
Alternate Histories of the Digital Humanities: A Short Paper Panel Proposal

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Recent work in the digital humanities has moved away describing the digital humanities as a “big tent,” to quote William Pannapacker’s famous 2011 post. Taking inspiration instead from the multiple histories and temporalities of media archaeology, such research emphasizes the local contexts where technological and institutional history take place. Matthew Kirschenbaum’s identification of the digital humanities in 2014 as a “discursive construction” that ignores the “actually existing projects” of the field set the stage for scholars to rethink how the digital humanities conceptualizes its work and its history (“What Is” 48). More recently, in the introduction to *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, Matthew Gold and Lauren Klein use the scholarship of Rosalind Krauss who, in 1979, described art history as emerging as “only one term on the periphery of a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities.” Whereas Krauss saw this as a failure of art history, Gold and Klein celebrate the multiplicity of what Patrik Svensson calls a digital humanities that is less a tent and more a disaggregated “trading zone” of various interests and disciplines. Instead of a transcendent, disciplinary category, the dig-

ital humanities emerges as an imminent set of assemblages and rhizomatic localities — converging in some places, diverging in others.

This panel of short papers intervenes in the discussion of an imminent digital humanities by describing several actual alternate histories of the field. All of the thinkers for this proposed panel have sketched variations on digital humanities history in the past. Steven Jones begins his book on Roberto Busa, for example, with an extended discussion of the “multiple potential continuities” existing beside the mythological figure as providing a possibility for “better historical understanding” (16). While Amy Earhart’s work historicizes digital literary studies in America through the work of the new historicism, Tara McPherson sees it in the screen cultures of media studies, Roger Whitson points to the publics outside academia invested in steampunk and other nineteenth-century sources, and Padmini Ray Murray explores the repurposing practice of jugaad in India. Such alternate histories point not to a denigration of the meaning of the digital humanities as a disciplinary field, but rather describe — as Lori Emerson says about media archaeology — each strand as “one possibility generated out of a heterogeneous past.” Each of the presenters will spend 10 minutes discussing how DH can be historicized using various disciplinary, national, and outer-institutional contexts.

Activism in Digital Humanities: Complicating Community, Technology, and Open Access

Amy Earhart

Much of our history in digital humanities has focused on proving that our work has legitimacy within the academy. As I have argued in other publications, the digital humanities has been critiqued as a regressive field, particularly in terms of its approach to cultural studies, and, at the same time, as a challenge to traditional humanities (“Futures”). Key to this simplistic critique of digital humanities is a representation of the digital humanities as a monolithic structure. As part of a panel which reveals the multiple histories of digital humanities, this paper will chart the alternative history of activism and community/academic partnerships in the digital humanities.

Arguing that critiques of digital humanities are ahistorical, the paper will focus on the connection between activism and community in the early digital humanities. For example, the public/academic focus of early digital humanities work has direct ties to what we now call public digital history. Douglas Seefeldt and

William G. Thomas have argued that the future of digital history “invites students and the public into the digital process,” yet this is actually not a future goal. It is our past and connects to a long historical interest in digital humanities as activism and a means of creating community partnerships.

Of particular focus, in the paper, are projects that bring scholars inside the academy into partnerships with community groups, such as the early *NativeWeb* or *eBlackStudies*. While such early projects are often viewed as retrograde technologically and often dismissed from our dh genealogy, they offer an alternative history of the way that technologies are used in service of particular fields within the academy. At the same time, such projects are interested in bridging the divide between the academy and the community and serve particular activist agendas. While there are some forms of digital humanities that reject a focus on cultural studies, this branch of digital humanities centers political activism and critiques of race, class, sexuality, and gender within its approach.

The paper will also focus on the way that technology is imagined in the various lineages of digital humanities. In the line of activist projects that the paper examines, technologies are decentralized, often out of the box, and less interested in innovation than in, say, current large corpora data mining projects. Too often “simple” technological projects are dismissed as not digital humanities, even when the theoretical usages of technology in relationship to humanities questions are innovative and forward thinking. Instead of accepting techno progressivism, scholars in digital humanities need to apply the full spectrum of humanities critique to the treatment and use of technology. For example, scholars have a responsibility to address the ways that technological specifications might force western representations of knowledge onto materials of cultural expression that do not use such systems. Projects such as the *Tibetan and Himalayan Library's (THL)* use of TEI/XML provides one example of how we might proceed. The *THL* has considered how the understanding of time might be culturally constructed and, as such, has revised the TEI/XML coding to reflect time from the perspective of the Tibetan culture rather than imposing western understandings of time through technological standards.

The history of activist digital humanities projects reminds us to think about how the exploitation of data is related to historical exploitations of people(s), to reconnect the digital with embodied experience. Mark Turin notes, “archives become more complex when the ‘documents’ in question are representations of human

‘subjects,’ as was the case for the ethnographic archives in which we were interested, including photographs, films, sound recordings and field notes on people’s lives, their cultures and their practices” (453). Documents are never devoid of embodiment, as we might never use the term exploitation of data without understanding that, eventually, exploitation of data has real impact on individuals and communities. A division of human subjects and documents leads to problematic interactions with those who we are working to digitize. We need to think about how our data embodies experience.

The paper will close by focusing on the way by which ideas of open access are culturally constructed. Activist projects complicate the adage “information wants to be free,” reminding digital humanities practitioners that the model of broad ‘access’ that often motivates western digitization efforts does not apply universally.” The complexities of technology as represented by such practitioners are central to digital humanities.

Roberto Busa, S.J., and Humanities Computing: Complicating the Origin Story

Steven Jones

The Jesuit scholar, Roberto Busa, is often called the founder of humanities computing. In fact, starting as early as 1949, he collaborated with IBM to perform experiments using suites of punched-card machines. These punched-card data systems—with their plug-board setups, clacking machinery, and flurries of perforated rectangular cards—were developed for business accounting and tabulating, and adapted for government censuses, defense calculations, archival management, and information processing of all kinds. These systems coexisted for many years with electro-mechanical calculators and electronic computers, helping to define, delimit, and shape the possibilities for research applications, including humanities research applications like Father Busa’s. Because the card systems were eventually connected to electronic computers, they’ve become part of the story of humanities computing. But in many ways, the first decade of humanities *computing* can more accurately be described as an era of humanities *data processing*—in the historically specific and contextually rich sense of the term.

My historical work on Roberto Busa’s data processing has drawn on a key premise of media archaeology: that technology doesn’t “evolve,” or “descend,” in a linear way. As Michel Foucault asserted, genealogy

(in the sense he used the term) cannot be figured by strictly logical trees of descent, as in the “evolution of a species.” It’s a way of viewing events in their “proper dispersion,” including the “minute deviations . . . complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations . . . the exteriority of accidents” that constitute history. When it comes to Busa, so often treated as the “founding father” of humanities computing and digital humanities, one way to complicate the origin myth is to pay attention to the “exteriority of accidents” that shaped the received story, to tell the story slant, as it were, by looking at what Steven Johnson has called the “adjacent possibilities,” even the dead ends or paths not taken that nevertheless help us to understand what was done.

One example is the fascinating Microfilm Rapid Selector machine, which Busa briefly considered but from which he swerved away. Based on an experimental design by Vannevar Bush for the famous memex, the prototype was viewed by Busa in operation at the library of the Department of Agriculture in 1949. It offered a competing paradigm (both technically and institutionally) for information processing and retrieval. Or, the large-scale photo-mainframe IBM SSEC, which Busa saw working at IBM in 1949-1952 but was unable to use himself (since it was dedicated to scientific and industrial applications). It nonetheless inspired his thinking about the nature and scale of his linguistic data. Its existence as a kind of adjacent possibility is a useful reminder both of the institutionalization of the “two cultures” of science and the humanities at mid century, and, at the same time, of the artificiality of the categories. Or, take the Dead Sea Scrolls project, which Busa’s “lab” undertook but could not complete (and the remnants of which remain in the Busa Archive in Milan), but which revealed some of the limits of the idealized “computerized philology” that Busa was pursuing at the time.

My work on Father Busa, IBM, punched-card machines, and large-scale calculators has been inspired by Geoffrey Rockwell and Stéfan Sinclair, who have called for a media-archaeology approach to the technologies of the mainframe era. I’ve also drawn on a related approach, platform studies, which looks at individual platforms in their multilayered material particulars. Because media archaeology looks at forgotten or discounted technologies (presumed to be superseded by what has come to dominate the present), and replaces a triumphal narrative of technological progress with messier stories, it can usefully check and complement the laser focus of platform studies. Together, they allow for richer, more detailed views of the changing

cultural and historical conditions within which technologies emerge and jostle for prominence.

Theory/Practice: Lessons Learned from Feminist Film Studies

Tara McPherson

This talk investigates possible relationships of theory to practice within digital humanities and media studies and also calls for a politically engaged approach to both fields. It seeks to move beyond the binary framing of the DH slogan, “less yack, more hack,” by arguing for a more integrative and dialectical melding of making and critique. In particular, I turn to feminist film studies of the late 1970s to examine an earlier moment in media studies that sought to integrate media production, distribution, theory, and pedagogy toward expressly political ends. In conversation with contemporary feminist scholarship in new materialisms and digital media studies, I argue that practices of making can and should enrich our theoretical and discursive endeavors within feminism. In a recent article taking up the phrase “less yack, more hack,” Claire Warwick helpfully suggests that increased focus might be paid to the qualifiers “less” and “more” rather than to a binary opposition between “yacking” and “hacking” (538). I agree. We can then see yacking and hacking as held within a productive and dialectical relation. To take this line of thinking further, we might not even focus on “less” or “more,” as if the relationship between theory and practice can be reduced to balancing a formula. Instead, we might understand the two terms to be tied together in a productive and iterative friction. The tensions between “yack” and “hack” are not, perhaps, all that unique to the digital humanities. They exist across the university in structures that make it hard to combine theory and practice in our curricula, evaluation and promotion structures, disciplinary methodologies, and privileged forms of scholarly output.

As digital humanities scholars have struggled with the right balance of yack and hack, broader debates have emerged about the relationship of theory to practice across the academy. If these tensions have simmered just below the surface of disciplines for much of the twentieth century, then the digital turn has reanimated such debates in new ways in the new millennium. Returning to earlier moments of practice within and beyond the academy can provide valuable lessons for DH today.

The wedding of theory and practice was crucial to the formation of feminist film studies as a field over forty years ago. We see this joining quite literally in the

title of key essays such as Claire Johnston's "The Subject of Feminist Film Theory/Practice." The "/" signals a hybrid practice beyond the "and." Published in the journal *Screen* in 1980, the piece reports on the Feminism and Cinema Event held at the 1979 Edinburgh Film Festival. Johnston writes that, "throughout the week, emphasis was placed on the need to locate feminist politics within a conception of film as a social practice, on the dialectic of making and viewing and on film as a process rather than an object" (27). The early history of feminist film theory models a vibrant relationship of making to critique. Many feminist film scholars engaged in a form of inquiry that understood theory and practice to be constitutive of one another. These insights were often born of a deep exploration of the material forms of cinema—explorations enriched by practice. Such work is vitally important terrain for digital humanities, leading us to ask how our machines encode culture in very particular and often damaging ways while also perhaps signaling an enhanced role for artists and designers within DH endeavors.

Decolonising Design: Critical Making and Jugaad in India

Padmini Ray Murray

This talk will cover the establishment of the first Masters-level digital humanities programme in India, as well as a digital humanities research agenda that contextualizes and embeds such work in an Indian environment. Ray Murray will discuss the shift that this unique context generates, in terms of necessarily moving away from modeling such work on paradigms established in Anglo-American institutions, and her work towards the creation of a locally reflexive practice which responds more appropriately to its conditions. Drawing on the work of architectural historian Arindam Dutta, Ray Murray will historicise these arguments, demonstrating how design as a discipline is implicated in the work of colonialism, and how the praxis of critical making (as formulated by thinkers such as Matt Ratto and Garnet Hertz) can contribute both to decolonising design and more broadly, humanities scholarship in India, as well challenging traditional institutional frameworks that are the legacy of colonial education. Ray Murray will demonstrate how critical making is a particularly useful mode of inquiry in a context where digital humanities work is relatively nascent, in order to supplement and inform an emergent narrative of the history of what might be considered digital humanities in India.

Radically different technological and infrastructural conditions as well as historical mean that this narrative diverges from those which underpin established histories of Anglo-American digital humanities, and Ray Murray will explicate on how this difference necessitates alternative methodological approaches in order to reconstruct alternative histories. The work of Jentery Sayers and others at the Maker Lab at the University of Victoria on their cultural kits for history, while emphatically not exercises in replication and more in remediation, and in foregrounding "how the past is interpreted through present conditions, exhibiting history as a collection of refreshed traces, with both loss and gain" often relies on historical material culture such as patent documents, illustrations, artefacts in order to inform their creation, much of which is conserved and made available by Victorian values of empire-building and taxonomic collection. In contrast, the history of indigenous technologies in India is patchy and often obscured by more visible archival material which asserted colonial structures of oppression, complicating the use of a mode of inquiry such as Sayers et al's cultural kits for digital humanities work in India.

In addition, in a country like India, where literacy is still at a premium, design and making privileges the value of other forms of knowledge found in communities, such as crafts or indigenous traditions. Ray Murray will thus demonstrate to how conceiving of critical making in the tradition of practices such as *jugaad*, an indigenous combination of making-do, hacking, and frugal engineering makes for a contextually appropriate intervention in understandings of the digital humanities, and allows for a more politically nuanced view of tools, materials and the conditions of production that have laid the foundations for digital humanities scholarship going forward. In closing, Ray Murray will discuss how contemporary design education privileges "solution-ing", which anticipates a model of consumption rather than co-creation, tracing a trajectory from colonial ambition to neoliberal inevitability—and how digital humanities thinking discourages this mode by with its legacy of interpretation that discourages a one-size-fits-all response. Ray Murray will conclude by asserting the uses of creating a useful methodology to turn the lens of scrutiny upon digital artefacts and activities as well as being observant of different materialities and modalities of knowledge production in order to both historicise and limit the over determined nature of the digital.

Alternate Histories: Steampunk Fandoms and Digital Humanities Publics

Roger Whitson

The digital humanities is often characterized as dedicated to making scholarship publicly accessible. Yet accessibility is only one way to pursue a public digital humanities agenda. Another method leverages the complicated history described by media archaeology to highlight how various publics outside of University settings are already constructing digital humanities projects of their own. Jussi Parikka begins *What is Media Archaeology?* with an extended consideration of steampunk as an exemplary media archaeological practice, arguing that it falls outside of mainstream digital methodologies and is what Deleuze and Guattari call a “nomadic, minor science”: a set of quirky hacker techniques whose innovations are appropriated by the more economic powers of the state (qtd. in Parikka 168). As with any manifestation of what Deleuze and Guattari call “royal science,” or a hegemonic system relying upon the appropriation of nomadic practices, steampunk creates a tension between such minor sciences and their corporate and academic use. For every fascinating gadget produced by steampunk fans, there are also corporate phenomena like Justin Bieber videos featuring joyless representations of steampunk automatons whose cogs are appropriated only to sell more albums.

This talk explores a set of steampunk projects from fans in order to show how their methodologies constitute an alternate history of the digital humanities rooted in the practice of public hobbyism. One example of this steampunk hobbyist practice is Tim Robinson’s 2007 build of a Babbage’s *Difference Engine No. 1* from parts manufactured by the toy company Meccano. Robinson says that he was intrigued by the brand’s claim to “do something real,” and the tactile quality of Meccano parts mediates this sense of reality: the cold metal, the round rivets, the clicking of metal rods as they are moved by other parts. The machine’s design is based upon Babbage’s first engine and calculates numbers up to four digits and three orders of difference. It is composed of several ratchet wheels, each with 20 teeth and which are covered by printed tape showing numbers from 0 to 9. While visiting Robinson’s website, you can find descriptions of his nostalgia for the toy company, which he describes as helping him build “the machines of my youth” — including “astronomical clocks, orreries, looms and other textile machinery [...] and perhaps most enduring, the differential analyzer (and analog computer).”

Robinson’s project exists within a wide variety of other steampunk gadgets that express both nostalgia for various parts and fascination with methods of building: from other models of the difference engine, like Andrew Carroll’s version created with Lego parts and rubber bands; to the varied projects of *The Steampunk Workshop*’s Jake von Slatt — who rescues available parts from junk yards and repurposes them into workable Steampunk RVs (Recreational Vehicles), Wimshurst Influence Engines, and even a Stroh violin with an amplifying horn and aluminum diaphragm. For me, such projects underscore Matthew Kirschenbaum’s argument that hobbyist activities enable the digital humanities to value “the unapologetically small, the uncompromisingly local and particular” (“Ancient” 196). Yet, steampunk hobbyism also enables a different understanding of the role various publics who engage in such activity play in the digital humanities as a field.

Many digital humanities projects envision the public as a homogeneous entity who acts primarily as an audience or — in some cases — a collaborator for what ends up being essentially a scholarly act. The sheer diversity of steampunk fandom, on the other hand, resists such an easy or homogeneous definition. While some aspects of steampunk fandom act, as China Mieville has observed, as forms of nostalgic imperialism; or as Charles Stross claims, as romances with totalitarianism, other fans use steampunk to imagine histories where the Industrial Revolution happened in Africa or China rather than in Europe. Miriam Rocek dresses up as a time-traveling “Steampunk Emma Goldman” and participates in protests like Occupy Wall Street. Lisa Hager, meanwhile, uses her steampunk persona to advocate for gender neutral bathrooms. Such diversity underlines the need to understand how steampunk and the digital humanities communities exist as discrete assemblages, rooted in the politics of the communities practicing them. While this talk will cover mainly hobbyist projects within steampunk fandom, it will contextualize that work with a multiplicity of various local practices. All of these practices, I argue, extend to the digital humanities as a field — which is less a big tent and more a massive assemblage of becoming, branching, and multiplicity.

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