Debates in the Digital Humanities

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Digital Humanities Triumphant?

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Last year when I blogged about the Modern Language Association (MLA), I said that the digital humanities seems like the "next big thing," and quite naturally, the digital humanists were indignant because they've been doing their thing for more than twenty years (and maybe even longer than that).

At a standing-room only session I attended yesterday, "The History and Future of the Digital Humanities," one panelist noted that there has been some defensiveness about the field, partly because it has included so many alt-academics who felt disrespected by the traditional academy: "Harrumph . . . Playing with electronic toys is not scholarship. Where are your peer-reviewed articles?" I know from experience that there are plenty of people in the profession who know little about this established field and even regard it with disdain as something disturbingly outré and dangerous to the mission of the humanities. During the discussion at that session, Matthew Kirschenbaum, author of *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*, which won the MLA's First Book Award last year, observed that "if you don't know what the digital humanities is, you haven't looked very hard."

I mean, come on, just start with the Wikipedia entry: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_humanities. The digital humanities are not some flashy new theory that might go out of fashion. At this point, the digital humanities are "the thing." There's no "next" about it. And it won't be long until the digital humanities are, quite simply, "the humanities."

Consider the quantity, quality, and comprehensiveness of the digital humanities panels at this year's MLA convention.[1]

The digital humanities have some internal tensions, such as the occasional divide between builders and theorizers and coders and noncoders. But the field, as a whole, seems to be developing an in-group, out-group dynamic that threatens to replicate the culture of Big Theory back in the 80s and 90s, which was alienating to so many people. It's perceptible in the universe of Twitter: we read it, but we do not participate. It's the cool kids' table.