Debates in the Digital Humanities

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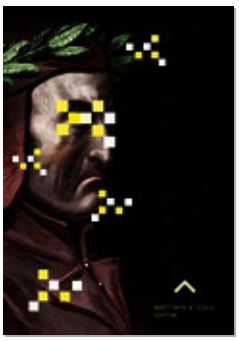

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The Digital Humanities Situation

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Let's be honest—there is no definition of digital humanities, if by definition we mean a consistent set of theoretical concerns and research methods that might be aligned with a given discipline, whether one of the established fields or an emerging, transdisciplinary one. The category denotes no set of widely shared computational methods that contributes to the work of interpretation, no agreed upon norms or received genres for digital publication, no broad consensus on whether digital work, however defined, counts as genuine academic work. Instead of a definition, we have a genealogy, a network of family resemblances among provisional schools of thought, methodological interests, and preferred tools, a history of people who have chosen to call themselves digital humanists and who in the process of trying to define the term are creating that definition. How else to characterize the meaning of an expression that has nearly as many definitions as affiliates? It is a social category, not an ontological one.

As a social category, the term has a more or less clear set of organizational referents. Recently Matt Kirschenbaum reminded us that there is a peer-reviewed journal, a federal office, an annual conference, and an international network of academic centers associated with the term, not to mention an Oxford Companion ("What Is"). However the gap between the social and the ontological cannot avoid appearing as a kind of scandal. This is evident from the number of essays and blog posts that have emerged seeking to define the category, as well as from the playfully combative and defensive tone some remarks have taken. This anxiety of self-definition seems to indicate a new phase in the history of the field, one that may indicate the emergence of a territorial instinct in an environment of scarce resources—even as the language of the "big tent" emerges. After all, the shift from "humanities computing" to the "digital humanities" indexes a growth in the size and popularity of the community. With growth comes growing pains.

To many, the digital humanities feels like a small town that has recently been rated as a great place to raise a family. It is now inundated by developers who want to build condos for newcomers who are competing for resources and who may not

understand local customs. Identity crises emerge when tacit, unspoken understandings and modes of interaction are disrupted by external contact and demographic shifts. In the quest to defend old ways and invent new ones, in-groups are defined, prophets emerge, witchcraft accusations are made, and people generally lose what communal solidarity they once had. The digital humanities community has not gone this far, but one cannot help but notice the disparity between the Woodstock feeling of THATCamp events and what appears to be the Altamont of Digital Humanities 2011.

To be sure, all digital humanists share a common bond as *humanists*, scholars devoted to the interpretation of what the art historian Erwin Panofsky called "the records left by man [sic]" (5)—works of literature, art, architecture, and other products and traces of human intellectual labor. More specifically, the sorts of humanists who have been drawn into the fold of digital humanities have had a distinct preference toward textual remains, even if we entertain pleas to consider nonverbal channels as well (usually originating from nontraditional fields, such as media studies). It remains an implicit (if discomfiting) assumption among digital humanists that, as Tim Bray puts it (in the tag line for his website, Textuality.com), "knowledge is a text based application." Consistent with this view, the typical digital humanist is a literary scholar, historian, or librarian—all traditional fields concerned with the management and interpretation of written documents. Others, such as myself, come from other backgrounds; but I believe it is no accident that the recent buzz about the discipline was spawned by talks given at the Modern Language Association (MLA) meetings.

There are also many schools of thought under the sign who do share, within themselves, a more or less coherent set of methods and concerns. There is, of course, the old guard of humanities computing, trained in the markup of textual sources using the Text Encoding Initiative's guidelines and schema and versed in the theoretical implications of this mode of representation. There is a newer community who embraces the "spatial humanities" through the use of mapping software in relation to textual (and other) sources and who has shifted our attention toward visualization and human geography—an overlooked field that should rightly have its day. Alongside these there is a long-running group of statistical critics, extending from Father Busa and IBM to Franco Moretti and Google, as well as other computational humanists who have been at it since the 1960s and who believe that counting words, applying the methods of computational linguistics, and observing patterns in large corpora will produce insights unreachable by mere reading. One could also point to the Critical Code Studies group and other schools of thought that have emerged in this space.

Taken as a whole, however, there is little connection among these groups beyond a shared interest in texts and the use of computational technologies to explore and understand them (as opposed to merely creating or distributing them). But more important, none of these groups, either in isolation or as a whole, has successfully

demonstrated to the wider community of humanists that there are essential and irreplaceable gains to be had by the application of digital tools to the project of interpreting (and reinterpreting) the human record for the edification of society. To a disconcertingly large number of outsiders, the digital humanities qua humanities remains interesting but irrelevant. Anthony Grafton speaks for the majority when, in a recent *New York Times* piece (Cohen), he repeats the platitude that the digital humanities is a means and not an end. Given his stature in the field, not to mention his role as president of the American Historical Association (AHA), his recent remarks regarding his experience of a presentation on Culturomics at the AHA meetings in Boston (Grafton) may indicate a turning of the tide—but the conversion of other prominent scholars has not produced such shifts in the past.

Now, if we use the term digital humanities and cannot define it, maybe we are thinking of such definitions in the wrong way. Maybe the traditional way of defining disciplines in the academy is all wrong. Instead of saying that physics is the study of matter and energy, or history the study of what people have done in the past, maybe we should say that physics is the work of those who read Newton and Einstein, who use various branches of mathematics, and who know how to construct experiments in a certain way. Or history is the work of people who know how to navigate archives and read old tax records and diaries and other textual remains, whereas archaeologists are those who know how to manage digs and how to retrieve, classify, and interpret shards and bones.

This may sound forced for the hard sciences, but it is eminently reasonable for the humanities and social sciences. For what are the real differences between history, sociology, economics, anthropology, and archaeology? Each claims to address the structure and function of society. The answer is that each has mastered a particular domain of data—its acquisition, organization, analysis, and interpretation. Sociologists do surveys and statistics, interviews and content analysis. Cultural anthropologists do fieldwork and thick description. Economists count indicators and develop equations to relate them. Historians are very good at converting old documents and archives into stories. When an archaeologist starts to read such documents, we say she is doing "historical archaeology." Document-reading anthropologists become ethnohistorians. And so forth.

Such a definition (which philosophers will recognize as a species of pragmatism) allows us to turn our attention to the practical and situated basis of the digital humanities. In this view, digital humanists are simply humanists (or interpretive social scientists) by training who have embraced digital media and who have a more or less deep conviction that digital media can play a crucial, indeed transformative, role in the work of interpretation, broadly conceived. Beyond this all bets are off. Because the category of digital media includes essentially everything afforded to the humanist by the presence of available computing—everything from crowd sourcing and social media to natural language processing and latent semantic indexing to gaming and haptic immersion—the digital humanities is in principle

associated with as many methods and tools as there are intersections between texts and technologies.

The complexity of the field is also multiplied by the modes of relationship that may characterize the intersection between computation and textuality in each case. Consider the difference between the practices of textual markup and the work associated with Critical Code Studies. The former subjects primary source texts to digital representation by means of code—XML, XSLT, and so on—whereas the latter treats code itself as text, seeking to apply principles of interpretation theory (hermeneutics, structuralism, etc.) to programming languages and, one hopes, markup languages as well. (One might include here Kirschenbaum's *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*, which treats hardware itself as text.) As Stephen Ramsay has argued ("Toward"), practitioners of the former approach can be curiously uncritical of their tools and methods, checking their postmodernist perspectives at the door of the lab.

Consider also the case of databases. On the one hand, many scholars supplement their research by using data management tools to organize notes and references. On the other hand, there is an emerging school of thought, initiated by Lev Manovich, that regards the database itself as an object of criticism in its own right (Manovich). The difference between the two approaches is like night and day, although one can imagine how one may profit from the other. Still a third mode of intersection is to regard technology as an allegory of textuality. For example, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has employed the image of the fiber optic network as a frame for the interpretation of digitally mediated social interaction and text (Chun). So not only are there as many kinds of digital humanities as there are intersections between humanities and computation technology, but that number is at least tripled, in principle, by the kind of relationship that inheres in that intersection. To a humanist, any computational technology is potentially tool, text, and metaphor.

Given this surplus of extensional meanings, there is simply no way to describe the digital humanities as anything like a discipline. Just think of the curricular requirements of such a field! Not only would it require its members to develop the deep domain knowledge of the traditional humanist—distant reading notwithstanding—it would also demand that they learn a wide range of divergent technologies (including programming languages) as well as the critical discourses to situate these technologies as texts, cultural artifacts participating in the reproduction of social and cognitive structures. Granted the occasional polymath who may master all three, the scope of such a program is simply too vast and variegated. And in fact there has been no consensus among digital humanists about the basic elements of a curriculum, a problem we share with advocates of media fluency to define a curriculum for faculty development.

So if the digital humanities is neither in fact nor in principle a discipline, then what is it? Surely, with its growing army of followers and plethora of concrete institutional manifestations, it must have some basis in a reality other than its own

existence. In fact it does. The digital humanities, as both a broad collection of practices and an intense, ongoing interpretive *praxis* generative of such practices, is best thought of as having two very concrete but equally elusive dimensions. On the one hand, the digital humanities (conceived of in the plural) comprises something very much like a curriculum, an interrelated collection of subject domains and resources that, as a whole, contributes to both the construction of knowledge and the education of people. Although no one individual can master an entire curriculum, a curriculum nevertheless has a logic, a coherence, and even a center of gravity.

This leads to the second and more important dimension: that center of gravity is not a particular assemblage of technologies or methods but the ongoing, playful encounter with digital representation itself. It is the encounter that the digital humanist discovers and finds at once a revealing, satisfying, and ineffable source of fellow feeling with his colleagues. This encounter is not regarded merely as a means to an end but as an end in itself, in so much as the process of interpretation is often as rewarding as its products. I call this encounter the *situation* of digital representation, a stable but always-in-flux event space that is but a special case of the work, or praxis, of representation in general. Adult members of literate cultures for the most part have sublimated and forgotten this praxis, but it remains present to the minds of children and poets, who are always learning how to read and write.

This, I believe, is what Stephen Ramsay means by "building" ("On Building"). Or at least it is a charitable misreading (*misprision*) that retrieves the argument he makes when he suggests, essentially, that real digital humanists write code. In my rephrasing, real digital humanists are engaged in the play of representation, which profoundly involves putting things together, whether the vehicle of assembly be Lisp or Zotero. That marks a wide spectrum; but within it there is a common element of play, of productively mapping and remapping the objects and categories of scholarship onto the rapidly changing, intrinsically plastic but structurally constraining media of digital technology. Without this play—to the extent that the scholar has a standoffish, do-this-for-me attitude toward the medium—then, no, she is not a digital humanist.

Digital humanists are aware that in the current historical moment, as the older *mentalités* of print literacy continue to be displaced and reworked, the humanist has the opportunity to immerse herself in the transductive plasma of interpretation where ideas and their expressive vehicles can be mapped and remapped in a variety of forms and frameworks, a giddy play of praxis that not all generations have the good fortune of witnessing. This experience cross-cuts all the various discipline- and technology-specific instances of digital humanities work. To the extent that a common discourse is emerging to reflect on this experience across the disciplines, the digital humanities is real enough.

NOTE

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