channels researchers acquire new knowledge. This approach allows for a more tailored understanding of information processing, ultimately enhancing methodologies in Digital Humanities.

##### **4.1 Methods and Strategies in the Acquisition and Personal Reworking of Information**

The collected data, obtained through structured interviews and focus groups, reflect a qualitative approach typical of anthropological-social research. Using Google Forms, ITSERR researchers in the humanistic disciplines were surveyed through four thematic areas — Spaces, Tools, Time, and Knowledge — via open- and closed-ended questions. This format enabled the collection of both measurable data and nuanced reflections, which were standardized into an Excel matrix to create a representative sample and generate valid qualitative findings.

These results emphasize the interplay between analog and digital tools in current research practices. Analog tools, favored for their personalized visual codes and spatial organization, remain vital in Digital Humanities — particularly for transcription. Researchers often begin with handwritten annotations before converting them into digital formats. While digital tools aid in document structuring, metadata management, and data sharing, they lack the expressive flexibility of analog methods, potentially leading to semantic loss. Spatial elements — layout, orientation, and scale — add meaning to text, making handwriting a powerful method of capturing thought (Perondi, 2023). The ability to locate, manipulate, and interact with data through customizable visualization tools is still underdeveloped (Perondi & Romei, 2010). For Digital Humanities research to thrive, more flexible, multichannel, and multi-instrumental tools must be developed to support personalized expressive codes and enhance learning and knowledge creation.

These findings not only highlight the need for more efficient and intuitive tools to enhance data accessibility in scientific research but also raise new questions regarding the practices and priorities of the academic community.

#### **5. New Visualization Systems for the Representation of Capta**

Graphical visualizations in Digital Humanities often borrow from statistical representation, but these rigid formats can be misleading for humanistic research. Many platforms present textual data in overly technical ways, making them feel sterile and difficult to navigate (Drucker, 2020; Moretti, 2022). As Drucker (2020) points out, such representations create an illusion of objectivity, overlooking the interpretative nature of humanities research. Unlike numerical data, *capta*—information shaped by context and perspective—

requires more flexible and dynamic visualization methods. Cartesian graphs, histograms, and trend curves fail to capture the layered complexity of humanistic inquiry.

Effective visualizations must be adaptable, modular, and capable of reflecting the richness of interpretation (Manovich, 2016). The challenge is not just to present data but to design tools that foster active engagement. Alternative models such as relational diagrams, network structures, and multidimensional graphs better represent the complexity of humanistic analysis, highlighting relationships, interruptions, and interpretive shifts (McCosker & Wilken, 2020). These methods move beyond static data presentation, embracing the variability and subjectivity inherent in humanities research.

Modularity is not just a design principle but an epistemological necessity (Drucker, 2020). While the exact sciences prioritize replicability, humanistic visualizations must acknowledge ambiguity and interpretative flexibility. Moretti (2022) and Manovich (2016) argue that breaking data into smaller analytical units enables deeper analysis. In literary and historical networks, nodes may represent authors, texts, or events, while connections reveal semantic or temporal relationships (Moretti, 2022). A well-designed visualization should not just display information but also make interpretive uncertainties explicit.

This shift demands a critical approach to visualization, moving beyond rigid statistical formats toward interactive and multidimensional models. Non-linear grids, elastic surfaces, and dynamic diagrams encourage richer engagement, overcoming the limitations of conventional quantitative methods. This transition is not merely technical but a fundamental change in how we represent and explore data. By integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches, Digital Humanities can develop visual tools that better reflect the complexity of humanistic inquiry, bridging the gap between humanistic thought and digital methodologies.

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