

What Would Marquette's Digital Humanities Center Look Like?

The meaning of the digital humanities has become more elusive with the popularity of the phrase. Its use has even spilled out of academia into the popular press. In its widest sense the phrase refers to any impact of digital technology on research and teaching in the humanities, and thus would include digital libraries, data mining, multimedia publication, digital visualization, most media studies, digital tool development, instructional videos, open access publishing, online courses, and so on.¹ I find this meaning too broad to be of much use, given the extent and diversity of the digital revolution. So I've created a narrower definition: The digital humanities consists of communities of academics building digital objects that interpret the human experience. My presentation today seeks to unpack this definition, and then use it to envision a digital humanities center at Marquette.

So what are digital objects? I first encountered the term working with instructional design staff in Raynor Library to build online instructional web sites addressing common issues we face in our work. Open to anyone on the web, these instructional sites use sound, video, and text to illustrate how one finds, for example, scholarship on particular verses in the Bible. The digital objects I am talking about today share these qualities, and more, while addressing subjects in the humanities. Two examples will illustrate the genre, both of which address historical issues, since that's my specialty. Similar, or better, ones could be found in other fields. My examples illustrate both strengths and weaknesses of contemporary digital humanities projects.

Cornell University's Institute of Labor Relations has developed a digital object, *The 1911 Triangle Fire*.² On March 25th of that year one-hundred and forty-six people, overwhelmingly young immigrant women, died in about fifteen minutes when a fire swept through the Triangle

Shirtwaist Company, a sweatshop producing blouses on the ninth floor of a factory loft building in New York City. The fire had a substantial influence on legislation regulating factories, on the labor movement in New York, and subsequently on the New Deal. The Institute of Labor Relations developed the site in response to repeated requests from high school students who were writing papers on the fire. First published in 1998, the site is in its second major edition. It contains six interpretative sections, ranging in length between about 500 and 1500 words, which narrate and analyze the fire and its aftermath, through the trial of the factory's owners. Its special strength is an array of online primary sources, including newspaper and magazine articles, interviews with relatives and witnesses (some in audio format), court records, photos, letters, songs and plays, reports of investigative commissions, and records of subsequent commemorative events. The site also contains secondary sources and study aids—a timeline, a detailed visual model of the ninth floor of the building, guides for students on how to use primary sources and write papers, and an extensive bibliography that any one researching the event would want to consult, including senior scholars.

My second example, the *Shaping the West*, comes out of the Spatial History Project at Stanford University.³ *Shaping the West* aims to develop “tools to represent and analyze visually how and to what degree the railroads created new spatial patterns and experiences in the 19th century American West.” Currently these tools consist of twenty-four digital interactive maps that use ArcGIS software to plot data over time, such as the kinds and volume of exports from railroad stations in Colorado between 1880 and 1910, and the changing population density of the whole country between 1790 and 2000. Thus their maps put “Big Data” into visual form. The best of these maps use the potential of the digital medium to visualize change over time, allowing, for example, one to see the population filling in across the country over two centuries

of development, an option unavailable in any print medium. Looked at individually, these maps just appear to be extraordinary illustrations; but, when viewed as a group, they can yield new perspectives on the complex interrelated changes brought to the West by railroad development.

Both of these digital objects are publications, although, unlike items in print, they are ongoing. *The 1911 Triangle Fire* is likely close to a settled shape, although new elements might be added, such as more records of commemorative events. In this way the public memory of the fire can be included within its history. *Shaping the West* is much more open-ended and will likely take on new elements, perhaps with new presentational formats. Both digital projects are also free on the Web, their costs being absorbed by the institutions that house the centers that host them. Also they both use multi-media resources to present information, including primary sources that can be used by their viewers for purposes other than those of their creators. In this way they add to the commonly available set of accessible resources for the further development of historical knowledge. And, most important for my definition of the digital humanities, they both interpret some aspect of the human experience. This interpretation is essential for distinguishing the digital humanities from the publication of archival sources, which has been the more typical option pursued by digitization projects up to now. My main criticism of my two examples is that their interpretations are too modest, and, in the case of *Shaping the West*, often hidden within unexplained choices about what to map. Both the evolution of the technology and the increasing sophistication of the people using it make a new stage in the use of information technology in the humanities possible, one in which interpretation of the human experience is more daring, sophisticated, explicit, and challenging. Only by embedding such interpretations in digital objects will the productions of the digital humanities be accepted as genuine scholarship.⁴

And so we are halfway through my definition, having reviewed digital objects that interpret the human experience. But what about the communities of academics who build them? They include people whose backgrounds cut across the status hierarchy of contemporary academia, as well as across the disciplines that define its notorious silos. And they can include people in several geographical places. The new opportunities created by digital technology—inexpensive publication, presentation from multiple perspectives, manipulation of vast amounts of data, communication in words, images, voice—also make its use complex, requiring people with various skill sets. Rarely, if ever, can one person master the skills needed to build digital objects; and the sheer amount of work involved accentuates the need for group effort. The people involved in a project range from tenured faculty through Web designers to coders, and these people have to work together intensely because seemingly prosaic technical decisions affect the interpretations that are communicated. Thus the technology has a democratizing effect even blurring the line between faculty and staff.⁵

The same versatility and complexity of the digital medium also makes interdisciplinary collaboration easier and desirable, as multiple perspectives and methodologies can be incorporated into one publication using several communication mediums. *The Popular Romance Project* based at the Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media promotes discussion of and research on popular romances throughout history published in formats ranging from novels and movies to comic strips and television shows.⁶ The disciplines represented by the academics on its staff and board of advisors include English, History, Social Psychology, African-American Studies, Gender Studies, Popular Culture, and Management. And, finally, the communities building digital objects can include people in several places and or countries. Suppose a community of academics started a digital project at Marquette on the involvement of the Jesuits

in El Salvador. It would be both feasible and necessary to have people in El Salvador integrally involved.

These communities of academics frequently have a transforming experience while building the digital objects that constitute the reason for their coming together. One scholar who has led digital humanities projects argues that “in the process of designing and constructing these resources our collaborators often undergo significant growth in their understanding of digital tools and methods and . . . this sometimes, perhaps even in a significant majority of cases, fosters insight into the originating scholarly questions. Sometimes secular metanoia is not too strong a term to describe the experience.”⁷ This new understanding, or transformative awakening, typically takes place while the community tries to communicate fundamental humanistic issues through new mediums. The process requires a re-appropriation of received knowledge in ways that enlivens it and transforms the participants, who in turn build digital environments making the same experience possible for the people using them. In this way these communities of builders become the locus of creativity in the digital humanities.

Understanding this communal experience is central to arguing that building digital objects is, in fact, part of the humanities. In their most fundamental sense the humanities are an event. They take place. And each generation has to appropriate them anew, experience them again, which means that, in their most fundamental meaning, the humanities are iterative rather than cumulative. The humanities happen when people encounter other human beings addressing the most fundamental issues of life. These other beings are often the dead authors of books; but they are also living people with whom you share the experience of trying to understand the books. Traditionally, the classroom has been the place where the humanities happen, and the standard objection to the whole concept of the digital humanities is that a digital environment cannot

foster and sustain the humanities event. If the digital humanities is to be more than just the latest academic fad it will have to prove that objection wrong by building digital objects in which the humanities take place, both for the people who build the objects and those who use them.

I want to propose two explorations—or forays, perhaps—into understanding this communal experience of the creators of digital objects, by discussing building and constructivism. Two scholars have articulated the centrality of building in the digital humanities with one provocative question: “What happens when building takes the place of writing?”⁸ In academia *writing* refers to both the medium—words, syntax, grammar—used to articulate thoughts as well as to the thoughts embedded in the medium—understandings, ideas, interpretations, philosophies. In the digital humanities *building* has the same double meaning, and centrality to its whole endeavor. Because of its centrality, participants in the digital humanities need to draw out the implications of building, even develop a theory of it, in order to articulate the nature and significance of what they do. My explorations are ways of highlighting two possibilities for doing this.

One is to discuss design, and theorize about, it with the people who do it. No substantial digital humanities project can succeed without creative cooperation between humanists and designers, who are usually in graphics, media, and digital systems. One group of digital humanists refers to design as a “method of thinking through practice,” arguing that “Digital Humanities is a production-based endeavor in which theoretical issues get tested in the design of implementations, and implementations are loci of theoretical reflection and elaboration.”⁹ This testing combined with theoretical reflection is one of the frameworks in which the communal experience of digital humanities projects takes place. It is also one of the contexts in which interdisciplinary work actually gets done.

Another possibility for theorizing about building in digital humanities projects is constructivism. Today I can only point out opportunities in this mode of thought, rather than develop them. Constructivism is a theory of knowledge, a psychology, and a pedagogy. According to the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, constructivism is a “theoretical perspective, central to the work of Jean Piaget, that people actively build their perception of the world and interpret objects and events that surround them in terms of what they already know. Thus, their current state of knowledge guides processing, substantially influencing how (and what) new information is acquired.”¹⁰ Constructivism overlaps the boundary between psychology and philosophy; Piaget referred to himself as a genetic epistemologist; and the intellectual ancestors of the field include John Dewey.¹¹ It has also been used by people theorizing about cybernetics. To me constructivism’s special attractiveness is that it offers common concepts and language for analyzing the communal experience that takes place when people build things, the digital object they build, and how people using the object might learn from it. Thus it might help rectify one of the deficiencies of the digital humanities to date—a relative neglect of pedagogy, compared to the concentration on technology and research resources.¹² Constructivism might provide a way of theorizing about the digital humanities that includes pedagogy as part of its core activity, and not just a subsequent add-on.¹³

I’ve finally reached the point where I can answer the question that constitutes the title of this presentation—what would Marquette’s digital humanities center look like? It would look like a moving constellation of academic communities building digital objects that interpret the human experience. These communities would grow, shift, shrink, and perhaps disappear—at least from the Center—based on the evolution of the digital objects they build. Given the mission of the university, the digital objects produced by Marquette’s center should strive to

seamlessly integrate research and pedagogy, which also might be one of its distinctive contributions to the digital humanities. To flesh out the character of the Center I'll list some day-to-day functions that I think it should perform.¹⁴

Marquette's Digital Humanities Center should function like a rolling conference. Today's academic meetings are typically more useful for building and maintaining social networks than for sharing knowledge. I imagine the Marquette Center like a perpetual conference exhibit hall where people at Marquette meet and share information. Blogs and listservs would supplement and expand the networks rooted in the Center.

Marquette's Digital Humanities Center should function like the editorial office of a journal. The Center would be a publisher, in this case, of digital objects; and it would have to provide editorial assistance while insuring that its publications were of high quality. In other words, it would have to provide the equivalent of peer review for digital objects.

Marquette's Digital Humanities Center should function like a grant writing workshop. This would be one of the ways that it nurtures its communities of academics. The Center would have to provide seed money, nurturing the projects to the point where they can apply for grant money, but they would have to get grants to come to fruition.

Marquette's Digital Humanities Center should function like Marquette's Center for Teaching and Learning. The CTL supplies ready services, most obviously training and technical advice, but also education about possibilities unimagined by people unfamiliar with the latest technological innovations. The communities based in the Digital Humanities Center would need such services on a larger and continuing scale. The CTL also offers a faculty fellowship program that a Digital Humanities Center here would want to emulate as a way to engage faculty actively and substantially in its program.

It's my hope that Marquette's Digital Humanities Center would evolve into a new type of environment—a staging area—where the humanities happen here in the 21st century.

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¹ See for example the definition by Brett Bobley, “An Interview with Brett Bobley,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 61.

² *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*, Institute of Labor Relations, Cornell University, assessed April 4, 2013, <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/>.

³ *Shaping the West*, Spatial History Project, Stanford University, assessed April 8, 2013, <http://www.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/project.php?id=997>.

⁴ For a similar statement about the challenge currently facing the digital humanities see Stephen Ramsay and Geoffrey Rockwell, “Developing Things: Notes toward an Epistemology of Building in the Digital Humanities,” in Gold, *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, 83. Anne Burdick, et al, see the digital humanities at a new stage after an earlier period of publishing archival resources and producing tools for textual analysis; Anne Burdick, et al, *Digital Humanities* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), 8-9.

⁵ Neil Fraistat, “The Function of Digital Humanities Centers at the Present Time,” in Gold, *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, 289.

⁶ *The Popular Romance Project*, Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, accessed April 15, 2013, <http://popularromanceproject.org/>

⁷ Willard McCarty, “A Telescope for the Mind?” in Gold, *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, 119.

⁸ Ramsay and Rockwell, “Developing Things,” 82-83.

⁹ Burdick, *Digital Humanities*, 13.

¹⁰ Gary R. VanderBas, ed., *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2007), 221.

¹¹ Paul Cobb, “Constructivism,” in *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, ed. Alan E. Kazdin, Vol. 2 (American Psychological Association; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 278.

¹² Stephen Breyer, “Where’s the Pedagogy? The Role of Teaching and Learning in the Digital Humanities,” in Gold, *Debates in the Humanities*, 390-401.

¹³ For an application of constructivist ideas to instructional design in a digital environment see Carla R. Payne, *Information Technology and Constructivism in Higher Education: Progressive Learning Frameworks* (Hershey, NY: Information Science Reference, 2009).

¹⁴ All of those I list, and more, are performed by existing digital humanities centers, such as the Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University or the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/> ; Center for Digital Research in the Humanities, <http://cdrh.unl.edu/>. For more examples visit centerNet, an international network of digital humanities centers: <http://digitalhumanities.org/centernet/>