Alternate Histories of the Digital Humanities: A Short Paper Panel Proposal

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Recent work in the digital humanities has moved away describing the digital humanities as a "big tent," to quote William Pannapacker's famous 2011 post. Taking inspiration instead from the multiple histories and temporalities of media archaeology, such research emphasizes the local contexts where technological and institutional history take place. Matthew Kirschenbaum's identification of the digital humanities in 2014 as a "discursive construction" that ignores the "actually existing projects" of the field set the stage for scholars to rethink how the digital humanities conceptualizes its work and its history ("What Is" 48). More recently, in the introduction to *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, Matthew Gold and Lauren Klein use the scholarship of Rosalind Krauss who, in 1979, described art history as emerging as "only one term on the periphery of a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities." Whereas Krauss saw this as a failure of art history, Gold and Klein celebrate the multiplicity of what Patrik Svensson calls a digital humanities that is less a tent and more a disaggregated "trading zone" of various interests and disciplines. Instead of a transcendent, disciplinary category, the digital humanities emerges as an imminent set of assemblages and rhizomatic localities — converging in some places, diverging in others.

This panel of short papers intervenes in the discussion of an imminent digital humanities by describing several actual alternate histories of the field. All of the thinkers for this proposed panel have sketched variations on digital humanities history in the past. Steven Jones begins his book on Roberto Busa, for example, with an extended discussion of the "multiple potential continuities" existing beside the mythological figure as providing a possibility for "better historical understanding" (16). While Amy Earhart's work historicizes digital literary studies in America through the work of the new historicism, Tara McPherson sees it in the screen cultures of media studies, Roger Whitson points to the publics outside academia invested in steampunk and other nineteenth-century sources, and Padmini Ray Murray explores the repurposing practice of jugaad in India. Such alternate histories point not to a denigration of the meaning of the digital humanities as a disciplinary field, but rather describe — as Lori Emerson says about media archaeology — each strand as "one possibility generated out of a heterogeneous past." Each of the presenters will spend 10 minutes discussing how DH can be historicized using various disciplinary, national, and outer-institutional contexts.

Activism in Digital Humanities: Complicating Community, Technology, and Open Access

Amy Earhart

Much of our history in digital humanities has focused on proving that our work has legitimacy within the academy. As I have argued in other publications, the digital humanities has been critiqued as a regresive field, particularly in terms of its approach to cultural studies, and, at the same time, as a challenge to traditional humanities ("Futures"). Key to this simplistic critique of digital humanities is a representation of the digital humanities as a monolithic structure. As part of a panel which reveals the multiple histories of digital humanities, this paper will chart the alternative history of activism and community/academic partnerships in the digital humanities.

Arguing that critiques of digital humanities are ahistorical, the paper will focus on the connection between activism and community in the early digital humanities. For example, the public/academic focus of early digital humanities work has direct ties to what we now call public digital history. Douglas Seefeldt and

William G. Thomas have argued that the future of digital history "invites students and the public into the digital process," yet this is actually not a future goal. It is our past and connects to a long historical interest in digital humanities as activism and a means of creating community partnerships.

Of particular focus, in the paper, are projects that bring scholars inside the academy into partnerships with community groups, such as the early *NativeWeb* or *eBlackStudies*. While such early projects are often viewed as retrograde technologically and often dismissed from our dh genealogy, they offer an alternative history of the way that technologies are used in service of particular fields within the academy. At the same time, such projects are interested in bridging the divide between the academy and the community and serve particular activist agendas. While there are some forms of digital humanities that reject a focus on cultural studies, this branch of digital humanities centers political activism and critiques of race, class, sexuality, and gender within its approach.

The paper will also focus on the way that technology is imagined in the various lineages of digital humanities. In the line of activist projects that the paper examines, technologies are decentralized, often out of the box, and less interested in innovation than in, say, current large corpora data mining projects. Too often "simple" technological projects are dismissed as not digital humanities, even when the theoretical usages of technology in relationship to humanities questions are innovative and forward thinking. Instead of accepting techno progressivism, scholars in digital humanities need to apply the full spectrum of humanities critique to the treatment and use of technology. For example, scholars have a responsibility to address the ways that technological specifications might force western representations of knowledge onto materials of cultural expression that do not use such systems. Projects such as the *Tibetan and Himalayan Library's (THL)* use of TEI/XML provides one example of how we might proceed. The *THL* has considered how the understanding of time might be culturally constructed and, as such, has revised the TEI/XML coding to reflect time from the perspective of the Tibetan culture rather than imposing western understandings of time through technological standards.

The history of activist digital humanities projects reminds us to think about how the exploitation of data is related to historical exploitations of people(s), to reconnect the digital with embodied experience. Mark Turin notes, "archives become more complex when the 'documents' in question are representations of human 'subjects,' as was the case for the ethnographic archives in which we were interested, including photographs, films, sound recordings and field notes on people's lives, their cultures and their practices" (453). Documents are never devoid of embodiment, as we might never use the term exploitation of data without understanding that, eventually, exploitation of data has real impact on individuals and communities. A division of human subjects and documents leads to problematic interactions with those who we are working to digitize. We need to think about how our data embodies experience.

The paper will close by focusing on the way by which ideas of open access are culturally constructed. Activist projects complicate the adage "information wants to be free," reminding digital humanities practitioners that the model of broad 'access' that often motivates western digitization efforts does not apply universally." The complexities of technology as represented by such practitioners are central to digital humanities.

Roberto Busa, S.J., and Humanities Computing: Complicating the Origin Story

Steven Jones

The Jesuit scholar, Roberto Busa, is often called the founder of humanities computing. In fact, starting as early as 1949, he collaborated with IBM to perform experiments using suites of punched-card machines. These punched-card data systems—with their plugboard setups, clacking machinery, and flurries of perforated rectangular cards—were developed for business accounting and tabulating, and adapted for government censuses, defense calculations, archival management, and information processing of all kinds. These systems coexisted for many years with electromechanical calculators and electronic computers, helping to define, delimit, and shape the possibilities for research applications, including humanities research applications like Father Busa's. Because the card systems were eventually connected to electronic computers, they've become part of the story of humanities computing. But in many ways, the first decade of humanities *computing* can more accurately be described as an era of humanities *data processing*—in the historically specific and contextually rich sense of the term.

My historical work on Roberto Busa's data processing has drawn on a key premise of media archaeology: that technology doesn't "evolve," or "descend," in a linear way. As Michel Foucault asserted, genealogy

Alternate Histories: Steampunk Fandoms and Digital Humanities Publics

Roger Whitson

The digital humanities is often characterized as dedicated to making scholarship publicly accessible. Yet accessibility is only one way to pursue a public digital humanities agenda. Another method leverages the complicated history described by media archaeology to highlight how various publics outside of University settings are already constructing digital humanities projects of their own. Jussi Parikka begins *What is Media Archaeology?* with an extended consideration of steampunk as an exemplary media archaeological practice, arguing that it falls outside of mainstream digital methodologies and is what Deleuze and Guattari call a "nomadic, minor science": a set of quirky hacker techniques whose innovations are appropriated by the more economic powers of the state (qtd. in Parikka 168). As with any manifestation of what Deleuze and Guattari call "royal science," or a hegemonic system relying upon the appropriation of nomadic practices, steampunk creates a tension between such minor sciences and their corporate and academic use. For every fascinating gadget produced by steampunk fans, there are also corporate phenomena like Justin Bieber videos featuring joyless representations of steampunk automatons whose cogs are appropriated only to sell more albums.

This talk explores a set of steampunk projects from fans in order to show how their methodologies constitute an alternate history of the digital humanities rooted in the practice of public hobbyism. One example of this steampunk hobbyist practice is Tim Robinson's 2007 build of a Babbage's *Difference Engine No. 1* from parts manufactured by the toy company Meccano. Robinson says that he was intrigued by the brand's claim to "do something real," and the tactile quality of Meccano parts mediates this sense of reality: the cold metal, the round rivets, the clicking of metal rods as they are moved by other parts. The machine's design is based upon Babbage's first engine and calculates numbers up to four digits and three orders of difference. It is composed of several ratchet wheels, each with 20 teeth and which are covered by printed tape showing numbers from 0 to 9. While visiting Robinson's website, you can find descriptions of his nostalgia for the toy company, which he describes as helping him build "the machines of my youth" — including "astronomical clocks, orreries, looms and other textile machinery [...] and perhaps most enduring, the differential analyzer (and analog computer)."

Robinson's project exists within a wide variety of other steampunk gadgets that express both nostalgia for various parts and fascination with methods of building: from other models of the difference engine, like Andrew Caroll's version created with Lego parts and rubber bands; to the varied projects of *The Steampunk Workshop*'s Jake von Slatt — who rescues available parts from junk yards and repurposes them into workable Steampunk RVs (Recreational Vechicles), Wimshurst Influence Engines, and even a Stroh violin with an amplifying horn and aluminum diaphragm. For me, such projects underscore Matthew Kirschenbaum's argument that hobbyist activities enable the digital humanities to value "the unapologetically small, the uncompromisingly local and particular" ("Ancient" 196). Yet, steampunk hobbyism also enables a different understanding of the role various publics who engage in such activity play in the digital humanities as a field.

Many digital humanities projects envision the public as a homogeneous entity who acts primarily as an audience or — in some cases — a collaborator for what ends up being essentially a scholarly act. The sheer diversity of steampunk fandom, on the other hand, resists such an easy or homogeneous definition. While some aspects of steampunk fandom act, as China Mieville has observed, as forms of nostalgic imperialism; or as Charles Stross claims, as romances with totalitarianism, other fans use steampunk to imagine histories where the Industrial Revolution happened in Africa or China rather than in Europe. Miriam Rocek dresses up as a time-traveling "Steampunk Emma Goldman" and participates in protests like Occupy Wall Street. Lisa Hager, meanwhile, uses her steampunk persona to advocate for gender neutral bathrooms. Such diversity underlines the need to understand how steampunk and the digital humanities communities exist as discrete assemblages, rooted in the politics of the communities practicing them. While this talk will cover mainly hobbyist projects within steampunk fandom, it will contextualize that work with a multiplicity of various local practices. All of these practices, I argue, extend to the digital humanities as a field — which is less a big tent and more a massive assemblage of becoming, branching, and multiplicity.

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