Using Zombies to Teach Collaborative Scholarship and Born-Digital Publishing

by Jamie A. Thomas

A New Open Humanities

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

Zombies have been sweeping across all types of media for many years, and their popularity continues to rise with TV shows like *The Walking Dead* and movies like *Warm Bodies*. The popularity of entertainment about the undead presents an interesting opportunity to draw parallels between the fiction of zombies and the reality of human politics, societies and issues. In an effort to connect this discourse with born-digital publishing, *[ZOMBIES REIMAGINED]* was created. The effort behind *[ZOMBIES REIMAGINED]* was undertaken by faculty, students and librarians at Swarthmore College, and it was launched in May 2016 as a public website with individual exhibits in the form of web pages. The web pages were authored by students in the author's seminar and turned into an online experience with the help of Swarthmore librarians. Due to the success of the project, a large update to the site was launched in May 2017 with all new student authors and topics discussed..

KEYWORDS

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Attention: Reanimated, flesh-eating corpses are on the prowl! Billions of dollars of the global economy have been taken over by zombies in movies, TV, magazines, comic books, marathons, pub crawls, video games and more. And from the big screen, the undead are working their way into real life. News reports saturated with references to *zombies*, *cannibals* and *apocalypse* provide a compelling angle from which to study the interplay of language and popular culture. These are areas of communication, discourse and media studies that invite new research and innovation in interdisciplinary teaching and publishing.

Here I share how incorporating zombies into my first-year seminar has assisted me in reaching undergraduates who have come of age with the television series *The Walking Dead* (since 2010) and films like *Warm Bodies* (2013). Working with digital humanities librarians and students at Swarthmore College, where I teach as a faculty member, I launched the web-based project *[ZOMBIES REIMAGINED]* in Spring 2016 to share new knowledge on understudied aspects of the zombie. The project is an online exhibition in the format of a publicly accessible website, with individual exhibit pages contributed by teams of student co-authors. Each exhibit examines representations of the undead for what they reveal about language, politics, society and culture.

In creating this project, I learned how to guide students through creative collaboration in open access publishing. I also developed a deeper understanding of how online exhibitions can expand the audiences for public scholarship and introduce students and instructors with minimal computing backgrounds to HTML for publishing and preparing web content.

Through its initial launch, the project produced such a strong outcome that with another opportunity to teach the seminar I led our team through a Spring 2017 update that extends our analysis of the zombie with a new series of co-authors and expands our use of web-based tools like Timeline JS. As a result, I have come to appreciate the digital humanities as a pathway for the following:

- harnessing digital tools for enhanced collaboration;
- making course projects translational and meaningful by connecting student creators to wider audiences;
- facilitating critical engagement with online communication and technology; and
- developing an appreciation for content development and management

Predictably, Zombie Discourses Refuse to Die

More than ever, the zombie is a great resource for teaching students how to use methods in discourse analysis to examine media representations and political dialogue. *Where Night of the Living Dead* (1968) engaged a visionary exploration of race and gender, the more recent *The Walking Dead* (2003 print; 2010 television) and *World War Z* (2006 print; 2013 film) have critiqued humanity and globalization. These days, survivors are increasingly pictured fighting off starvation and cannibalism in real-life locations like Atlanta, London and Tokyo. Reality has itself begun to pattern after fiction, with zombies being invoked to describe our political and cultural turn of events and trends toward miscommunication and inhumanity.

A meme surfacing after the 2008 U.S. presidential debate, for example, featured an image of a calm Obama and a distressed McCain, and read, "Obama cool enough to just ignore zombies." This use of discourse required readers to already be well informed as to what the zombie is. [1]

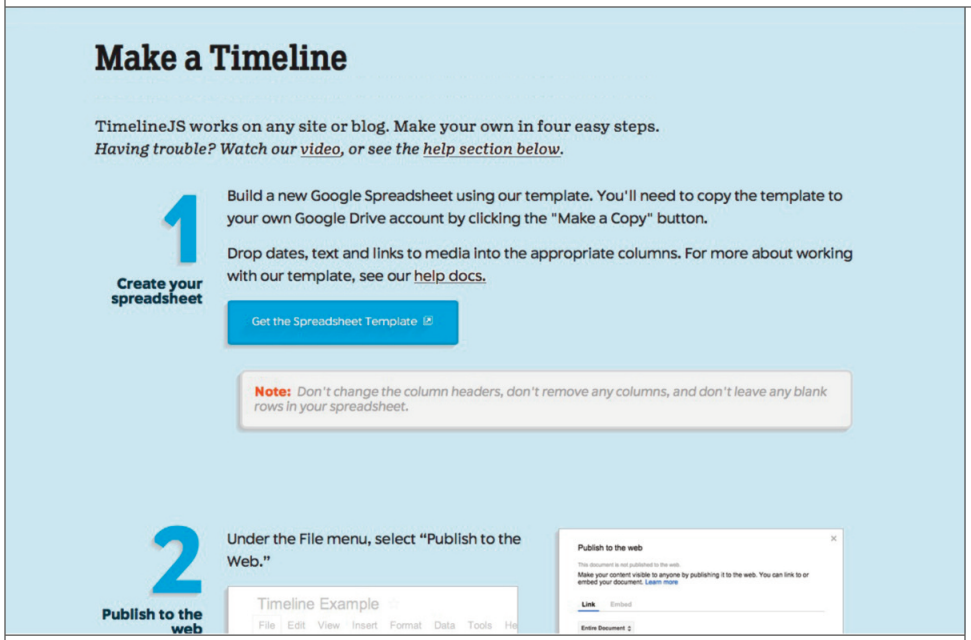
A few years later, after a Floridian man was caught assaulting another man and eating on his face in 2012 (with a later, separate incident in 2016), it was widely suspected that the undead were making their actual debut. As news headlines sensationalized the assault as a potential zombie attack, a new phase of discursive engagement was begun, which thrives on a mirroring of reality and fiction. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control had to allay public concerns about a possible zombie outbreak, and several scientists have since come forward to explain that reanimation of the dead is not at all likely.

But, like the undead themselves, zombie discourses simply refuse to die. While the *Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) has sold over 1.4 million copies, it has also become clear that the Pentagon has its own defense strategy, ConPlan 8888, in the event that zombies do surface. Plus, ongoing debate of U.S. healthcare law in 2017 has prompted descriptions of *Trumpcare* as a reanimated legislative effort that is "rising from the grave." The more audiences have become familiar with the zombie narrative, the more they have arguably become infected by it and begun to use the concept to describe real-life events.

Zombie studies is now an emerging interdisciplinary field gathering momentum thanks to sociologists, anthropologists and scholars in media and literary studies. See, for example Platt [2]. However, perspectives on language and communication remain underrepresented in studies of the zombie genre, fandom and related discourse. As a sociocultural linguist, I saw this lacuna as an opportunity to develop a new seminar course in *Languages of Fear, Racism and Zombies* and contribute to existing scholarship through collaboration with my students.

Why Publish Digital Scholarship?

Before I determined how to lead my own project, I learned more about digital humanities and the creation of online exhibitions at the March 2016 conference of the National Council on Public History (NCPH). During a session entitled, "Born Digital: Engaging Diverse Audiences Through Online Exhibition Projects," presenters shared how creating content designed exclusively for the web, or *born-digital* content, led to dramatic increases in user traffic and engagement, specifically by users ages 15 and under, and also 50+ [3]. They also discussed how open access digital tools like Timeline JS, created by the Knight Lab of Northeastern University, can be used to author



engaging and interactive presentations of textual, photographic and audio/visual information plotted along a clickable timeline.

From the National Women's History Museum to the Digital Public Library of America, born-digital exhibitions are facilitating opportunities for scholars, information architects and technologists to collaborate in publishing materials that enhance public engagement. This shows how the digital humanities can democratize access to knowledge sources and produce information repositories and pathways that support broader efforts of physical museums and other institutions or synthesize and host underrepresented knowledge that has no previous home. These outcomes are consistent with wide discussion of a digital, applied, translational, open and public humanities – to increase public access and diverse engagement with new knowledge, develop humanistic and technological skills and advance knowledge production in and beyond research institutions (for example, Steven Lubar's *Public Humanities Blog* post from 2014 https://stevenlubar.net/digital-humanities/applied-translational-open-digital-public-new-models-for-the-humanities/).

After attending the NCPH conference, I returned to campus with a basic idea for a born-digital exhibit. I shared with my seminar students a bit of what I had learned, and asked them if they would be interested in trying it out. My plan was to guide them to work in teams of two, and as co-authors they would brainstorm and carry out their own original analyses. Each mini-collaboration would contribute an exhibit page to the overall project, consisting of a written analysis (around six double-spaced pages in length) and an interactive timeline constructed with Timeline JS to bring together images, multimedia and captions to complement their research. In the end, the exhibition would be publicly accessible, helping to educate a wide audience on the significance of the zombie. The end result was a credit-bearing final project for the seminar, broken down into incremental assignments throughout our concluding weeks together.

In preparing students to publish their own original content, I was surprised to learn they were all unfamiliar with the concept of *digital humanities* and had no experience with creating web content. The final stages of our online project would require hosting on an institutional server and assistance with building a website to feature each of the co-authored contributions. But the students and I had no significant know-how in backend development or access to campus servers. For help, I turned to librarian technologists at my institution who could assist us in understanding what digital scholarship is, how it fits in with the digital humanities and how to use web-based tools to share our research with the public.

Building Online Exhibits Expands Digital Literacies

According to the 2000-2015 Pew Research Center study, across race, class, socioeconomic status, education and urban or rural setting, at least 96 percent of Americans ages 18-29 are using the internet (www.pewinternet.org/ 2015/06/26/americans-internet-access-2000-2015/). Students in my small undergraduate seminar came from Los Angeles, Shanghai and places in between and were African Americans, Korean Americans, White Americans and Chinese nationals. They each regularly used their smartphones to multitask, access online content and participate in social media, often sharing with me websites and online hubs

that I had never heard of. Naturally, given their status as *digital natives* [4] [5], I assumed their digital literacy would also include some knowledge of Web 2.0, or familiarity with how to build websites and code content for blogs, wikis and other collaborative, user-centered platforms.

As it turns out, however, undergraduates who are avid users of laptops, mobile devices and social media are not typically experienced web creators. As Ng observes of undergraduates taught to use the web-based tools *VoiceThreads* and *Prezi*:

> Unless taught explicitly to use other (educational) technologies, it is unlikely that digital natives would think about educational technologies or consider tinkering around creating a website or wiki unless for a purpose, for example to advertise for a product or for a graded academic assignment [6].

Without a scaffolded learning experience, the vast majority of undergraduates in Ng's study admit to not questioning how the digital content they consume is produced or to what end. This inexperience is important, because our increasingly technology-centered societies are demanding a critical and engaged digital literacy. Indeed, these skills are part of the imperative for digital humanities, which, following Wikipedia, concerns "investigation, analysis, synthesis and presentation of information in electronic form," as well as concerns of how computing and the humanities inform and affect each other.

Pitching my project concept to Swarthmore College librarians Nabil Kashyap and Roberto Vargas over a series of conversations, I learned that there was a wider suite of digital tools we could draw upon. Using these tools, we could give students experience with handling the backend dimensions of web content development and management so that they could gain greater understanding of how such content is produced. In essence, we could collaboratively facilitate a pedagogical experience that would assist us in constructing intricate details of the project, while also giving students input on the appearance and structure of their contributions.

For these reasons, I invited both of the librarians to the seminar to conduct an hour-long workshop concerning (1) how publicly accessible, born-digital content contributes to scholarship, (2) advantages of using open access vs. proprietary digital tools and (3) how HTML and other computer languages are necessary for the formatting and preparation of publishable and readable web content.

During the workshop, we introduced the following free, open access tools and helped students experiment on their computers with how to meaningfully navigate each:

- **Timeline JS**: An online tool linked to Google Spreadsheets that enables the creation of an interactive, annotated timeline to support a research narrative with online pictures and multimedia (Knight Lab).
- **Storymap JS**: An online tool linked to Google Spreadsheets that facilitates the creation of an interactive sequence of functioning Google Maps that, along with online pictures and multimedia, help illustrate geographic locations central to a research narrative (Knight Lab).
- **Markdown**: A simplified coding language and web-based tool for conversion of non-coded text (e.g., essay content) into the HTML formatted language needed for its presentation in a web-ready format.
- **StackEdit**: An interactive, web-based cheat sheet that allows users to discover and experiment with using Markdown coding language, while creating their own HTML-coded document for export. StackEdit features a split interface with two fields of text: the user can type in one field and view the web-ready version of the text in the adjacent field, adjusting the appearance of formatted text by adding Markdown code to the source text.

Stages of Collaboration and Ethical Considerations

Through our explanation and demonstration of each of the essential digital tools for the project, the librarians and I also introduced our planned stages of publication, or workflow. Our chosen suite of digital tools would enhance my goal of engaging students in digital scholarship and publication and develop their capacity to communicate intricate ideas with a non-specialist audience. With seven students in the course, there were three collaborative two-person teams, and I invited the remaining student (who had previous experience in linguistics), to work with me to produce an exhibit page and publishable research article.

Following our workshop with the librarians, the project hinged upon four main layers:

(1) technical and creative guidance from our librarian colleagues;

(2) student research and creation of content, which I would facilitate, including peer review and editing;

(3) transformation of the written analysis into HTML using Markdown and StackEdit, which would done by the students; and

(4) synthesizing and managing content (images and text) for the "About" and "Landing" pages and further communication with the librarians on stylistic and other details, which was also my responsibility.

Among these other details was the issue of licensing and ownership of the content, attribution of contributors and acknowledgement of staff support. Our digital humanities project was touching upon important questions about how faculty and students can ethically and responsibly collaborate, in alignment with institutional infrastructure and support [7].

There was no way that a web-based project with the size and scope of the one we were creating could have succeeded without a collective effort. This includes the effort that I have put into facilitating student co-authorship and my numerous additional hours spent guiding students in how to craft cogent arguments. This level of effort is why I concluded that we should copyright the project to the seminar. We acknowledge my role as the seminar instructor and project manager, each student as a contributing author and our partners in the college's library and digital scholarship units.

To protect the project and communicate a clear message about our vision for public engagement, we looked to the Creative Commons, a hub for licensing born-digital content. We agreed upon the use of an Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License, meaning that users are free to "copy and redistribute the material in any medium and format" and also to "remix, transform, and build upon the material." Also important, the librarians, in their roles as web developers, chose to post all of the project's backend development code to *Github*, an online repository for code creation and version control, where others can check it out, review it and potentially build upon it for future projects.

On the last day of class in April 2016, we celebrated a soft launch of the exhibition with a physical poster session and on-campus reception, where students presented near-final versions of their research to others in our learning community. This event allowed students to celebrate our collective effort and truly see themselves as subject-matter experts and content creators. By May 2016, we launched the website with a successful release through the social media hashtag *#ZombiesReimagined*.

Enhancements to the May 2017 Exhibition Update

With the opportunity to teach my zombies seminar a second time in Spring 2017, I worked again with my librarian colleagues and students to produce a substantial update to the exhibition. Having greater familiarity with the depth of digital humanities, I was able to introduce the concept much earlier in the semester. And like before, we hosted an in-class workshop led by the librarians.

Swarthmore College freshmen Yash Kewalramani, left, and Kendre Thomas work on their *[ZOMBIES REIMAGINED]* project.

As with the previous run, I also facilitated a round of in-class presentations for students to share draft versions of their co-authored Timelines and StoryMaps. These presentations were followed by a round of peer review in the classroom, where students exchanged drafts of their analytical essays and offered constructive feedback. Even more so this year, I have been overjoyed to see the public-facing dimensions of this project boost students' motivation to thoughtfully engage analytical writing in ways they can be proud of.

However, this time, to support an increased class size, the librarians devised a way to have students upload the necessary coded content to *Prose.io*, a platform interface for content management and version control, using free *Github* accounts specific to each student. This cut out the

middleman, so that instead of sending individual pieces of the project via email (coded HTML, ID numbers for content created with Timeline JS and StoryMap JS), students could share these in a sleek, organized format through an open access interface. Effectively, our new use of *Prose.io* comprises a backend sync to the web exhibition and enhances collaboration by allowing all stakeholders access to view (and adjust) key content for the project.

Conclusion: Publishing with the Undead is Good for You

Now that the undead are here, it's critical that we embrace every opportunity to learn from their cautionary tales. After all, even noted astrophysicist Neil Degrasse Tyson, in an appearance on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, stubbornly admitted the possibility of zombies:

> I can't say that somewhere in the infinite reaches of the cosmos, there isn't a heavenly planet that evolved a xeno-biological lifeform capable of reanimating, and it feeding on the organs of the living. (www.cc.com/video-clips/iegury/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-neil-degrasse-tyson--buzzkill-of-science)

Even for a reasoned scientist, the zombie garners an unmistakable allure – a popularity that demands study. As a result of my publishing experience, I now consider myself a digital humanist and a bona fide zombie studies scholar.

Collaborating with students and colleagues on *[ZOMBIES REIMAGINED]* has brought both zombies and the digital humanities to life. It has been amazing to see students without any coding experience learn to generate HTML. And for some, this project was their first opportunity to genuinely scrutinize their writing and argumentation and view themselves as legitimate authors. One student shared, "I think it's safe to say I'll never think of zombies the same way again, as well as serious social issues such as racism and sexism." Another student commented, "Our ideas did change as a result of working together, and coordinating and communicating helped us arrive at a better conclusion."

Given the success of the program and the reaction of the students to collaboration and open publishing of their work, in the next phases of *[ZOMBIES REIMAGINED]* I plan to build a two-part workshop series into my seminar to engage theory and practice in the digital humanities and look forward to preparing a new generation of students for digital publishing. ■

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