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Matthew K. Gold

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The Digital Humanities Situation

RAFAEL C. ALVARADO

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