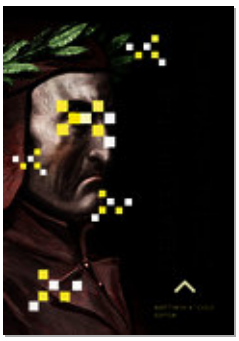
Debates in the Digital Humanities

Matthew K. Gold



Published by University of Minnesota Press

The Digital Humanities or a Digital Humanism

DAVE PARRY

We should all probably start by admitting that none of us really knows what digital humanities is or, more precisely, that none of us is fully in control of what digital humanities (DH) is. As with so many disciplinary practices, the answer to the "what is" question is likely to be legion. And as Matthew Kirschenbaum has noted in a recent ADE Bulletin article, defining DH has become something of a genre essay. But contrary to any suggestion that the definition is settled or has been fully explored, the rising number of conference presentations along with the surplus of writings on the topic would suggest that many see the question as somehow crucial. Indeed, the significant rise in discourse around the question "What is DH?" reveals, I would suggest, not only a certain angst about the constitution of the field, a not-so-unconscious uneasiness on the part of the practitioners, but a recognition that DH has become a significant force discursively and economically within the institution.

Establishing a definition by asking after the essence of something seems a futile project. What is the essence of the digital humanities? is an impossible question to answer, as if there is an ideal form of digital humanities out there to which one can point, a central Platonic ideal from which all other digital humanities can be judged in relation. (I am not really into Platonic ideals.) It is, however, possible to engage the question from another angle, performing a discursive analysis. Rather than asking, what is the digital humanities? we can ask, what do we talk about when we talk about digital humanities?

For the past three years, scholars identifying as digital humanists have participated in a project called "A Day in the Life of the Digital Humanities," or "Day of DH," for short. In an effort to create a picture of what it is that DH scholars actually do, practitioners write about what scholarly (and sometimes not so scholarly) activities they engage in throughout the day. Typically, this takes the form of writing blog posts documenting one's work day, attempting to render transparent one's individual work, while simultaneously representing the diversity of work that is collected under the name DH. This year, over two hundred scholars (up from roughly one

hundred two years ago and one hundred and fifty last year) registered and posted to the official Day of DH site, with numerous others engaging through other venues such as Twitter. As such, the textual corpus produced on this day, while not a definite answer to the question of what is DH, serves as an important representative sampling of how it is that a group of scholars who self-identify as DH practitioners talk about their work. The text produced on this day represents an inclusive example, not a restrictive one, of how it is people talk—or more precisely, write—about what it means to "do DH."

Unfortunately, though, with such a large sampling, it would be difficult to closely read all of the essays listed on the Day of DH website, which is to say nothing of the material and conversations produced via other means not archived on the official Day of DH website. Reading all of this material would indeed be a Sisyphean task, whereby any close engagement would necessarily yield numerous other texts that would have to be read, a black hole to be sure. Luckily, however, digital humanists have provided us with computational tools that enable a more efficient reading practice, textual analysis tools that look for frequency of word use across a large textual corpus, saving us the task of actually having to read the entire body of work. So rather than engaging in a close reading of what practitioners actually wrote, it is possible and certainly more convenient to use a computer to aid in the reading process.

The data that such an analysis yields is, as with many such projects, largely predictable, indeed largely knowable without the use of a computer. The most frequent words by far are digital, humanities, day, and work. Again, not surprising, given that these are the terms that frame the discussion: what a day looks like for those who work in the digital humanities. But the next level of words with high frequency are revealing, if mostly predictable: research, design, project, data, text (and its variants such as textual), and tool(s), which is to suggest that people who identify as DH practitioners see themselves as designing and building tools and projects that deal with text and data, producing text and data about said text and data. Perhaps, tellingly, all of these words have a higher occurrence than "reading" and "writing."

None of this is particularly surprising, though; it merely reinforces a sense that many scholars have already articulated: digital humanities is largely, or primarily, about using computing technologies as tools to do traditional humanities-based research. One could, I suspect, perform this type of textual analysis on a range of sources producing similar results. The Digital Humanities Conference programs, Blackwell's *A Companion to Digital Humanities*, or even the recipients of National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) funding would all present a similar distribution of words and conversations. This is not to make an evaluative claim (at least not yet) but simply to make an observational one: those who identify their work as digital humanities primarily talk about using computers to do humanities research.

Indeed, there is a strong connection between digital humanities and humanities computing. The first sentence in Kirschenbaum's essay suggests as much, quickly

conflating the two terms: "What is (or are) the 'digital humanities,' aka 'humanities computing?'" (1). As his essay goes on to argue, the term "digital humanities" itself is a (re)branding of the term "humanities computing," specifically chosen by Blackwell's book project and later, perhaps crucially, as Kirschenbaum suggests, with respect to the formation of the NEH Office of the Digital Humanities. What Kirschenbaum illustrates is how the term "digital humanities" was a strategic choice made by several key players. It is these events that serve as one of the focal points for Kirschenbaum's essay, as he argues that they will "earn a place in histories of the profession alongside major critical movements like the Birmingham School or Yale deconstruction" (4). And this, ultimately, is what is at stake in the "what is DH?" debate. Digital humanities has become "something of a movement," indeed perhaps the next big movement in humanities-based scholarship (4). As scholars look to define what it is that constitutes the movement, and by extension what it is that is not part of the movement, "digital humanities" comes to serve as a rather deft switch from the phrase "humanities computing," stressing that humanities remains the focus, the next moment in a continuum of scholarship rather than a rupture with the past.

Consider the fact that we do not have "pencil humanists" or "typewriter humanists." This might seem like an odd observation, but we should ask what the adjective "digital" is doing in "digital humanities." As the earlier introductory word-frequency analysis suggests, what digital humanists mean by "digital humanities" is not that they use computers to write or read humanities-based texts; rather, a digital humanities scholar uses digital devices to perform critical and theoretical observations that are not possible with traditional pencil or typewriter aided analysis. That is, computers and by extension the digital enable a new critical lens for understanding traditional humanistic subjects of inquiry, a lens not available prior to the invention of computing technologies. At this point we do not even have to distinguish between the people who make tools for this type of analysis and those who use these tools for analysis. The defining feature is the relation of a digital tool to the scholarship being performed.

In the same way that the Birmingham School or Yale deconstruction opened up new ways of critiquing texts not possible prior to their inception, computers inaugurate a school of critique, a new series of tools through which we can analyze texts. This is to say nothing of the relative significance of any of these movements but rather to point out that all of them see themselves as movements, as ways of critiquing and analyzing texts that illustrate or reveal textual meaning in a way previously unavailable prior to the invention of their particular methodologies. Simply using a computer does not make one a digital humanities scholar—typing your manuscript on a word processor does not let you in the club; your work needs to share an affinity with a certain method of approach to humanities scholarship. In this regard, the computer is a necessary, but not sufficient, factor in the digital humanities. One

could certainly imagine the digital being incorporated in other ways, but certainly it is a primary enabling factor for the rise of digital humanities.

Perhaps the best way to explain this view of digital humanities is, as Alex Reid suggests, through a Venn diagram in which the humanities is one circle, the digital another, and their overlap constitutes the field of digital humanities. In many respects, this works to describe any one of a number of methodological approaches to the humanities. A Venn diagram with the feminism school as one circle, humanities another, and their overlap constitutes a humanities scholar who practices feminist humanism—or similarly Marxism as one circle, humanities as another, constitutes Marxist humanities scholarship. This is often how scholars describe their endeavors: "I work at the intersection of computing, feminism, and eighteenthth-century writing."

On the whole, this version of the digital humanities treats the digital as an adjective, a word that modifies the unchanged notion of the humanities, leaving the core of what happens unaltered, instead updating the means by which it is done. It makes humanities relevant in the age of computing and demonstrates that humanists, too, can use computers to do better, more elaborate projects; deal with large data sets; count word occurrences; and produce interesting textual visualizations. In this sense, the rhetorical shift from humanities computing—humanities as the adjective that modifies computing, humanities as a way of computing—to digital humanities, the digital as a way of doing humanities, seems rather predictable. It is both more descriptive of actual practice and less threatening to traditional humanistic scholars. Using computers to engage in more efficient textual analysis does little to disrupt the framing values and ideals of the field; rather, it merely allows them to be accomplished on a larger scale and at a faster pace.

In this respect, digital humanists talk about the digital as something added to the humanities, a supplement to the existing scholarly paradigm. The question in this type of scholarship is how the digital can be used to enhance, reframe, or illuminate scholarship that is already done or, in some cases, how the digital can do it more efficiently. While texts become data and word frequency counts substitute for sentence-level analysis, the goal remains markedly the same: a hermeneutics of the text meant to discern what it is a text (or a large corpora of texts) means.

This all suggests that there is a nondigital humanities—a humanities unaffected by the digital. This comes to be a rather problematic claim when we realize that the digital has so altered the academic culture that there are relatively few scholarly activities that are not already significantly altered by the digital. Almost all scholars at this point use computers rather than typewriters and use e-mail to converse with colleagues dispersed around the globe. Library card catalogs have been replaced by computer searches, and journal articles are often available only by electronic means. The practice of the humanities, of the academy as a whole (certainly within the American and European contexts), is thoroughly integrated with the digital and is, at this point, impossible to separate from it.

But for the most part, epistemological claims of large data sets notwithstanding, the digital has done little to alter the *structure* of the humanities. Digital humanities now means that one can build tools to read texts and produce data—for instance, to design a tool as part of a project to study eighteenth-century manuscripts—but the work of the humanities scholar remains largely unchanged by the existence of the computational device. The digital is a means to do what has always been done, a means to do it more efficiently and better, but still to do what has always been done. To be sure, the incorporation of the digital has led to the emergence of more varied scholarly writing practices, such as the ability to have multimodal scholarly writing that incorporates images and sound within a work. However, I still see this work along a continuum of academic writing, rather than work that marks any sort of significant rupture: using the new to do more of the same. I think the speed at which the digital humanities have been so easily incorporated into humanities programs—Kirschenbaum notes that the transition from term of convenience to whole scale movement was less than five years—should give us pause. It certainly suggests that the digital humanities are not all that transformative and certainly not a threat to the business of humanities departments or the university as a whole.

This is not to suggest that there are not some significant and interesting projects being done under the banner of DH both within and outside of academia but rather that a great deal of what is being done, what is seen as central and representative of digital humanities scholarship, does little to question the founding principles of academic knowledge, again, especially within the humanities. A digital humanism that replaces an ivory tower of bricks and mortar with one of supercomputers and server farms crunching large amounts of textual data and producing more and more textual analysis simply replaces one form of isolationism with another, reinscribing and reenforcing a very conservative form of humanities-based scholarship.

Now, we could juxtapose this digital humanism to another, the one not represented in the textual analysis of the Day of DH that began this essay. Tellingly, there are a group of words that appear less frequently in scholars' posts about the digital humanities, ones often associated with the digital and the humanities that are, nonetheless, significantly less represented, in some place all together absent. Social media, video games, or even contemporary web services and objects are significantly underrepresented. Even popular services such as Facebook or Twitter have a relatively low occurrence and, when mentioned, often are used in the context referring to using the service rather than studying the tool. The most popular word used with either of these two services is "checked," indicating that they are referenced as a medium of communication and not a medium of study.

And so, there are at least two digital humanisms: one that sees the digital as a set of tools to be applied to humanistic inquiry (design, project, tools, data) and another that sees the digital as an object of study (social media, digital games, mobile computing). As Kathleen Fitzpatrick observes, digital humanities can be defined as "a nexus of fields within which scholars use computing technologies to investigate

the kinds of questions that are traditional to the humanities or, as is more true of my own work, who ask traditional kinds of humanities-oriented questions about computing technologies."

This definition would be more inclusive than the one derived from the word-frequency approach used at the beginning of this essay. Indeed, it is in the group that asks humanities-oriented questions about computing technologies, where Kathleen places her own work, that I would also include mine. And so here we have two versions (under one definition), sometimes in conflict, over what constitutes the digital humanities. The first is the sense that the digital is a direct, almost practical use of computational means for research in the humanities: computer-enabled reading. The second invokes scholars who study media or, more popularly, "new media" (a somewhat problematic term as "new media" is neither new nor media).

Given what the data reveals about how people who identify as digital humanists talk about their work, given what is included in journals and conferences under the rubric of "digital humanities," the first definition appears to be carrying the day—that is, that the digital humanities I have been discussing for the majority of this essay, the one that sees the computational as a tool for doing humanities-based research, is becoming the privileged term, with the media studies version of the digital humanities serving a marginal role. As much as the "big tent" definition and narrative is iterated, the practice of what actually occurs points to a different reality.

Now, I could argue that this type of polarity or conflict, between a digital humanism of computational technologies as adjectival modification of humanities research trumping a digital humanities of humanities-based research into the digital, is an unfortunate academic development. Indeed, it seems to me that the dominant type of digital humanism privileges the old at the expense of the new, even while it brings computational technologies into humanities buildings. And, personally, I find the first form of digital humanism, well, frankly, rather boring. I am not really interested in scholarship that counts word occurrence in Jane Austen texts, or even word occurrence across all the texts written in the same year as Austen's. While Ngram viewers might illuminate certain interesting, up until now unnoticed statistical trends regarding word usage and ultimately, perhaps, cultural meaning, if they become the paradigmatic example of what it means to perform a humanities reading, I fear not only for the future relevance of the humanities but also for our ability to resist being easily replaced by Watson-style computers. (There is nothing particularly new here. Italo Calvino imagined just such a computational reading practice in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* far before the instance of any humanities-based computing.) If using computational technologies to perform text analysis becomes just the latest way to make humanities exciting and relevant, to argue for funding, to beg not to be eliminated from the university, then DH will soon also go the way of any number of other textual reading schools: historically important, yes, culturally transformative, no. My hope is that DH can be something more than text analysis done more quickly.

But, actually, I am not going to make a claim as to why we should reverse this privileging, arguing for my flavor of DH over another. Really, that is just an etymological battle that might only reflect a preference for studying Facebook over *Pride and Prejudice* and which a particular scholar thinks is more socially relevant. What we choose to call these practices seems less significant than actually doing them, and if within the academy we end up dividing humanities computing from emerging media studies, with each getting its own name, I am not sure this would be an entirely unproductive division. Instead, though, I want to suggest we think about a different way to conceive of this problem, via Walter Benjamin.

I have become convinced over the last few years that Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is one of the most important essays in media studies, not because of Benjamin's careful reading of the photograph, film, mechanization, and art or the effects these things have on culture but rather for the discursive approach that he uses during his investigation. That is, it is less the precise contours of the argument in relation to art or fascism but rather his methodology that I find crucial. What Benjamin says is that rather than ask, is photography art? we need to ask the more important questions: What does having the photograph do to our concept of art? How does the mere existence of the photograph change our ability to conceive of art as such? What change does the existence of the photograph bring about from which there is no going back?

By extension, asking, what is the digital humanities? or, should this particular approach to humanities be included under a tent of digital humanism? is to perform a less than productive inquiry. Rather, we should be asking what the digital does to our concept of the humanities and, by extension, even our concept of the human.

It is clear to me now, and I think it should be clear to any scholar, that the digital does not merely transform all means by which we do scholarship—word processors instead of pencils, computers instead of card catalogs, text encoding instead of notes scribbled in margins and notecards. The existence of the digital transforms the very meaning of the word "scholarship." Simply put, the existence of the digital transforms all areas of culture, not just scholarship. Indeed, scholarly transformations are just one small piece of the puzzle. We live in a world that is so thoroughly digital it is impossible, at this point, to talk about the nondigital. To treat the digital as simply an adjective that can be added onto the humanities is to attempt to contain it, to discipline the digital, to regulate it to one among a range of approaches to scholarship, rather than to recognize that the *only* way to do scholarship now is digital. Even if one never turns on a computer, answers an e-mail, or sends a text message, our cultural support structures are digital to the core: the world is digital now, not analog. If what adding "digital" to the humanities does is just take old disciplines, old ways of talking about texts and other objects of study, and make them digital, leaving the disciplinarity and the silo structure of the university intact, it will have failed or, more precisely, perhaps, simply reduced itself to an adjective. This critique holds equally well for studying Facebook or *Pride and Prejudice*: what is

at stake here is not the object of study or even epistemology but rather ontology. The digital changes what it means to be human and by extension what it means to study the humanities. (Still, I would argue that you cannot begin to understand the complexities of these questions without engaging the present. No amount of Shakespeare and claiming his centrality to expressing a universal human condition will help you understand the role of WikiLeaks in the Tunisia uprising.)

In discussing the Venn diagram of the digital humanities, Alex Reid posits a second option. Rather than think of "the digital" and "the humanities" as two separate spheres of influence, which overlap and intersect in a field known as "digital humanities," we should think rather of one giant circle labeled "digital humanities." That is, there is no studying of the humanities separate from the digital. To study the humanities (or any kind of socially relevant, engaged-in-the-present object of inquiry) necessitates a realization that the world is now digital. There is no humanism separate from the digital. This is not about the means of study (computers to process text), nor is it about the object of the study (digital media)—although both are implicated. Rather, it is about how the idea of studying itself is altered by the existence of the digital.

It is in this respect, I think, that the digital humanities has something to offer the academy and that there is perhaps a third definition, one we could oppose to either the first or the second: the digital humanities as an understanding of new modes of scholarship, as a change not only in tools and objects but in scholarship itself. What is important about the Day of DH was not what was talked about, using text analyzers to rank word counts. Rather, the importance of the Day of DH lies in the fact that a community of scholars was differently constituted: publicly performing scholarship, blogging, tweeting, facebooking about what it means to be an academic. That such a discussion took place around a specific, ultimately narrowly defined academic discipline seems less important to me than the fact that such a demonstration and public conversation took place. Doing digital work means working differently, whether that work is humanities or sociology or physics.

Indeed, it is the indirect benefits of the scholarship that goes by the name humanities computing that tends to be of the most importance. Humanistic inquiry that involves conversation between computer scientists and classically trained humanists cannot but help to produce a different kind of crossdisciplinary understanding, even if said scholarship is limited by a focus on traditional objects of study. A program that reads all of the texts published in England in 1784 to measure occurrences of the word "God" ultimately seems of less importance to me than a project that necessitates (by its digital nature) a collaboration and merging of disciplinary silos.

Of course, collaborative and collective scholarship has a long history both inside and outside of the academy, especially when we look at the work performed in other disciplines, especially the sciences, where collaborative scholarship is the standard, not the exception. But within the humanities, and especially over the recent history of our discipline, scholarship is seen as an individual, indeed often solitary,

performance. Digital humanities did not invent collaborative scholarship, but it does make such work more acceptable and transparent.

In the end, debates will occur about digital humanities, with various practitioners carving out ground and staking claim to their particular fields and methods of inquiry. If I were to guess, I suspect that the primary definition of digital humanities as humanities computing, using computers as tools to do humanities research, will win the day, a concession I am more than willing to make. I have very little to no desire to label myself a digital humanist. The real transformation will come, or not come, based on the way the academy, and even humanists, transform the nature of scholarship based on the digital and, more importantly, come to terms with the way the digital transforms what it means to have a humanism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. "Reporting from the Digital Humanities 2010 Conference." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 13, 2010. http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/reporting-from-the-digital-humanities-2010-conference/25473.

Kirschenbaum, Matthew. "What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?" *ADE Bulletin* 150 (2010): 1–7. http://mkirschenbaum.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/kirschenbaum_ade150.pdf. Reprinted in this volume.

Reid, Alex. "Digital Humanities: Two Venn Diagrams." *Alex-Reid.net.* March 10, 2011. http://www.alex-reid.net/2011/03/digital-humanities-two-venn-diagrams.html.