

The Emergence of the Digital Humanities

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Between 2004 and 2008 something happened to the digital network. It changed from being something we visited to something that colonised our everyday; it turned inside out, or, to use William Gibson's parlance, it 'everted'. Concurrently something happened to humanities computing. It changed from a vibrant if niche area of the humanities into the 'Digital Humanities'; it bloomed into an umbrella for a range of work taking place across the humanities, an intellectual turn towards both exploiting and understanding computational and networked technology, and – depending on who you ask – a category of research that either holds in its hands the future of the humanities or is complicit in a neo-liberal agenda intent on destroying higher education and all that humanists hold dear.

Steven E. Jones's *The Emergence of the Digital Humanities* is neither evangelical nor conspiratorial about DH (an acronym used interchangeably with Digital Humanities), though he is unquestionably positive about much work it has produced and promises to produce – lingering anxieties that have erupted in recent months around the supposed 'solutionism' of digital research practices do not feature here.⁽¹⁾ Indeed the premise of *The Emergence of the Digital Humanities* is direct and simple: that the concurrent changes to the network and to humanities computing circa 2004–8 were no coincidence, that the key context for the emergence of DH was this change to the network.

Jones' story begins with a simple truth: the digital network is now part of the real world. Or rather it never was otherwise, never was unreal, rather our choice of nomenclature and patterns of use gave the digital network a fiction of being something other than real. And whilst at the turn of the new millennium language and use of the network clustered around the term 'cyber', between 2004 and 2008 both the prefix 'cyber' and words such as 'cyberspace' began to decline in use, to seem awkward descriptors. From this time forth many of us (or, as Jones rightly caveats, those in the already-networked world – I follow his convention throughout this review) stopped logging onto the network, we were just in it, connected to it persistently, everywhere, all of the time, through social notifications, satellite data, QR codes. The latter, square barcode-like patterns that interact with smartphone cameras to link to networked information, are clumsy symbols of the everted network. But they are worthy of mention for they are illustrative of two significant points: that the network is physical and that digital ghosts of physical things are all around us.

Historians are one group of people already using and critiquing this physical, everted network to good effect, many being traditional subject experts who are exploiting the affordances of this network to rethink and represent their texts, to connect and interpret human endeavour at scale, to push scholarly agendas through networked social technology. But there are also those who do more than bring their research to the network, who work in ways shaped by working with the network, who adopt an ethos that is hacky, experimental, fluid and cooperative, who employ a programmers model of doing humanities work. These researchers are often described – whether they like it or not – as Digital Humanists and the work they undertake is often situated at the intersections between machines and the groups and crowds who use them, a vast, networked human workforce whose contributions to Wikipedia, Transcribe Bentham, or any given project source code are characteristic of the communities empowered by the digital network, of communities agnostic to scholarly notions of authority, quality and control.

The disconnects, the awkward clashes of perspective brought forth by working at the fringes of the academy have proven little deterrence to the historians, literary scholars, geographers, musicologists, archaeologists, linguists, art historians, and new media researchers most closely aligned with DH. Indeed having legitimised co-opting a range of people into their quest for knowledge, so too have they co-opted a range of places – both physical and digital. Google Maps is a case in point. Thanks to the release of its API in 2005 – in the midst of the network's eversion – Google Maps is now a common place used by humanists looking to tie their research data to something else, this despite Google Maps being maintained and run by a company nonplussed by the needs of humanities researchers. By tying their data to such places, these humanists release from their direct control both their data and their method – for Google Maps not only limits possible interactions, but also – crucially – may not be there to interact with in the same form from one week to the next. The resulting research that uses such places can resemble a sort of productive play, a game-like interaction with the network akin more to everyday encounters with location data than all but defunct virtual worlds such as Second Life. This then is a spatial turn with an experimental ethos, an ethos of inevitably ongoing experimentation layered onto traditional research, a tying of research data to off-the-shelf solutions, to networked places, and to the maps they contain and that we know so well, representations of places in the real world, past and present.

These places are then as much physical as digital. As Jones recognises a concern with how the digital relates to things might not seem an obvious trait of those working under the umbrella of DH. But it is, not least because as the network everted, as it entered in ever more pervasive ways the physical realm, DH approached things, things made by or containing data, as a means of underlining the materiality of the network and how false 'cyber' nomenclature and claims to the network's immateriality had been. Digitisation is one area to have benefited from this change of mindset. Once merely a replication of a thing, a conversion of a physical object into ones and zeros with direct preservation and access benefits, DH has revealed digitisation to be a gateway for transformation of physical things into new research objects with their own associated affordances and challenges; a transformation that can enrich, connect, and reconfigure the original data point, the thing itself. Historians, experts as we are at understanding things, are well positioned to experiment with this transformation and to consider what it means to live in a world of things transformed, things we thought we knew.

One set of physical things already transformed and with the clear potential to transform further are our publications. For if DH is humanities done digitally, it follows that its publications are digital, that they exploit the everted network. Examples of this might include *The Journal of Digital Humanities*, much content for which is selected from the most shared and discussed blogs, *The Programming Historian*, an iterative and non-linear book project, and – in a sense – this very publication, *Reviews in History*, an open, direct to press, and author comment-enriched journal of book reviews. These experiments with scholarly publication are far from unthinking, rather they respond to both the ongoing crisis in scholarly publishing and the technological affordances of the everted network. DH is then well placed to consider how scholarly publishing was made, the conditions that allowed it to work, and why it could be considered no longer fit for purpose. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, perhaps the foremost of this oeuvre, argues that with the network affording

better means of sharing and propagating one's work than print, the scholarly monograph is not dead, for humanists in particular still publish plenty of the things. Rather it is *undead*, propped up by a scholarly culture whose fetishisation of print ascribes authority to the monograph. DH though does much more than condemn opposition to open, social, digital publications. Located at the intersection between people, things and data, it places scholarly valourisation of the physical within the context of an analogue backlash in society and culture at large, examining publishing as a whole, as a platform. This perspective confronts us with an immediate irony – that all print publishing, however print fetishist their makers and consumers are, is almost entirely digital up until it reaches the press; the process is inevitably hybrid even if the product is not, and it is the process that platform thinking DH sees as the real stuff of publication.

An emphasis on process over product does more than summarise how many scholars working under the umbrella of DH consider scholarly outputs. Rather, it too characterises a set of practices which seek to turn inside out, to evert, the research process *in toto*, to make it visible and available to all. By thinking about what they do in public as makers rather than publishers, by opening up their research processes – all the meeting, discussing, programming, counting, data wrangling, platform building, encoding – Digital Humanists can seem, at times, instrumental. But openly building iterative things that replace publishing books and articles or working together on something always and intended to be unfinished in preference to achieving a polished sense of completion, is far from instrumental: it is practice that fosters theory and reflection, a reassertion of hands-on doing as a form of knowledge creation.

This is the DH landscape of people, practices, things and approaches that Jones plots in his lively, provocative and compelling book. And though as subject to change as any scholarly pursuit, it is clear that this category of work, this Digital Humanities, is no longer emerging. Rather it has emerged. And yet the emergence described in *The Emergence of the Digital Humanities* is somewhat lopsided. Jones, like the majority of the prominent North American DH scholars that are introduced in this volume, from Matthew Kirschenbaum, Franco Moretti and Amanda French to Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Matthew Jockers and Alan Liu, has a literary and new media studies background. These are fertile areas for DH in the United States, and accordingly *Emergence* lingers at length on not only literature and poetry, but also videogames, videogame culture, and the study thereof; contexts, behaviours and scholarship on the porous fringes of DH. These are, after all, the communities Jones is most familiar with. Nevertheless, the emergence he describes can be mapped more widely, to vibrant and important DH-like work clustered around centres, faculties, departments and libraries across Europe, Australia, South America, India, work undertaken by historians, geographers, musicologists, archaeologists, linguists, and art historians, as well as literary and new media scholars prominent in *Emergence*.

This emergence then is a phenomenon with potentially profound implications for how we historians study the past, for the discipline of History, and for the place of History within the humanities. Accordingly Jones's volume has plenty to offer every historian. Indeed, aside from providing a convincing argument for why all this is happening now, historians looking to think through the often unconventional ethos and outputs of the DH and digital history projects they have encountered should find *Emergence* a valuable starting point. Equally, *Emergence* is strong on the mediation inherent in digitisation and the complexities of working with digital representations of physical objects, on the fiction of DH being anti-material, seeing machines as always more effective than people and being an advocate of all things digital (including placing some significant distance between MOOCs – Massive Open Online Courses – and the practice-based and collaborative focus of learning approaches prominent among DH scholars), on the anti-social and ill-fit for purpose nature of much scholarly publishing, and on how playing and experimenting with research technology ought to occupy a similar standing to reading around the edges of one's subject. Salient passages on moving between the close reading more familiar to humanists and 'distant reading', directing a machine to read patterns in corpora of (usually) texts of a size beyond the grasp of a lone scholar (or even a team of scholars), should encourage historians – especially those with long enough memories – that their profession can play an important brokering role as quantitative work returns to prominence, bringing with it differences of scale the humanities has – in recent times at least – been unfamiliar with.

Only those historians wanting to know with a sense of finality what Digital Humanities actually is will be disappointed by *Emergence*. This is not a criticism. The book's resistance to meditate at length on the boundaries and definitions of DH, and instead focus on the near historical contexts from and around which DH emerged, is its greatest triumph. That is not to say definitions are not offered. DH is variously 'an umbrella term for a diverse set of practices and concerns, all of which combine computing and digital media with humanities research and teaching' (p. 5), 'collaborative modes of harnessing together human and machine intelligence, across the perceived boundary of the physical and digital' (p. 96), 'a team effort, combining computing with cultural analysis, scholarship and creativity – another form of hybridity, another kind of mixed reality' (p. 121), 'a humanities about things' (p. 131), 'the humanities done digitally' (p. 147), 'more a process than a product' (p. 171), 'not everything academic with "digital" in it' (p. 178), and 'a socially constructed phenomenon, along with every academic field and intellectual movement' (p. 7). 'That doesn't mean', Jones adds, 'it's an aery nothing, mere hype' (p. 7).

With so many definitions of DH on offer this is an important caveat, for rather than representing an all-consuming hype, such definitions are intended to be consciously partial, provisional, overlapping, approximate, fragile. And yet under a little pressure they can be forced into one broader definition, one tied to the contexts Jones describes: that the Digital Humanities is 'the humanities everted' (p. 33), the humanities turned inside out. This everted humanities has consciously and unconsciously tracked and responded to the fall of cyberspace as the antithesis of 'real' space and the subsequent eversion of network, of the digital onto the physical, into our everyday lives. This is why DH is what it is today. As Jones writes:

The emergence of the new digital humanities isn't an isolated academic phenomenon. The institutional and disciplinary changes are part of a larger cultural shift, a rapid cycle of emergence and convergence in technology and culture (p. 31).

This is why DH matters to historians now.

Notes

1. See Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, 'What is 'Digital Humanities', and why are they saying such terrible things about it?', *differences* 25, 1 (2014) and Ian Bogost, '28 tweets on Digital Humanities', *Storify*, 6 May 2014, <<https://storify.com/ibogost/28-tweets-on-digital-humanities> [2]> [accessed 16 May 2014]. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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