

Reflections on “The Digital and the Human(ities),” a Symposium Series at the University of Texas at Austin

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This paper offers a reflection on the discussions at the series of symposia hosted by the Texas Institute for Literary and Textual Studies (TILTS) at the University of Texas at Austin, in the spring of 2011. The three symposia were designed to raise questions about the new formation (call it discursive, intellectual, institutional, or all of the above) being called “the digital humanities.” Each of the symposia addressed a major area of work in the digital humanities: the question of how access to information in digital form affects meaning-making, identity, and power (“Access, Authority, and Identity”); the question of how pedagogy is changing or might change in response to an increasingly digitally mediated world (“Teaching and Learning”); and the philosophical and institutional questions associated with digital change—changing ideas about the human and the machine, about disciplines, and about aesthetics (“The Digital and the Human(ities)”). This white paper will describe the design of the symposia; sketch some of the conditions in which the discussions proceeded; attempt to synthesize a few of the recurring concerns and concepts that circulated; and conclude with some observations on the above.

1. The design of the symposia

Because the University of Texas does not have a major digital humanities center, and because TILTS is located in the Department of English, this structure of events was intended to mediate between cutting-edge concerns in the digital humanities, broadly defined, and its comparative novelty locally at UT. Leading researchers in the field around campus, from the School of Information, Anthropology, American Studies, Linguistics, the Texas Advanced Computing Center, and other departments were involved. The second symposium was particularly shaped to feature the Rhetoric and Writing department, which has a long history of digitally mediated pedagogical and research practices. Several of the presenters in that symposium came from the Rhetoric department’s diaspora.

Each symposium was structured differently from the others, but each was built on two basic principles: first, to bring together scholars from different disciplines; and second, to represent a range of scholarly positions and statuses. The first symposium featured a number of invited speakers and also a call for papers. The second consisted predominantly of invited speakers. The third symposium featured invited speakers and a “curated” audience of interested intellectuals, including a number of graduate students from other Texas universities. The committee designing the symposia hoped that this approach would offer interdisciplinary breadth; in practice, this design also put the question of the “disciplinarity” of digital humanities into play.

2. Framing events

Two major framing events had an impact on the discussions at the symposia. The first was the effect on higher education of the economic collapse (which began during the early planning of TILTS). The second was the question of the rising star quality of “digital humanities,” particularly in the literary academy, but more precisely as a tension-inducing quality both within literary departments and across the humanities.

Responses by state governments and university administrators to the economic “austerity measures” (as the keyword seems to have become) apparently called for by the state of the U.S. economy both unified and divided discussions of the meaning of the digital humanities now, at all of the symposia. Alan Liu’s keynote to the second symposium, “The University in the Digital Age: The Big Questions,” compared his state of California’s debates about digital technologies to those of Texas, raising difficult questions that most humanists working with technology will face. Administrators and politicians often see “distance learning” or other digitally mediated forms of scholarship as cost-saving; at the same time, grants in the digital humanities tend to be more lucrative and numerous by category than those in the traditional humanities. Perhaps it was inevitable that a confrontation over resources would happen between those whose training or intellectual inclinations have afforded them comfort with and access to technological topics and/or tools and more traditionally oriented scholars.

But the potential divisions forced by austerity measures and top-down reform proliferated as discussions proceeded among participants at different stages of their careers, and at different sorts of institutions. The burgeoning tension between humanists who emphasize or make new media and those doing archival or textual studies-driven work might be exacerbated by it; as might be the private school-big public divide, which had seemed to be ameliorated or balanced in some ways by the ability of state schools such as Maryland and Nebraska quickly to leverage digital humanities. Many institutions, too, have emphasized teaching with technology through in-house grants, sometimes collaterally fostering the external funding of research programs, sometimes hindering them. The relationship between teaching-oriented digital humanities and research-oriented digital humanities work might be strained by administrators and politicians who know little about the state of the field or its workers but imagine technology as a kind of salvation for the public university. At many levels, a policy landscape in which digital humanities is understood to be an important factor in the future of higher education, fiscally or intellectually or both, shaped conversations both in and outside of the sessions at the symposia.

Another key framing event for the discussions at the symposia was the coalescence of discourse around the digital humanities at the 2011 Modern Language Association (MLA) annual meeting, in the pages of the *New York Times* and other venues, and in a series of other highly visible locations such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.¹ Stephen Ramsay caused sparks with his declaration at MLA that those who would call themselves digital humanists (or indeed, the humanists of the future) must build things. While Ramsay was generally interpreted as having said this in the interest of provocation, rather than deprecation, the notion more broadly of digital humanities as having an “inner circle” or a set of stars, as in the case of postcolonial studies or southern U.S. history, for

example, seemed to be on many participants' minds. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the stars agreed that it was natural and perhaps necessary to have stars, while many of the graduate students were concerned about both being able to make something—given that funding tends to go to stars and not to starters—and still also complete a dissertation.

While participants tended to agree that something looking like field-status for digital humanities would benefit everyone under what has been called the “big tent” of definitions of digital humanities, participants tended to diverge about the risks that might be entailed by that status. Some senior scholars emphasized the need for status in the process of promotion and tenure; others felt overworked by the same mechanism. Younger scholars expressed concern that local institutional cultures might well outweigh having a star outsider praise a tenure case, particularly with respect to the daily interactions that sustain or catalyze digital humanities work. Others pointed out that electronic scholarly publishing of works recognized as tenure-worthy by rhetoric or literature departments—book-length scholarly analyses—seems still to be in its infancy, even as academic book publishing continues to decline. The question, then, of the articulation between institutional politics and the daily work of the digital humanist seems very much open and of concern.

3. Key concepts and concerns

The range of topics at the TILTS symposia is reasonably well-reflected in the titles of the presentations; the keynote addresses and several of the panels are available by streaming delivery online.² When taken together, however, and considered with the discussions among audience members (including Twitter exchanges and other responses), several key concepts and concerns emerged (in addition to older and still clearly crucial concerns about corporatization, the material qualities of the digital, and the relationships among different disciplines being reconfigured by digital mediation). Concerns included the role of writing; of the “aesthetic” and of “art”; the question of the product of digital humanities labor; and the ethics of digital work. Recurrent concepts included “media ecologies,” failure or decay or fracture, attention, responsibility or scholarly agency, and play. These concerns and concepts were interrelated, but we offer here a brief and only partly successful attempt to distill their gravity, before turning to a reflection on what their prevalence might mean at the moment.

All of the keynote speakers shared a notion that writing and the role of writing in the humanities are changing. Between new potential forms of inscription, new workplace demands of our students, and new ways of analyzing writing from a distance, the conditions of teaching and using writing are shifting. Within the ground of discussion of this concern, which had to do with how different academic work may become for all humanities scholars, not just self-denominated digital humanists, the concepts of fracture, failure, and attention emerged as nodes. Long-form writing seems to be decaying as a dominant mode; whether or not one regards the shorter or more multi- or intermedia intensive mode that is rising as a “fracture” or not, there seems to be a sense that we must make something of it consciously. Participants divided in their opinions about the potential good or bad uses of technologies like Facebook and Twitter; about the risks and

values of failure as an expressive form in humanities work; and about the risks or rewards, both in terms of theoretical insights about time and in terms of real human development, of human attention fragmented by digital representation.

The definition or uses of the term “Art,” particularly in the presentations of the third symposium, fluctuated in fascinating ways. Some of this was rooted in the navigation of a very old notion of the tension between art and technical mastery—a tension that most participants see as false, but that must be dealt with in pitching digital humanities projects to a wider audience.³ But part of the fluctuation was a result of the importance to many scholars of games or play, which seems on the one hand to deprecate purposive or authorial aesthetics terms in favor of the elements of game play or interactivity or narrative co-creation, yet to return it to center stage, in the form of the astonishing complexity and rapid evolutions of games, interactive environments, and the storytelling that goes on around them (in fan fiction, blogs, and other online publishing environments). The return to aesthetics that’s happening elsewhere in the literary academy, together with explorations of the relationship between cognitive neuroscience and human creativity, seem to indicate that this is likely to be an increasingly interesting area of discussion.

Finally, a concern over the politics of digital humanities work exhibited itself in a number of fascinating and sometimes controversial ways. This concern appeared in cases ranging from those of linguists, some of whom are creating tools for the analysis of human discourse designed to reveal inclinations or habits of mind that might be put to what some humanists would regard as sinister governmental use, to the dominance of what Kim Christen warned is an ethnocentrically western attitude towards the openness of digital archives of cultural heritage. The collaboration of one of the indigenous groups with which Christen works with the World Intellectual Property Organization caused tensions; but more broadly challenging seemed to be the notion that digital humanists should build archives in a social way, considering the protocols and community habits of those whose materials are being archived, not just those interested in the materials. Yet a similar attitude appeared elsewhere in the discussions—of co-creation with students in the digital classroom, for example, or of careful consideration of the values of open access to information when mediated by a for-profit corporation like Google, for another.

4. Reflections

1) Everyone seemed to think that the term “media ecologies” was a good way of thinking about media and framing analyses of it.⁴ But in practice, many analyses were constrained to a (sometimes very) small number of interrelated media, and few of the presentations reflected on the peculiar qualities or formal lessons to be learned from the particular articulation points of different media. What are the limits of a media ecology? What makes it possible to speak of them in the plural? And what are the implications of this concept for traditional disciplines? There were a number of moments when an interest in “embodied cognition” approaches to language and also computer interaction were raised, which seems like a point of convergence with rich potential.

2) There is a generational divide under the big tent. This may be temporary growing-pains; it may also be a product of the large difference between faculty and their grad students who are working in a lab-like environment, with something vaguely like a science funding structure, and grad students interested in digital humanities who are largely working on their own.

3) Twitter generates a lot of light, and less heat—unless one considers the heat it causes in discussions about a digital humanities “in” crowd. We suspect this should not be simply dismissed as sour grapes or a natural expression of social formation in the academy, because we are not dealing with a traditional field formation or its transmissive mechanisms. But more broadly, many participants expressed a bit of exhaustion with the continual updating and management of blogs-Twitter-Facebook and a sense that it was something seriously to consider strategically as a part of their careers.

4) Disciplinary divisions are alive and well, despite generations of talk in the humanities about the values of interdisciplinarity. Participants often explicitly claimed not to be digital humanists, and though explicitly placed on interdisciplinary panels, they often seemed to hedge their observations with disciplinary qualifiers. Digital humanities seems, then, not inherently conducive to interdisciplinary work. This may be just fine, but it would be an important consideration in thinking about the institutionalization of digital humanities.

5) Robert Mitchell’s assertion that many digital humanities projects do not present themselves as making arguments—a traditional scholarly practice—but rather as describing methods or processes or archiving contents seemed provocative, dividing opinions. In a similar vein, Matt Kirschenbaum proposed the notion of “scalable reading,” which seems a healthy response to the suspiciously eager embrace of “surface reading” in recent critical conversations.

6) Discussion of the definition of the phrase “digital humanities”—or whether, indeed, to define it at all—pointed to tension around the forms of commitment that different participants felt towards it as a separate intellectual endeavor. There were even sardonic hints of a version of Shelley’s caveat from *Defense of Poetry*: “When composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline”—that is, when the naming of a field becomes the concern, perhaps its intellectual energy has already peaked.

In the panels and along the sidelines, a recurring point of conversation and interrogation was the status of “digital humanities” as a field or discipline. The group of activities, initiatives and interests that converge in the referential space of the digital humanities label are not always easy to conceptualize as an academic field in the established sense. Even a careful wording such as Patrik Svensson’s—“the digital humanities comprise a field in a loose sense”—would seem to call for investigation.⁵ The notion of either a field or a discipline usually implies an object of study toward which all participants ultimately orient, and which is accepted as the highest degree of abstraction within that field—in the way that sociologists ultimately all study society, and musicologists study music. The digital humanities label is a noun phrase with a head—*humanities*—that is too broad to designate a common interest: to claim that the

humanities stick together as a discipline would be to negate two centuries of disciplinary diversification. Cathy Davidson has argued that the specific concerns of late-late modernity (“this era”)—namely “paradigm shifts, moral and political treachery, historical amnesia, and psychic and spiritual turmoil”—create a renewed, heightened relevance for humanistic concerns.⁶ It remains to be seen whether the devolution of the humanities into a common enterprise, as claim of disciplinary or field status for the digital humanities would imply, can spring from the needs of the present historical moment that Davidson describes and a shared engagement with the “digital.” The premodifier *digital* may just prove itself as the sticking agent that, by its iconic relation to the present moment, can hold a multitude of humanistic concerns together as the necessary shared horizon, and allow digital humanities to sediment into an academic field (if not a discipline).

An equally plausible outcome for the mid to long term might be that the operator *digital* loses its force as an iconic anchor in the present day, and, reduced to its semantic core, ends up designating nothing more than a shared aspect of method—one that in non-humanistic disciplines has been established for so long that it is now hardly talked about.

Svensson proposes that neither outcome is likely to happen soon, and that digital humanities stands to linger in an intermediate space: as something less than a field, but more than an incidentally shared interest in a method or topic. The three Austin symposia confirmed that digital humanities is most accurately understood as a community of practice: a community that converges with some regularity (at academic events such as these) around a common goal or interest; the common goal of interest being frequently marked by considerable flexibility over time.⁷ That phrase, and the phrase “community of interest,” were often used by participants.

Notes

The authors thank Elizabeth Cullingford, Nicole Gray, and Matthew Kirschenbaum for their cultivation of this white paper.

¹ See, for example, Matthew Kirschenbaum, “The (DH) Stars Come out in LA”, <<http://mkirschenbaum.wordpress.com/2011/01/13/the-dh-stars-come-out-in-la-2/>>; or <http://chronicle.com/search/?search_siteId=5&contextId=&action=rem&searchQueryString=Digital+Humanities>.

² See <<http://tilts.dwrl.utexas.edu>>.

³ See Marc Redfield, *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁴ See, for example, Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

⁵ See Svensson, “The Landscape of Digital Humanities,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 4.1 (2010). <<http://digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/4/1/000080/000080.html>>.

⁶ Davidson, “Humanities 2.0: Promise, Perils, Predictions,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 123.3 (2008), 707-717, quot. 715.

⁷ See Etienne C. Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).