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The Landscape of Modern Theses

Matthew Hannah

Purdue University, hannah8@purdue.edu

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The background of the slide is an aerial photograph of a city street grid, rendered in a muted, sepia-toned style. A white rectangular frame with a thin green border is centered on the page. Two dark brown horizontal bars are positioned on the left and right sides of the frame, partially overlapping the white background. The title text is centered within the frame.

The Landscape of Modern Theses

Matthew Hannah

Assistant Professor of Digital Humanities

Purdue University Libraries and School of Information Studies

The Neoliberal University

“a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” (Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 64).

“While personal and individual freedom in the marketplace is guaranteed. Each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being. This principle extends into the realms of welfare, education, health care, and even pensions” (65)

Medieval Institutions under Capitalism



- The dissertation has existed in pretty much the same structure since the Medieval period.
- Exists in an uncomfortable position within the neoliberal university.
- Represents specialization and achievement of scholarly autonomy, but are there other ways to measure this?
- How does the combination of low job prospects sync with the amount of time to write and complete a dissertation (around 9 years for some programs).

Mastering other Skills

- Computer programming
- Web design
- Data visualization
- Data management
- Multi-media expertise (podcasting, video production)
- Graphic or digital arts



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Case Study 1

Dr. Amanda Visconti

Infinite Ulysses

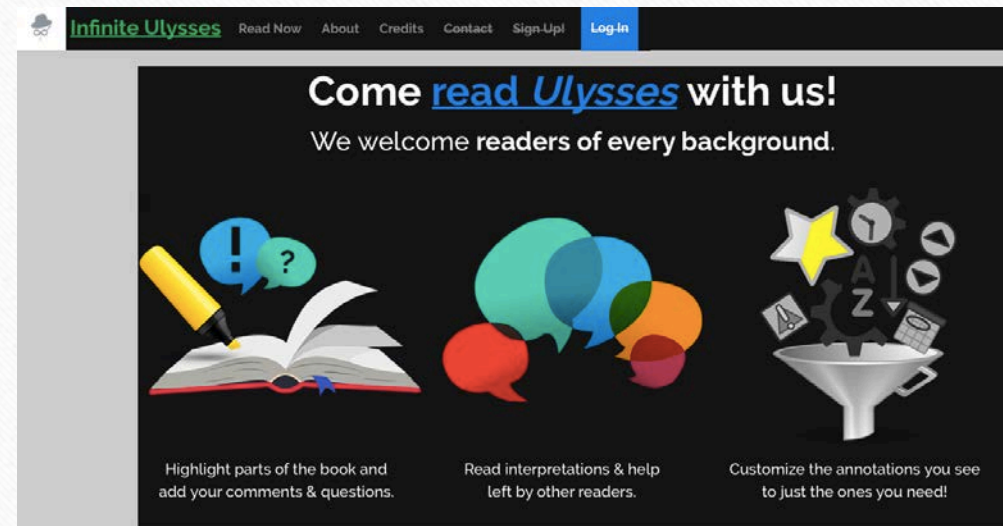
Skills

Program management

Web development (HTML, CSS)

Web design

Public Humanities



Case Study 2

Dr. Nick Sousanis

Unflattening

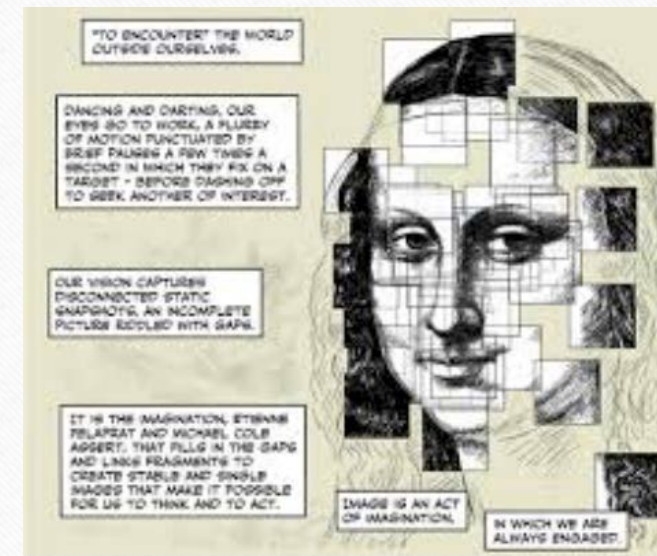
Skills

Project management

Storyboarding

Graphic design

Drawing and comics



Case Study 3

Dr. Anna Williams

Skills

Project management

Story boarding

Mixed media

Podcasting

Sounds/Production

Public Humanities

“My Gothic Dissertation”



Case Study 4

Dr. Jesse Merandy

Vanishing Leaves

Skills

Project management

Game design

Interface design

App development



Challenges of Implementing Alternative Theses

- Academic jobs still privilege the “book” and so do hiring committees
 - Students should be clear about their priorities.
 - Students who want more traditional academic jobs may want to work on hybrid dissertations and theses.
- Tenure cases typically require a book, which comes from the diss.
 - Part of this conversation requires renovating academic as an entire ecosystem.
- Projects require different skills than dissertations.
 - Students should have some skills before setting out.
 - Advisors should be careful about student projects.
- Difficult for dissertation committees to advise and evaluate.
 - Faculty in humanities/social sciences usually don't have the skills to evaluate student projects.
 - Digital Humanities librarians can help here.
- Storage and maintenance of projects.