



PROJECT MUSE®

Debates in the Digital Humanities

Matthew K. Gold

Published by University of Minnesota Press

Matthew K. Gold.

Debates in the Digital Humanities.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Project MUSE. Web. 8 Feb. 2015<http://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<http://muse.jhu.edu/books/9780816681440>

Where's the Beef? Does Digital Humanities Have to Answer Questions?

TOM SCHEINFELDT

The criticism most frequently leveled at digital humanities is what I like to call the “Where’s the beef?” question—that is, what questions does digital humanities answer that can’t be answered without it? What humanities arguments does digital humanities make?

Concern over the apparent lack of argument in digital humanities comes not only from outside our young discipline. Many practicing digital humanists are concerned about it as well. Rob Nelson of the University of Richmond’s Digital Scholarship Lab, an accomplished digital humanist, recently ruminated, “While there have been some projects that have been developed to present arguments, they are few, and for the most part I sense that they haven’t had a substantial impact among academics, at least in the field of history.” A post on the *Humanist* listserv, which has covered humanities computing for over two decades, expresses one digital humanist’s “dream” of “a way of interpreting with computing that would allow arguments, real arguments, to be conducted at the micro-level and their consequences made in effect instantly visible at the macro-level.”¹

These concerns are justified. Does digital humanities have to help answer questions and make arguments? Yes, of course. That’s what the humanities are all about. Is it answering lots of questions currently? Probably not—hence the reason for worry.

But this suggests another, more difficult, more nuanced question: When? *When* does digital humanities have to produce new arguments? Does it have to produce new arguments now? Does it have to answer questions yet?

In 1703, the great instrument maker, mathematician, and experimenter Robert Hooke died, vacating the suggestively named position he occupied for more than forty years, curator of experiments to the Royal Society. In this role, it was Hooke’s job to prepare public demonstrations of scientific phenomena for the fellows’ meetings. Among Hooke’s standbys in these scientific performances were animal

dissections, demonstrations of the air pump (made famous by Robert Boyle but *made* by Hooke), and viewings of prepared microscope slides. Part research, part ice breaker, and part theater, one important function of these performances was to entertain the wealthier fellows of the society, many of whom were chosen for election more for their patronage than their scientific achievements.

Upon Hooke's death, the position of curator of experiments passed to Francis Hauksbee, who continued Hooke's program of public demonstrations. Many of Hauksbee's demonstrations involved the "electrical machine," essentially an evacuated glass globe that was turned on an axle and to which friction (a hand, a cloth, a piece of fur) was applied to produce a static electrical charge. Invented some years earlier, Hauksbee greatly improved the device to produce ever greater charges. Perhaps his most important improvement was the addition to the globe of a small amount of mercury, which produced a glow when the machine was fired up. In an age of candlelight and on a continent of long, dark winters, the creation of a new source of artificial light was sensational and became a popular learned entertainment not only in meetings of early scientific societies but also in aristocratic parlors across Europe. Hauksbee's machine also set off an explosion of electrical instrument making, experimentation, and descriptive work in the first half of the eighteenth century by the likes of Stephen Gray, John Desaguliers, and Pieter van Musschenbroek.

And yet not until later in the eighteenth century and early in the nineteenth century did Benjamin Franklin, Charles-Augustin de Coulomb, Alessandro Volta, and ultimately Michael Faraday provide adequate theoretical and mathematical answers to the questions of electricity raised by the electrical machine and the phenomena it produced. Only after decades of tool building, experimentation, and description were the tools sufficiently articulated and phenomena sufficiently described for theoretical arguments to be fruitfully made.²

There's a moral to this story. As I have argued in an earlier post, this kind of drawn-out, *longue duree*, seasonal shifting between methodological and theoretical work isn't confined to the sciences. One of the things digital humanities shares with the sciences is a heavy reliance on instruments, on tools. Sometimes new tools are built to answer preexisting questions. Sometimes, as in the case of Hauksbee's electrical machine, new questions and answers are the byproduct of the creation of new tools. Sometimes it takes a while; in the meantime, tools themselves and the whiz-bang effects they produce must be the focus of scholarly attention.

Eventually, digital humanities must make arguments. It has to answer questions. But yet? Like eighteenth-century natural philosophers confronted with a deluge of strange new tools like microscopes, air pumps, and electrical machines, maybe we need time to articulate our digital apparatus, to produce new phenomena that we can neither anticipate nor explain immediately. At the very least, we need to make room for both kinds of digital humanities, the kind that seeks to make arguments

and answer questions now and the kind that builds tools and resources with questions in mind, but only in the back of its mind and only for later. We need time to experiment and even, as Bill Turkel and Kevin Kee have argued, time to play.³

The eighteenth-century electrical machine was a parlor trick—until it wasn't.

NOTES

This chapter originally appeared as “Where’s the Beef? Does Digital Humanities Have to Answer Questions?” by Tom Scheinfeldt, *Found History*, May 12, 2010, <http://www.foundhistory.org/2010/05/12/wheres-the-beef-does-digital-humanities-have-to-answer-questions/>.

1. Rob Nelson, “Audiences and Arguments for Digital History,” *THATCamp CHNM 2010*, April 19, 2010, <http://chnm2010.thatcamp.org/04/19/audiences-and-arguments-for-digital-history/>; and Willard McCarty, “Reading,” *Humanist*, May 9, 2010, <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/humanist/Archives/Current/Humanist.vol24.txt>.

2. For more on Hooke, see J. A. Bennett, *London’s Leonardo : The Life and Work of Robert Hooke* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). For Hauksbee and the electrical machine, see Willem Hackmann, *Electricity from Glass: The History of the Frictional Electrical Machine, 1600–1850* (Alphen aan den Rijn, The Netherlands: Sijthoff & Noordhoff, 1978); and Terje Brundtland, “From Medicine to Natural Philosophy: Francis Hauksbee’s Way to the Air-Pump,” *British Journal for the History of Science* 41, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 209–40. For eighteenth-century electricity in general, see John Heilbron, *Electricity in the 17th and 18th centuries : A Study of Early Modern Physics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) is still the standard.

3. Dan Cohen, Mills Kelly, and Tom Scheinfeldt, *Digital Campus Episode 56—Past Play*, MP3, <http://digitalcampus.tv/2010/05/07/episode-56-past-play/>.