Assignment for ENGL 877 (Advanced Topics in the Digital Humanities: Digital Project Development). Reading response to Arnold, Taylor, and Lauren Tilton. “What’s in a Name?”

Response 1

Topic: The forms which DH labs can take and the issue with technological labor

This week's reading provided an excellent, big-picture overview of how Digital Humanities (DH) is practiced in the United States. DH at the university level is powered through laboratories that operate within two distinct frameworks, one as an open community space, other as a research unit. The key difference in accessibility between the two frameworks is that the former promises to be space or resource that is open to all, while the latter has a stronger tie to the department or personel who pioneered the creation of the lab. On paper, the open community space labs adhere to the founding principles of DH which are collaboration, experimentation, and open access. Yet in practice, labs that operate on this framework have to practice some degree of gatekeeping to keep the lab operationally feasible. Having too wide of a user base, risks bogging down larger and more critical projects but narrowing the base too much will defeat the purpose of the lab being an open community space.

While structuring the DH lab as a research unit is in theory less accessible to the wider campus community, it has the advantage of giving the researcher or scholar a better handle of the project's direction and achieve more personalized goals at their own pace. However, the lab's accessibility can improve with the discretion of the department or scholar which it is attached to. The strong connection to a single department or faculty is an edge that needs to be carefully navigated because the lab has fewer stakeholders for its maintenance.

No matter what form the DH lab takes, the article raised an important issue for the future wellbeing of DH which is the humanities' penchants for individualized works. A lab is supposedly a collaborative space where the product goes through the hands of many people before completion. This is in contrast with traditional humanities work where a thesis is largely credited to a sole author. This can be seen in graduate assistants that receive nameless recognition within crowded pages of acknowledgements, even when their work formed the backbone of a project. DH projects are inherently "multi-authored" as you seek invite wider engagement with the project and have coders that give the project its "digital" aspect. Within these labs are coders, data specialists, and programmers, all professionals in their own right that risk being uncredited due to the individualized mindset of the humanities as a field. The article has an excellent anecdote of junior digital humanists being sidelined by language such as "their" project and "my" project" by scholars.

As the field continues to grow, digital humanists have to come to terms with the collaborate nature of their work and promptly credit the technological labor involved in the project. Steps such as naming the individual coders or digital experts who had a hand in the project within the website's credit page can go a long way in sustaining the long-term health of DH. Crediting the technological labors of others should be as natural and easy as providing the footnotes and bibliography of a thesis.