

Book Review: Digital_Humanities

by Blog Admin

June 20, 2013

This collaboratively authored book aims to explore methodologies and techniques unfamiliar to traditional modes of humanistic inquiry – including geospatial analysis, data mining, corpus linguistics, visualization, and simulation – to show their relevance for contemporary culture. Included are chapters on the basics, on emerging methods and genres, and on the social life of the digital humanities, along with “case studies,” “provocations,” and “advisories.” Reviewed by Katarina Gray-Sharp.



Digital_Humanities. Anne Burdick, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp. MIT Press. December 2012.

Find this book:

Digital_Humanities is the cooperative production of five leading practitioner-theorists from the US, aiming to provide an in-depth examination of this emerging field. Although the source of their authority has been [questioned](#), the authors can claim expertise. Johanna Drucker, for example, is [named](#) amongst those present at the rechristening of the field from humanities computing, whilst Jeffrey Schnapp and Todd Presner were the authors of the [Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0](#). This book can be seen as an extension of that collective history.



Less of an introduction and more of an identity statement, *Digital_Humanities* collects the authors' primary conviction in the title's underscore. Explicitly, the character acknowledges the “productive tension” between the concepts and the “undefined future of the humanities in a world fundamentally transformed by everything digital” (p.x). Implicitly, it symbolises the work's privileging of design in knowledge production. The digital humanities – underscored or otherwise – becomes an illumination of a networked humanity.

kindle edition

amazon

The book comprises four chapters, a collection of fictional projects as case studies, and two appendices. The authors' first chapter summarises the field, defining a digital humanities firmly situated in process. A genealogical narrative, from the Renaissance through to the introduction of digitisation and the rise of screen culture, historicises the discipline. The previously technical receives power as computation and processing are separated into component parts. A section on core curriculum development recommends a “concentration on process and method”, reflecting a digital humanities “unified by its emphasis on making, connecting, interpreting, and collaborating” (p. 24).

Following the logic that definitions of Other are a useful means for ascribing Self, the digital and non-digital are juxtaposed. The digital is “game-changing”, “visual”, and “dynamic”. The non-digital is “inherited”, “fixated”, and “slow”. Transparency, collaboration, and availability are posited in opposition to text and restriction. Although relativist approaches are claimed, the binary succeeds in reducing the perceived value of one to the benefit of another. In empathising with those who do not access digital production tools, I find myself oddly excluded.

The third chapter, “The Social Life of the Digital Humanities”, provides a gentle analysis of the newly-ascribed discipline. It begins by locating the digital humanities in a knowledge economy rooted in open-source production and beyond discourses of scarcity. A critical review of social media technologies is followed by discussions of publishing, participation, and pedagogy. Questions of power and ownership, bordered and in bold, are weaved throughout. I am provoked to consider the place of the Academy in legitimating truth through credentialing. A recognition of the humanities as ambiguous and interpretive is offered, but it is the position on authorship which is most interesting.

Collaborative authorship is offered as a means of recognising both the source of the message and the method by which it is communicated. Authorship becomes design, and design is reconstructed as authorship. Such a conception acknowledges the conditional nature of digital text. Further, by questioning the Author category’s power, writer-readers must articulate process and address materiality. In congruence with this theoretical position, collaborative authorship is applied to the production of *Digital_Humanities*.

In the writers’ use of a collaborative model, attribution to individual authorship is replaced by a (sometimes dissonant) chorus. Although it does not restrict understanding, the second and third chapters read as if written by two different people. Strangely for an academic work available [online](#), elements are reused without ascription. Lines from Presner’s earlier [work](#) appear on page 89. Others from the *Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0* are spaced across an appendix. For clarity, the work would benefit from more in-text citations and a bibliography. This may help it achieve its principal proposal.

Ultimately, the work seeks to explicate a humanities where scholars confidently operate digital tools and accentuate design. Such explication includes convergence of qualitative and quantitative methods. Developing my academic practice in place-based, interdisciplinary fields means I expect collaboration and contestation across methodologies. In this sense, I support the authors’ aim to broker a digital humanities, which engages extensively including with the statistical.

In other ways, I find the book’s position confusing. The volume appears to limit the (non-digital) humanities academic to a content developer role. This uncritical reduction reflects a technical emphasis. Of the 18 core competencies recommended, 12 are technical while three are intellectual. In a world of generative practice – a place of “[more hack, less yack](#)” where ‘how’ is iterated, measured, and refined – where does the ‘why’ belong?

The discipline is maturing and includes many voices to its benefit. From the foundation in [A Companion to Digital Humanities](#) (2004) through to [Debates in the Digital Humanities](#) (2013), a self-development project can be seen. In this context, the work should be a welcome addition to the literature on the topic. It should not, however, be seen as an introduction to the discipline. No compelling reasons are provided for why the technical novice should enter the field. The design emphasis may have allowed an entry point by utilising thinking-through-practice as a shared method. Unfortunately, the book fails to grasp such opportunities to embrace a broader readership.

In summary, *Digital_Humanities* has a much-underplayed capacity to engage a wide audience. In contributing to the war effort on the field, the authors fail to capture the hearts and minds of those off it. The intense focus on technique may accurately reflect the instrumentalist turn. However, such practices have been at the heart of the disciplinary war. Maintenance is a likely condition of contested territory. Perhaps a later iteration may provide more options to parley.

Katarina Gray-Sharp holds a lectureship in academic development at Massey University, New Zealand. She has published in women’s health and housing, and co-edited a volume on New Zealand’s founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi, and public policy. She blogs in the educational subject area, and you can find her on Twitter [@TeachingConsult](#). [Read more reviews by Katarina](#).