

1 Reasons to Engage with the Digital Humanities

In 1981, the music video was very much a new art form. When MTV launched in August of that year, they began by broadcasting “Video Killed the Radio Star” by the Buggles, a song that highlights the tension between old and new technologies. The song’s lyrics reflect fears of how television might negatively impact audiences’ ability to connect with musical performances. Video is not the only innovation addressed. They also discuss technology’s ability to impact musical composition: “They took the credit for your second symphony, Rewritten by machine on new technology, And now I understand the problems you can see.”¹ Of course, these lyrics are accompanied not by acoustic instruments, but by synthesizers, further underscoring how, no matter how we may feel about it, technological change in the arts is inevitable.

When considering technological advancements in music, literature, and the humanities more generally, many people have voiced similar fears about change. Some notable authors in their personal lives have adopted stances critical of digital technologies, including Ray Bradbury, the author of *Fahrenheit 451*, who famously refused for years to allow publishers to create digital editions of his books.² However, scholars can be quick to point out that printed books themselves are a technology, developed after handwritten manuscripts and scrolls. Similarly, the radio referenced in the Buggles song was simply the technology that preceded television. As we move forward, it is impossible not to engage with the fact that the technologies of the future are digital, and the study of the humanities has been and will continue to be impacted by that change.

Defining the Digital Humanities

What do we mean, then, when we talk about the digital humanities? When scholars attempt to define the digital humanities, they often

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consider the discipline broadly and inclusively. Indeed, this book explores the many approaches one can take to the digital humanities, including the practical and the theoretical. Simply using digital tools as a humanities scholar is part of this process, as is the assessment of how artists employ digital tools in their work. If taken at face value, then, any humanities work involving a computer could be considered digital humanities. However, it is generally accepted that digital humanities work requires scholars to think about and engage with digital tools more deeply in their own research and teaching. Kathleen Fitzpatrick has offered one way to think about it:

Scholarly work across the humanities, as in all academic fields, is increasingly being done digitally. The particular contribution of the digital humanities, however, lies in its exploration of the difference that the digital can make to the kinds of work that we do, as well as to the ways that we communicate with one another.³

As Fitzpatrick points out, the use of digital technology is nearly inescapable in current scholarly work. Moving beyond routine use of digital technology to thinking instead about how it can *transform* scholarship is to engage with the digital humanities.

It is important to note that the term “digital humanities” has itself been called into question, as scholars have often grappled with how to define the term.⁴ Scholars have even debated whether to consider the term singular or plural or to preface it with the definite article: “the digital humanities” as opposed to “digital humanities.” Alan Liu conducted a study of academics that found that no unified standard has yet emerged despite the fact that scholars do seem to approach it as a “unitary field.”⁵ Sometimes the debates around the term have become quite contentious. Michael Piotrowski has claimed that articles attempting to define the digital humanities have become a genre unto themselves, with those articles unhelpfully usually coming to the conclusion that the term is undefinable.⁶ Ryan Cordell has offered that sometimes sidestepping the terminology can be helpful as, regardless of how one attempts to label them, the core concepts common to definitions of the digital humanities are beneficial to scholars and teachers and can inspire a great deal of enthusiasm and creative output.⁷ This volume will, nevertheless, continue to embrace the term “digital humanities,” acknowledging that for all its imperfections, it provides a way to bring together concepts and practices related to the use of digital technology to transform our study of the humanities.

Motivations for Engaging with the Digital Humanities

How do scholars begin to engage with the digital humanities? To answer this question, we can consider the kinds of external forces that inspire scholars to implement digital approaches to their work. Institutional priorities, stakeholder interests, and the enhanced ability to share ideas about an area of expertise often affect scholars' decisions about how to conduct research. We can also consider scholars' internal motivations. The reasons people begin digital humanities work range from the personal to the pragmatic. Scholars who are intrinsically motivated by their own personal reasons are often very optimistic about the possibilities of incorporating technology into their research and teaching. Those scholars who are requested (or required) by employers and institutions to transition to using digital tools may experience more trepidation. Even for those who may be approaching the digital humanities more reluctantly, this book seeks to enumerate the possibilities of embracing the digital turn in research, teaching, and scholarship. Those possibilities are reliant, however, upon the key to any successful digital humanities project: keeping the humanities at the forefront of your planning process in incorporating any new technologies.

Start your engagement with the digital humanities by focusing on your own needs and interests. As you begin a new digital project as a student or scholar of the humanities, you should first ask yourself, "Why do I want to align my work with the digital humanities?" Maybe you are excited about the possibility of building on work you are already doing with new technologies. Sharing your work more widely may be another attraction to the field. Perhaps, on the other hand, you have been asked to do so by your employer, who has made digital humanities a priority for your research center, school, or library. It is also possible that you anticipate encouraging grant opportunities or job prospects for people with digital humanities experience. Reflecting on your reasons for incorporating digital humanities into your work is important as you develop your eventual project because those reasons impact your decision-making processes in important ways. As you begin your work, it is also essential that you think about how your digital practices can be more inclusive. The digital humanities of the future must include in its construction commitments to justice, including but not limited to racial equity,⁸ respect for indigenous practice,⁹ and advocacy for universal design.¹⁰

Consider the following common motivations as you reflect on your own goals for digital humanities work, and think about how they impact the decisions you will make as you begin a new project.

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Motivation #1: Finding New Ways to Answer Questions and Solve Problems

Often, long-standing problems in humanities subject areas can be addressed by new approaches with digital technology. Digital technologies can not only provide new ways to answer old questions, but they can also prompt new and exciting lines of inquiry. For many digital humanities researchers, the need to find new ways to consider their subject area is a primary motivation for engaging in digital projects.

Sometimes the research process is tedious. We wish we could wave a magic wand and have the answers we are looking for. Unfortunately, technology is not a magic wand, and the results it gives are not perfect. Nevertheless, it can speed up many processes. Computing makes possible in a short span of time types of inquiry that were only previously achievable through a lifetime of labor. For an example of a simple use of technology, one could use a search function in a digital text to find all instances of a certain word. Scholars used to answer those kinds of research questions by carefully poring over every page of a text. Computers can have those answers in seconds.

The constant advancement of technology opens new doors for scholars of the humanities, and that can provide exciting opportunities for learning. Digital technologies can offer us more nuanced ways to examine familiar objects. The use of certain digitization and magnification tools allows us to see things we never before would have seen. For instance, some researchers use high-resolution cameras to examine the surfaces of manuscripts and canvases to see if there are faint impressions of work done before or other clues to the early life of an object. What they find can change how they think about that object and what they hope to learn about it.

Motivation #2: Building on Digital Work you are Already Doing

Undoubtedly, you have been using digital technologies extensively in your personal and professional life. Research for many scholars depends upon electronic databases, even if the end result of using that database is finding access to a physical book or artifact. Communicating with librarians who help provide access to materials, with colleagues who are collaborating on a project, or with potential audiences for a project all often depend on e-mail, social media, video conferencing, and other digital technologies. Teaching, for many instructors, includes utilization of multimedia and other digital sources, often distributed via

online learning management systems (such as Blackboard, Moodle, or Canvas).

Using your previous experience and expertise with digital tools is a great way to get into the digital humanities. However, you should not let the tools you are using keep you from thinking of new approaches. The most successful digital humanities practitioners are open to playing with new technologies and experimenting with using digital tools in new ways. This willingness to engage with emerging technologies is crucial because technology advances at a rapid pace, such that upgrades are often needed even in the midst of a project. Bringing a willingness to work with technology as well as an openness to learning new things is a path to success in digital projects.

With any successful digital humanities project, the first place to focus is on the research question that interests you about your humanities subject area. The digital tools you employ should always be in the service of your research. Don't shift your research goals to try to fit electronic tools. Attempts to build projects around specific digital tools are not going to be as successful as projects that begin with a clear focus on answering questions grounded in the humanities.

Motivation #3: Sharing Ideas More Widely

A main component of Fitzpatrick's definition of the digital humanities involves the differences that digital work can make to "the ways that we communicate with one another." The printed book or journal remains an important contribution to scholarship, but many publishers are now turning to electronic books and journals. With that innovation, the possibility of linked information arises, including linking references online for faster access of sources. It is not a big leap to consider the increased possibilities of including multimedia in addition to more traditional text-based sources. In fact, certain projects, such as the Manifold Scholarship initiative, have already moved publication in that direction.¹¹ These faster connections increase the speed with which we access work and also help increase the sharing of that work.

As we share ideas in digital format, it can also change our methods for processing the information we find. Many scholars find the possibility of providing information in nonlinear format exciting and challenging. How we access information affects how we understand that information, and such nonlinear works might inspire creative, exploratory approaches to our subjects. For disciplines that study visual arts and performance arts, the increased possibility of including high-quality representations of the art form makes a big impact as well.

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A noteworthy consideration, however, is that sometimes digital projects do not (or cannot) deliver on the promise of access for all audiences. Links to sources are of minimal value when those publications are paywalled. Sometimes, too, a digital project requires certain kinds of computing equipment for access that not all potential users may be able to acquire. Nevertheless, keeping these cautions in mind, scholars can design projects that plan ahead for broader access and sharing of ideas.

Motivation #4: The Pivot to Online Learning and Research

Recent world events have brought the use of digital tools in education and research into sharp focus. In early 2020, as COVID-19 spread across the globe, much of the world's population was asked to practice social distancing or was forced into quarantine. The pivot online for educational institutions was swift, but for many it was new territory. Recognizing the potential for increased deployment of courses online again in the future, many teachers have opted to develop more digital competencies in their pedagogy. As research moved entirely online, with only remote access to library materials and museum collections, many scholars also chose to develop more digital resources as a way to continue work. Of course, while this work is new to some, a long history of humanities computing already exists. Building upon the strong digital humanities foundation that has been established by current and previous scholars is essential as researchers seek to incorporate the digital into their work. It is worth noting that simply teaching humanities courses online (or taking such courses) does not necessarily engage with digital humanities in a transformative way. Nevertheless, actively using digital humanities tools in your pedagogy can transform the way you teach, either online or in face-to-face settings.

Also important to note when considering the relationship of the digital humanities to a move online is that digital humanities research does not always happen remotely. Indeed, sometimes the required specialized equipment for a project must be accessed in person. A challenge many faced during the COVID-19 pandemic was separation from makerspaces or labs. However, the products of digital humanities projects often make possible remote use by other scholars. For instance, scholars studying Romantic poetry could access the William Blake Archive remotely, thus advancing their own humanities research while quarantined. Any scholar involved in the project who was in the process of scanning or photographing Blake's texts or images, on the other hand, had to pause until they were able to return to work with the specialized

equipment and materials available at their museum, library, or physical archive.

Motivation #5: Opportunities for the Future

There has been a great deal of scholarly debate about the future of the humanities and the role of the digital humanities in helping usher in a new era for the studies of arts, literature, and performance. The debates are unresolved, but enthusiasm for the potential of digital humanities is on the rise with increasing job prospects in centers for digital humanities and numerous grant opportunities for digital humanities projects. There also exists the opportunity for potential employment in the publishing industry, with the rise in popular consumption of e-books, and in the entertainment industry, with the increase in online streaming for the performing arts.

As all humanities scholars know, however, there is no single path from the study of any humanities field into a particular career trajectory. More relevant when considering opportunities for the future is reflection on the changing nature of how we study the humanities and how the humanities contribute to society. Twenty-first-century scholarship seems guided by interdisciplinarity, breaking down the barriers between academic departments and between universities, museums, archives, and libraries. Increased use of technology to achieve those goals also helps bring that scholarship to wider audiences beyond the university. Study of the digital humanities has much to contribute to those pursuits.

Digital Futures

Your motivations may derive from any or all of the above-listed categories, or you may have additional reasons for engaging with the digital humanities. It is impossible to predict exactly how the humanities disciplines will develop over the next several decades, but whatever happens seems bound to intertwine with the digital. Nicholas Kristof reminds us that the humanities remain essential to our lives and that the digital technologies we so often use in our daily interactions reach back toward the humanities:

To adapt to a changing world, we need new software for our cell-phones; we also need new ideas. The same goes for literature, for architecture, languages and theology. Our world is enriched when coders and marketers dazzle us with smartphones and tablets, but,

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by themselves, they are just slabs. It is the music, essays, entertainment and provocations that they access, spawned by the humanities, that animate them—and us.¹²

Makers of digital products know that people are accessing their computers and smartphones for humanities content. That makes it all the more important for humanities scholars to engage with the digital as well.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are your reasons for engaging with the digital humanities? Do your motivations align with those listed above, or are there other factors influencing you?
2. Why do you think some authors and humanities scholars have adopted stances critical of digital technologies? What are their likely concerns? Do you share any of those concerns?
3. Some scholars have suggested that the future use of digital technologies in the humanities is so inevitable that a separate study of digital humanities will soon be unnecessary. Do you agree or disagree with that assessment? What do you think the future of the humanities and technology will look like?
4. Have you found that digital tools have transformed any of the work you do as a scholar or student of the humanities? If so, provide an example.

Notes

- 1 Buggles, “Video Killed the Radio Star,” on *The Age of Plastic*, Island Records, 1980.
- 2 Tim Carmody, “Digital Holdout Ray Bradbury Brings *Fahrenheit 451* To E-Readers,” *Wired*, November 30, 2011, <https://www.wired.com/2011/11/fahrenheit-451-digitized/>
- 3 Kathleen Fitzpatrick, “The Humanities, Done Digitally,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 8, 2011, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-humanities-done-digitally/>
- 4 Melissa Terras, Julianne Nyhan, and Edward Vanhoutte, eds., *Defining Digital Humanities: A Reader*. (Routledge, 2013); Matthew Kirschenbaum, “What Is Digital Humanities and What’s It Doing in English Departments?” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-88c11800-9446-469b-a3be-3fdb36bfd1e/section/f5640d43-b8eb-4d49-bc4b-eb31a16f3d06#ch01>

- 5 Alan Liu, "Is Digital Humanities a Field? – An Answer from the Point of View of Language," *Journal of Siberian Federal University: Humanities and Social Sciences* 7 (2016): 1546–1552.
- 6 Michael Piotrowski, "Ain't No Way Around It: Why We Need to Be Clear About What We Mean by 'Digital Humanities,'" *SocArXiv* (April 14, 2020), doi:10.31235/osf.io/d2kb6
- 7 Ryan Cordell, "How Not to Teach Digital Humanities," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, eds. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/31326090-9c70-4c0a-b2b7-74361582977e>
- 8 Kim Gallon, "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, eds. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/fa10e2e1-0c3d-4519-a958-d823aac989eb#ch04>
- 9 Roopika Risam, "Decolonizing the Digital Humanities in Theory and Practice," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*, ed. Jentery Sayers (Routledge, 2018), 78–86.
- 10 Sara Hendren, "All Technology Is Assistive: Six Design Rules on Disability," in *Making Things and Drawing Boundaries: Experiments in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Jentery Sayers (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-aa1769f2-6c55-485a-81af-ea82cce86966/section/b22b7f2d-f386-4ec5-bcee-30591c0078ba#ch15>
- 11 Manifold (website), *Manifold Scholarship*, last modified 2020, <https://manifoldapp.org/>
- 12 Nicholas Kristof, "Don't Dismiss the Humanities," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/14/opinion/nicholas-kristof-dont-dismiss-the-humanities.html>