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The Digital Humanities Moment

MATTHEW K. GOLD

Recent coverage of the digital humanities (DH) in popular publications such as the *New York Times*, *Nature*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Inside Higher Ed* has confirmed that the digital humanities is not just “the next big thing,” as the *Chronicle* claimed in 2009, but simply “the Thing,” as the same publication noted in 2011 (Pannacker). At a time when many academic institutions are facing austerity budgets, department closings, and staffing shortages, the digital humanities experienced a banner year that saw cluster hires at multiple universities, the establishment of new digital humanities centers and initiatives across the globe, and multimillion-dollar grants distributed by federal agencies and charitable foundations. Even Google entered the fray, making a series of highly publicized grants to DH scholars (Orwant).

Clearly, this is a significant moment of growth and opportunity for the field, but it has arrived amid larger questions concerning the nature and purpose of the university system. At stake in the rise of the digital humanities is not only the viability of new research methods (such as algorithmic approaches to large humanities data sets) or new pedagogical activities (such as the incorporation of geospatial data into classroom projects) but also key elements of the larger academic ecosystem that supports such work. Whether one looks at the status of peer review, the evolving nature of authorship and collaboration, the fundamental interpretive methodologies of humanities disciplines, or the controversies over tenure and casualized academic labor that have increasingly rent the fabric of university life, it is easy to see that the academy is shifting in significant ways.

And the digital humanities, more than most fields, seems positioned to address many of those changes. The recently created international group 4Humanities, for instance, argues that the digital humanities community has a “special potential and responsibility to assist humanities advocacy” because of its expertise in “making creative use of digital technology to advance humanities research and teaching” (“Mission”). In a moment of crisis, the digital humanities contributes to the sustenance

of academic life as we know it, even as (and perhaps because) it upends academic life as we know it.

We've come a long way from Father Busa's digital concordances.¹ Indeed, the rapid ascent of the digital humanities in the public imagination and the concomitant expansion of its purview have masked, and at times threatened to overshadow, decades of foundational work by scholars and technologists who engaged in "digital humanities" work before it was known by that name.² Though longtime practitioners, having weathered decades of suspicion from more traditional colleagues, have largely welcomed an influx of newcomers into the field—the theme of the 2011 Digital Humanities Conference was "The Big Tent," a metaphor much debated in the pages that follow—some DHers have found the sudden expansion of the community to be disconcerting. Indeed, fault lines have emerged within the DH community between those who use new digital tools to aid relatively traditional scholarly projects and those who believe that DH is most powerful as a disruptive political force that has the potential to reshape fundamental aspects of academic practice.³

As the digital humanities has received increasing attention and newfound cachet, its discourse has grown introspective and self-reflexive. In the aftermath of the 2011 Modern Language Association Convention, many members of the field engaged in a public debate about what it means to be a "digital humanist." The debate was sparked by University of Nebraska scholar Stephan Ramsay, whose talk at the convention was bluntly titled "Who's In and Who's Out." Having been asked by the roundtable session organizer to deliver a pithy, three-minute-long take on the digital humanities, Ramsay noted increasingly capacious definitions of the field ("[DH] has most recently tended to welcome anyone and anything exemplifying a certain wired fervor," he noted) before delivering, with the mock-serious pretension that it would settle the matter once and for all, the pronouncement that, yes, there are some basic requirements one must fulfill before calling oneself a digital humanist: "Digital Humanities is not some airy Lyceum. It is a series of concrete instantiations involving money, students, funding agencies, big schools, little schools, programs, curricula, old guards, new guards, gatekeepers, and prestige. . . . Do you have to know how to code [to be a digital humanist]? I'm a tenured professor of digital humanities and I say 'yes.' . . . Personally, I think Digital Humanities is about building things. . . . If you are not making anything, you are not . . . a digital humanist" (Ramsay, "Who's In and Who's Out"). Predictably, these comments set off an intense debate during the session itself and in the ensuing online discussions. Ramsay wrote a follow-up blog post in which he softened his stance—moving from "coding" as a membership requirement to the less specific "building"—but he still noted that the fundamental commonality that can be found among digital humanists "involves moving from reading and critiquing to building and making" (Ramsay, "On Building").

These recent, definitional conversations bear the mark of a field in the midst of growing pains as its adherents expand from a small circle of like-minded scholars

to a more heterogeneous set of practitioners who sometimes ask more disruptive questions. They also signal the ways in which the applied model of digital humanities work portends significant shifts in the nature of humanities scholarship. When a DH scholar attempts to include within her tenure dossier (if, indeed, the scholar is even on a tenure track and not one of a growing set of “alt-academics”⁴) not only articles and books but also, for example, code for a collaboratively built tool that enables other scholars to add descriptive metadata to digitized manuscripts, key questions about the nature of scholarship are raised. Several essays within this volume deal with such questions, and institutions such as the Modern Language Association have compiled guides to help DH scholars begin to answer them (“The Evaluation of Digital Work”).

Similar definitional debates can be found in the pages that follow. Where, for instance, does new media studies leave off and digital humanities begin? Does DH need theory? Does it have a politics? Is it accessible to all members of the profession, or do steep infrastructural requirements render entry prohibitive for practitioners working at small colleges or cash-strapped public universities? Are DHers too cliquish? Do social media platforms like Twitter trivialize DH’s professional discourse? Can DH provide meaningful opportunities to scholars seeking alternatives to tenure-track faculty employment? Can it save the humanities? The university?

These questions and others have vexed the public discourse around the digital humanities for a few years now, but to date such discussions have taken place predominantly on listservs, blogs, and Twitter. Few attempts have been made to collect and curate the debates in a more deliberate fashion, with the result that some conversations, especially those on Twitter—a platform used extensively by digital humanists—are hopelessly dispersed and sometimes even impossible to reconstitute only a few months after they have taken place.

Debates in the Digital Humanities seeks to redress this gap and to assess the state of the field by articulating, shaping, and preserving some of the vigorous debates surrounding the rise of the digital humanities. It is not a comprehensive view of DH or even an all-encompassing portrait of the controversies that surround it, but it does represent an attempt to clarify key points of tension and multiple visions of a rapidly shifting landscape. The contributors who provide these visions have a range of perspectives; included among them are some of the most well-known senior figures in the field, well-established midcareer scholars, rising junior scholars, “#alt-ac” digital humanists, and graduate students. This mix of new and seasoned voices mirrors the openness of digital humanities itself and reflects its strong tradition of mentorship and collaboration.

The collection builds upon and extends the pioneering volumes that have preceded it, such as *A Companion to the Digital Humanities* (Schreibman, Siemens, and Unsworth) and *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies* (Schreibman and Siemens), as well as newer and forthcoming collections such as *The American Literary Scholar in the Digital Age* (Earhart and Jewell), *Switching Codes: Thinking*

Through Digital Technology in the Humanities and Arts (Bartscherer and Coover), *#alt-academy* (Nowviskie), *Hacking the Academy* (Cohen and Scheinfeldt), and *Teaching Digital Humanities* (Hirsch). In the spirit of those texts and in line with the open-source ethos of the digital humanities, this volume will be published as both a printed book and an expanded, open-access webtext. The University of Minnesota Press is to be much commended for its willingness to share the volume in this way, a feature that will significantly extend the reach of the book.

This collection is not a celebration of the digital humanities but an interrogation of it. Several essays in the volume level pointed critiques at DH for a variety of ills: a lack of attention to issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality; a preference for research-driven projects over pedagogical ones; an absence of political commitment; an inadequate level of diversity among its practitioners; an inability to address texts under copyright; and an institutional concentration in well-funded research universities. Alongside these critiques are intriguing explorations of digital humanities theories, methods, and practices. From attempts to delineate new theories of coding as scholarship to forward-looking visions of trends in big data, the volume sketches out some of the directions in which the field is moving.

And the field of digital humanities does move quickly; the speed of discourse in DH is often noted with surprise by newcomers, especially at conferences, when Twitter feeds buzz with links to announcements, papers, prototypes, slides, white papers, photos, data visualizations, and collaborative documents. By the typical standards of the publishing industry, this text has seen a similarly rapid pace of development, going from first solicitation of essays to published book in less than a year. To have a collection of this size come together with such speed is, to put it mildly, outside the norms of print-based academic publishing. That it did so is a tribute to the intensity of the debates, the strength of the submissions, and the responsiveness of the press. But it is also a testimonial to the collaborative process through which the book was produced, a feature seen most clearly in the peer review that it received.

The book, in fact, went through three distinct stages of peer review, each of which required separate revisions: the first and most innovative process was a semipublic peer-to-peer review, in which contributors commented on one another's work. Essays then went through an editor's review, which was followed finally by a traditional blind review administered by the press.

The semipublic peer-to-peer review was modeled on a number of recent experiments in peer review, most notably Noah Wardrip-Fruin's *Expressive Processing* (2008), Kathleen Fitzpatrick's *Planned Obsolescence* (2009), *Shakespeare Quarterly's* "Shakespeare and New Media" issue (2010), and Trebor Scholz's *Learning through Digital Media* (2011). In all of these cases, CommentPress, a WordPress blog theme built by the Institute for the Future of the Book, was used to publish draft manuscripts on a site where comments could be added to the margin beside particular paragraphs of the text (Fitzpatrick, "CommentPress"). Most of the

aforementioned examples were fully public, however, meaning that anyone with the link and an interest in a particular text could read and comment on it. For *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, we chose to go with a semipublic option, meaning that the site was password protected and accessible only to the scholars involved in its production. Draft essays were placed on the site along with a list of review assignments; each contributor was responsible for adding comments to at least one other text. The process was not blind: reviewers knew who had written the text they were reading, and their comments were published under their own names. Often, debates between contributors broke out in the margins of the text.

Whether measured quantitatively or qualitatively, the peer-to-peer review process was effective. In the space of two weeks, the thirty essays that went through the process received 568 comments—an average of nearly twenty comments per essay (the median number of comments received was eighteen). Many contributors went far beyond the single essay that had been assigned to them, commenting on as many as half of the essays in the volume. Lest skeptics assume that a nonblind review process leads inevitably to superficial praise or even to a mild suppression of negative feedback, it should be noted that several features of the peer-to-peer review worked against such possibilities. The semipublic nature of the review meant that the names of reviewers were attached to the comments they left; a failure to leave substantive comments would have reflected poorly on the reviewer's own work. The fact that review assignments were shared openly among the circle of contributors created a sense of peer pressure that made it difficult for reviewers to shirk their duties. And because the peer-to-peer review was not fully open to the public, contributors seemed comfortable providing negative criticism in a more open fashion than they might have had the platform been fully public.

The peer-to-peer review website wound up imparting a sense of community and collectivity to the project as a whole. It also gave contributors a better sense of the full volume in its prepublished state. Whereas contributors to edited collections typically gain a vision of the entire book only when it is finally printed, contributors to *Debates in the Digital Humanities* were able to see the work of their peers while revising their own essays. This led some authors not only to thank fellow contributors in their acknowledgments for feedback given during peer-to-peer review but also to cite one another's essays and peer reviews. In short, rather than serving solely as a gate-keeping mechanism, this review process built a sense of cohesion around the project itself. And it was followed and supplemented by more traditional forms of review that provided opportunities for the kind of unfiltered criticism typically associated with blind review. Ultimately, this hybrid, semioopen, multistage model of peer review incorporated the innovations of completely open models of peer-to-peer review while retaining the strengths of more traditional processes.

The resulting text reflects the range of issues facing the digital humanities at the present time. It begins with the section "Defining the Digital Humanities," a

subject of perennial discussion within the DH community. Other portions of the book explore the field by moving from theory to critique to practice to teaching, ending with a look toward the future of the digital humanities. Each chapter closes with a short selection of materials reprinted from scholarly blogs and wikis, reflecting both the importance of such networked spaces to digital humanities scholars and the ways in which such “middle-state” publishing both serves as a vital channel for scholarly communication and feeds into more formal publishing projects.⁵

The printed version of *Debates in the Digital Humanities* is the first iteration of this project; it will be followed by an online, expanded, open-access webtext. We are planning a website that will offer not a static version of the book, but rather an ongoing, community-based resource that can be used to track and extend discussions of current debates. Given the speed with which the digital humanities is growing, such a dynamic resource is necessary. And in that sense, this volume is but the beginning of a new set of conversations.

NOTES

I am grateful to Douglas Armato, Stephen Brier, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Matthew Kirschenbaum, Elizabeth Losh, Stephen Ramsay, Lisa Spiro, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful readings of earlier drafts of this introduction.

1. Father Roberto Busa, an Italian Jesuit priest, is generally credited with having founded humanities computing in 1949 when he began collaborating with IBM on a machine that could be used to create a concordance of all words ever published by Thomas Aquinas. After thirty years of work, Busa published the *Index Thomisticus* first in print and later on CD-ROM and the web. See Hockey and Busa for more information.

2. For a history of the digital humanities before it was known by that appellation, see Susan Hockey’s “The History of Humanities Computing,” in *A Companion to Digital Humanities*. The entire first section of that book, “Part I: History,” provides a useful overview and history of digital work in various fields. See also the essays by Matthew Kirschenbaum in the present volume.

3. See the essays by Patrik Svensson and Julia Flanders in this volume for further discussion of such tensions. For recent discussions of the ways in which DH is reconfiguring traditional scholarly careers and forms, see Nowviskie’s *#alt-academy* project as well as the recent announcement of *PressForward* (Cohen, “Introducing *PressForward*”).

4. See Nowviskie for a description of this term and the various kinds of work it can entail.

5. For more on the concept of middle-state academic publishing, see Cohen, “Introducing *PressForward*.”

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