**THORNE-MURPHY — Digitizing**

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**Digitizing Slow and Deliberate: The Victorian Short Fiction Project**

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The field of the digital humanities is built on the back of the archive. Researchers and the public have access to ever-growing online compilations of important texts (e.g., Dalmau and Courtney, 2011; Allori and Kaborycha, 2013), physical artifacts (e.g., Hunter et al., 2014; Streiter and Goudin, 2014), and lived experience (e.g., McGrath and Peaker, 2014). The power that these digital repositories afford—access to vast amounts of primary sources, processing tools to make sense of them, etc.—has redefined scholarship in the humanities.

We should ask ourselves, however, what the process of creating sweeping digital collections leaves out. That is, as we move to automate the processes of digitization (e.g., Lenkiewics and Drude, 2013; Lombardi, 2014), do we risk losing aspects fundamental to the human experience? If Mark Algee-Hewitt (2013) is correct that distant reading is three-fourths interpretive, if the materiality of the original text is key to understanding its contents (Lavin, 2013), then a close experience with literary artifacts supports effective distant reading. Automated digital archiving—while undisputedly valuable to certain researchers—potentially shortchanges students and budding scholars.

This paper describes the student-centric production of the Victorian Short Fiction Project (VSFP). Grown organically from a paper-based compendium of student research to a wiki of more than 160 articles, the VSFP conscientiously objects to removing the human experience from the curating process, even in the digital age. Two principles guide VSFP procedures: First, we prioritize quality of experience above speed of delivery. Second, the VSFP nurtures new scholars whose interaction with both the printed and digital text is integral to their development.

The VSFP is a pedagogical project. Students in Victorian literature classes at Brigham Young University select a 19th-century periodical from the Special Collections library. They then choose a short story published in that periodical; prepare a digital transcription of the story, including an introduction and annotations; and post their work to the VSFP.



Figure 1. The VSFP homepage.

Though short fiction is plentiful in Victorian literature, scholars have typically downplayed its significance, looking instead to French and American fiction for the genesis of the genre (e.g., Killick, 2008; Korte, 2003; Orel, 1986). The VSFP creates a unique opportunity for undergraduate students to contribute to an area of inquiry in professional literary scholarship. It includes little-known fiction by Charles Dickens, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Joseph Conrad, just to name a few authors. And we have fiction by a host of authors whose work has been all but forgotten, which makes the VSFP valuable for understanding the wider development of the short story during the century.

By embedding the students’ experience with the digital humanities within a traditional literary classroom experience and within a scholarly conversation in a literary field, they learn to see the digital humanities as a natural part of their academic studies, and as a relevant part of their career preparation. However, anyone familiar with the practices of the digital humanities will realize that building a digital collection of short fiction one student-prepared text at a time is, quite frankly, appallingly inefficient. The typical procedure would be to set up a system of culling all short fiction from Victorian-era periodicals and digitizing them en masse.

What would be lost in a typical process is exactly the rationale that gave rise to the VSFP in the first place. We need to nurture a new generation of digital humanists, not just by employing them as student workers on our large projects, but by showing them how the digital humanities is inextricably linked to the rest of their field. One student’s comments are representative of how students appreciate such connections:

I learned how to work in an electronic environment, and that knowledge is invaluable in today’s electronically mediated world. Also, knowing that the material I was going to post would be public motivated me to fastidiously ensure that the work was a polished representation of my writing and researching abilities. Overall, this project was one of, if not the most influential educational activity I’ve taken part in as a student here at BYU. I was able to research lesser known material which contributed to the sense of accomplishment I felt. I had the sense that I was actually contributing to the discourse within literary studies and not simply churning out another banal paper or project, and at the same time I also feel that the knowledge I gained from the project is valuable because it is not a topic that the whole of literary studies is familiar with, and I can therefore feel a sense of ownership for what I’ve done and feel pleased with the effort I put into it.

Note the aspects that the student pinpoints as particularly valuable: digital literacies, personal ownership, and legitimate participation in a community of practice. We know from constructivist theory and research that these qualities contribute to better performance (Ennis et al., 1999) and early professionalization of novices (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Other student comments reinforce the professionalizing aspects of the project. Students are motivated to do their best work because they know it will outlast the class.

There is another aspect of student responses that deserves attention. Students often express a sense of sheer wonder at the process of bringing archival materials to a 21st-century audience. As one student put it, “The project made me interested in spending time in the archives. . . . And doing the project made me realize how valuable books are, and how I need to take much better care of books than I do. They are really priceless and need to be taken care of if I want them to last for the next hundred years.” Another student observed, “[I]t was just impressed on me even more how great it is to be able to look at the original text and how much more you learn from a publication b[y] looking at that original copy. For example, for my journal, the format of it and the way it was illustrated and even the way it smelled was enriched by reading and made its audience seem more real.” Ironically, the tactile experience of working with the archival holdings makes this digital project even more rewarding and beneficial for the students.

As the field of the digital humanities charges bravely on in the construction of new knowledge, as we increase our understanding of the human experience by applying computation methods to centuries-old disciplines, we must not lose appreciation for the essential—yet often unacknowledged—physical aspects of that experience. We must be attentive to the balance between creation of or from digital content and the curation and appreciation of source artifacts, especially as we cultivate a new generation of scholars. Such awareness may serve as content knowledge that will influence our interpretation of digital representations.

The VSFP will continue its deliberate efforts by posting approximately 20 new articles each year with the hope of influencing future literary scholars. Meanwhile, we are beginning the process of seeking NINES certification so that this digital repository will be of increased value to researchers of Victorian literature.

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