

What Is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?

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People who say that the last battles of the computer revolution in English departments have been fought and won don't know what they're talking about. If our current use of computers in English studies is marked by any common theme at all, it is experimentation at the most basic level. As a profession, we are just learning how to live with computers, just beginning to integrate these machines effectively into writing- and reading-intensive courses, just starting to consider the implications of the multilayered literacy associated with computers.

—Cynthia Selfe

WHAT is (or are) the “digital humanities,” aka “humanities computing”? It’s tempting to say that whoever asks the question has not gone looking very hard for an answer. “What is digital humanities?” essays like this one are already genre pieces. Willard McCarty has been contributing papers on the subject for years (a monograph too). Under the earlier appellation, John Unsworth has advised us “what is humanities computing and what is it not.” Most recently Patrik Svensson has been publishing a series of well-documented articles on multiple aspects of the topic, including the lexical shift from humanities computing to digital humanities. Moreover, as Cynthia Selfe in an *ADE Bulletin* from 1988 reminds us, computers have been part of our disciplinary lives for well over two decades now. During this time digital humanities has accumulated a robust professional apparatus that is probably more rooted in English than any other departmental home.

The contours of this professional apparatus are easily discoverable. An organization called the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations hosts a well-attended annual international conference called Digital Humanities (it grew out of an earlier annual series of conferences, hosted jointly by the Association for Computers and the Humanities and the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing since 1989). There is Blackwell’s *Companion to Digital Humanities*. There is a book series (yes, a book series), Topics in the Digital Humanities, from the University of Illinois Press. There is a refereed journal called *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, one of several that serve the field, including a newer publication, *Digital Studies / Le champ numérique*, sponsored by the Canadian Society for Digital Humanities (Société pour L’étude des Médias Interactifs). The University of Victoria hosts the annual Digital Humanities Summer Institute to train new scholars. Crucially, there are digital humanities centers and institutes (probably at least one hundred worldwide, some of them established for a decade or more with staffs numbering in the dozens): these are served by an organization known as centerNet. There have been digital humanities manifestos (I know of at least two) and FAQs, colloquia and symposia, workshops and special sessions. Not to mention, of course, that a gloss or explanation of digital humanities is implicit in every mission statement, every call for papers and proposals, every

*What Is Digital
Humanities and
What's It Doing in
English Departments?*

Matthew G.
Kirschenbaum

strategic plan and curriculum-development document, every hiring request, and so forth that invokes the term. Or the countless times the question has been visited on electronic discussion lists, blogs, *Facebook* walls, and *Twitter* feeds, contributing all the flames and exhortations, celebrations and screeds one could wish to read.

We could also, of course, simply Google the question. *Google* takes us to *Wikipedia*, and what we find there is not bad:

The digital humanities, also known as humanities computing, is a field of study, research, teaching, and invention concerned with the intersection of computing and the disciplines of the humanities. It is methodological by nature and interdisciplinary in scope. It involves investigation, analysis, synthesis and presentation of information in electronic form. It studies how these media affect the disciplines in which they are used, and what these disciplines have to contribute to our knowledge of computing.

As a working definition this serves as well as any I've seen, which is not surprising since a glance at the page's View History tab reveals individuals closely associated with the digital humanities as contributors. At its core, then, digital humanities is more akin to a common methodological outlook than an investment in any one specific set of texts or even technologies. We could attempt to refine this "outlook" quantitatively, using some of the very tools and techniques digital humanities has pioneered. For example, we might use a text-analysis tool named Voyeur developed by Stéfan Sinclair to mine the proceedings from the annual Digital Humanities conference and develop lists of topic frequencies or collocate key terms or visualize the papers' citation networks. We could also choose to explore the question qualitatively, by examining sets of projects from self-identified digital humanities centers. At the University of Maryland, where I serve as an associate director at the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, we support work from "Shakespeare to Second Life" as we're fond of saying: the Shakespeare Quartos Archive, funded by a joint grant program administered by the United Kingdom's JISC and the NEH, makes a searchable digital facsimile of each of the thirty-two extant quarto copies of *Hamlet* available online, while the Preserving Virtual Worlds project, supported by the Library of Congress, has developed and tested standards and best practices for archiving and ensuring future access to computer games, interactive fiction, and virtual communities.

Yet digital humanities is also a social undertaking. It harbors networks of people who have been working together, sharing research, arguing, competing, and collaborating for many years. Key achievements from this community, like the Text Encoding Initiative or the Orlando Project, were mostly finished before the current wave of interest in digital humanities began. Nonetheless, the rapid and remarkable rise of *digital humanities* as a term can be traced to a set of surprisingly specific circumstances. John Unsworth, who was the founding director of the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at the University of Virginia for a decade and is currently dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois, has this to relate:

The real origin of that term [digital humanities] was in conversation with Andrew McNeillie, the original acquiring editor for the Blackwell *Companion to Digital Humanities*. We started talking with him about that book project in 2001, in April, and

*What Is Digital
Humanities and
What's It Doing in
English Departments?*

Matthew G.
Kirschenbaum

by the end of November we'd lined up contributors and were discussing the title, for the contract. Ray [Siemens] wanted "A Companion to Humanities Computing" as that was the term commonly used at that point; the editorial and marketing folks at Blackwell wanted "Companion to Digitized Humanities." I suggested "Companion to Digital Humanities" to shift the emphasis away from simple digitization. (Message)

At about the same time the Blackwell's volume was being put together, the leadership of two scholarly organizations opened discussions about creating an umbrella entity for themselves and eventually other organizations and associations with like interests. As anyone who has ever tried to run a scholarly organization will know, economies of scale are difficult to come by with only a few hundred members and so the thought was to consolidate and share infrastructure and services. The two organizations were the aforementioned Association for Computers in the Humanities and the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing. The umbrella structure that resulted was called ADHO, or the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations. Here is Unsworth again, from the same communication:

Conversations about merging ACH and ALLC began at Tuebingen, in a bar, in a conversation between Harold Short and me, in July 2002. A couple of months later, I had set a list called "ad hoc"—allied digital humanities organizations committee, first message dated August 16, 2002. . . . We finally got things off the dime in Sweden, at the 2004 ALLC/ACH, and after waffling some more about names (ICHIO, OHCO, and others) we voted, in April of 2005, to go with ADHO, changing "A" from "Allied" to "Alliance."

By 2005 then, the Blackwell's *Companion* had been published and the Alliance for Digital Humanities Organizations had been established. There's one more key event to relate, and that's the launch, in 2006, of the Digital Humanities Initiative by the NEH, then under the chairmanship of Bruce Cole and with leadership provided by Brett Bobley, a charismatic and imaginative individual who doubles as the agency's CIO. In an e-mail to me, Bobley describes a January 2006 lunch with another NEH staffer at which they were brainstorming ideas for what would become the Digital Humanities Initiative:

At the lunch, I jotted down a bunch of names, including humanities computing, ehumanities, and digital humanities. When I got back to the office, I Googled all three of them and "digital humanities" seemed to be the winner. I liked it for a few reasons: due to ADHO and their annual Digital Humanities conference, the name brought up a lot of relevant hits. I believe I'd also heard from Julia Flanders about the forthcoming *Digital Humanities Quarterly* journal. I also appreciated the fact that it seemed to cast a wider net than "humanities computing" which seemed to imply a form of computing, whereas "digital humanities" implied a form of humanism. I also thought it would be an easier sell to the humanities community to have the emphasis on "humanities."

In 2008 the Digital Humanities Initiative became the Office of Digital Humanities, the designation of "office" assigning the program (and its budget line) a permanent place within the agency. That *the* major federal granting agency for scholarship in the humanities, taking its cues directly from a small but active and influential group of scholars, had devoted scarce resources to launching a number of new grant

*What Is Digital
Humanities and
What's It Doing in
English Departments?*

Matthew G.
Kirschenbaum

opportunities, many of them programmatically innovative in and of themselves, around an endeavor termed “digital humanities” was doubtless the tipping point for the branding of DH, at least in the United States.

These events will, I think, earn a place in histories of the profession alongside other major critical movements like the Birmingham school or Yale deconstruction. In the space of a little more than five years digital humanities had gone from being a term of convenience used by a group of researchers who had already been working together for years to something like a movement. Individual scholars routinely now self-identify as digital humanists, or “DHers.” There is an unusually strong sense of community and common purpose, manifested, for example, in events such as the Day of Digital Humanities, organized by a team at the University of Alberta. Its second annual iteration featured over 150 participants (up from around one hundred the first year), who blogged on a shared site about the details of their workday, posted photographs of their offices and screens, and reflected on the nature of their enterprise. Digital humanities has even been the recipient of its own *Downfall* remix, the Internet meme whereby the climactic scene from the HBO film depicting Hitler’s final days in the bunker is closed-captioned with, in this instance, a tirade about the pernicious influence of online scholarship.

Digital humanities was also (you may have heard) big news at the 2009 MLA Annual Convention in Philadelphia. On 28 December, midway through the convention, William Pannacker, one of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*’s officially appointed bloggers, wrote the following for the online “Brainstorm” section: “Amid all the doom and gloom of the 2009 MLA Convention, one field seems to be alive and well: the digital humanities. More than that: Among all the contending sub-fields, the digital humanities seem like the first ‘next big thing’ in a long time.” (It seems fair to say that Pannacker, who is the author of “Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don’t Go,” under the pseudonym Thomas Benton, is not a man easily impressed.) Jennifer Howard, meanwhile, a veteran *Chronicle* reporter who has covered the convention before, noted the “vitality” of digital humanities with its “overflow crowds to too-small conference rooms.” There were several dozen panels devoted to the digital humanities at the MLA convention, and one could (and did) easily navigate the three-day convention by moving among them.

Crucially, digital humanities was visible in another way at the conference: the social-networking service *Twitter*. *Twitter* is the love-it-or-hate-it Web 2.0 application often maligned as the final triumph of the attention-deficit generation because it limits postings to a mere 140 characters—not 140 words, 140 characters. The reason has less to do with attention spans than *Twitter*’s origins in the messaging protocols of mobile devices, but the format encourages brief, conversational posts (“tweets”) that also tend to contain a fair measure of flair and wit. Unlike *Facebook*, *Twitter* allows for asymmetrical relationships: you can “follow” someone (or they can follow you) without the relationship’s being reciprocated. Tweeting has rapidly become an integral part of the conference scene, with a subset of attendees on *Twitter* providing real-time running commentary through a common “tag” (#mla09, for example), which allows everyone who follows it to tune in to the conversation. This phenomenon has

*What Is Digital
Humanities and
What's It Doing in
English Departments?*

Matthew G.
Kirschenbaum

some very specific ramifications. Amanda French ran the numbers and concluded that nearly half (48%) of attendees at the Digital Humanities 2009 conference were tweeting the sessions. By contrast, only 3% of MLA convention attendees tweeted—according to French's data, out of about 7,800 attendees at the MLA convention only 256 tweeted. Of these, the vast majority were people already associated with digital humanities through their existing networks of followers. Jennifer Howard, again writing for the *Chronicle*, noted the centrality of *Twitter* to the DH crowd and its impact on scholarly communication, going so far as to include people's *Twitter* identities in her roundup of major stories from the convention. *Inside Higher Ed* also devoted coverage to *Twitter* at the MLA convention, noting that Rosemary G. Feal was using it to connect with individual members of the organization—not surprisingly, many of them DHers. Feal, in fact, kept up a lively stream of tweets throughout the conference, gamely mixing it up with the sometimes irreverent back-channel conversation and, in a scene out of *Small World* had it only been written twenty years later, issued an impromptu invite for her “tweeps” to join the association's elite for nightcaps in the penthouse of one of the convention hotels.

While it's not hard to see why the academic press devoured the story, there's more going on than mere shenanigans. *Twitter*, along with blogs and other online outlets, has inscribed the digital humanities as a network topology, that is to say, lines drawn by aggregates of affinities, formally and functionally manifest in who follows whom, who friends whom, who tweets whom, and who links to what. Digital humanities has also, I would propose, lately been galvanized by a group of younger (or not so young) graduate students, faculty members (both tenure line and contingent), and other academic professionals who now wield the label “digital humanities” instrumentally amid an increasingly monstrous institutional terrain defined by declining public support for higher education, rising tuitions, shrinking endowments, the proliferation of distance education and the for-profit university, and, underlying it all, the conversion of full-time, tenure-track academic labor to a part-time adjunct workforce. One example is the remarkable tale of Brian Croxall, the recent Emory PhD who went viral online for a period of several weeks during and after the MLA. Croxall had his paper, “The Absent Presence: Today's Faculty,” read at the convention in absentia while he simultaneously published it on his blog after finding himself unable to afford to travel to Philadelphia because he hadn't landed any convention interviews. As numerous observers pointed out, Croxall's paper, which was heavily blogged and tweeted and received coverage in both the *Chronicle* and *Inside Higher Ed*, was undoubtedly and by many orders of magnitude the most widely seen and read paper from the 2009 MLA convention. These events were subsequently discussed in a series of cross-postings and conversations that spilled across *Twitter* and the blogosphere for several weeks after the convention ended. Many seemed to feel that the connection to wider academic issues was not incidental or accidental, and that digital humanities, with a culture that values collaboration, openness, nonhierarchical relations, and agility might be an instrument for real resistance or reform.

So what is digital humanities and what is it doing in English departments? The answer to the latter portion of the question is easier. I can think of some half a dozen reasons why English departments have historically been hospitable settings for this

*What Is Digital
Humanities and
What's It Doing in
English Departments?*

Matthew G.
Kirschenbaum

kind of work. First, after numeric input, text has been by far the most tractable data type for computers to manipulate. Unlike images, audio, video, and so on, there is a long tradition of text-based data processing that was within the capabilities of even some of the earliest computer systems and that has for decades fed research in fields like stylistics, linguistics, and author attribution studies, all heavily associated with English departments. Second, of course, there is the long association between computers and composition, almost as long and just as rich in its lineage. Third is the pitch-perfect convergence between the intense conversations around editorial theory and method in the 1980s and the widespread means to implement electronic archives and editions very soon after; Jerome McGann is a key figure here, with his work on the *Rossetti Archive*, which he has repeatedly described as a vehicle for applied theory, standing as paradigmatic. Fourth, and at roughly the same time, is a modest but much-promoted belle-lettristic project around hypertext and other forms of electronic literature that continues to this day and is increasingly vibrant and diverse. Fifth is the openness of English departments to cultural studies, where computers and other objects of digital material culture become the centerpiece of analysis. I'm thinking here, for example, of the reader Stuart Hall and others put together around the Sony Walkman, that hipster iPod of old. Finally, today, we see the simultaneous explosion of interest in e-reading and e-book devices like the Kindle, iPad, and Nook and the advent of large-scale text digitization projects, the most significant of course being *Google Books*, with scholars like Franco Moretti taking up data mining and visualization to perform "distance readings" of hundreds, thousands, or even millions of books at a time.

Digital humanities, which began as a term of consensus among a relatively small group of researchers, is now backed on a growing number of campuses by a level of funding, infrastructure, and administrative commitments that would have been unthinkable even a decade ago. Even more recently, I would argue, the network effects of blogs and *Twitter* at a moment when the academy itself is facing massive and often wrenching changes linked both to new technologies and the changing political and economic landscape has led to the construction of "digital humanities" as a free-floating signifier, one that increasingly serves to focus the anxiety and even outrage of individual scholars over their own lack of agency amid the turmoil in their institutions and profession. This is manifested in the intensity of debates around open-access publishing, where faculty members increasingly demand the right to retain ownership of their own scholarship—meaning, their own labor—and disseminate it freely to an audience apart from or parallel with more traditional structures of academic publishing, which in turn are perceived as outgrowths of dysfunctional and outmoded practices surrounding peer review, tenure, and promotion (see Fitzpatrick on "planned obsolescence" in this issue).

Whatever else it might be then, the digital humanities today is about a scholarship (and a pedagogy) that is publicly visible in ways to which we are generally unaccustomed, a scholarship and pedagogy that are bound up with infrastructure in ways that are deeper and more explicit than we are generally accustomed to, a scholarship and pedagogy that are collaborative and depend on networks of people and that live an active 24/7 life online. Isn't that something you want in your English department?

*What Is Digital
Humanities and
What's It Doing in
English Departments?*

Matthew G.
Kirschenbaum

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