

Anne Burdick, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp. *Digital\_Humanities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012, 141 pp., \$24.95 (hardcover), \$13.99 (Kindle).

Reviewed by  
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*The New York Times* laid it all out in late October 2013: The humanities, in apparently precipitous decline, are worrying college and university administrations. Never mind that the drop in the percentage of degrees awarded in the humanities is measured with an abnormal spike as its starting point; never mind that the drop is accompanied by a dramatic increase in the number of degree options for students across the curriculum; never mind the number of majors that are missing from the category of the humanities (art history is grouped among the arts, while ethnic studies and other interdisciplinary fields are credited wholly to the social sciences); never mind that, of all fields, computer science seems to be experiencing a far greater drop in degrees awarded than is the humanities. Once the Old Grey Lady has decided your relevance is waning, it would seem, there's little to do but make a cup of tea and straighten the doilies and wait for the inevitable end. Or, as Twitter would say: GUYS, the humanities are anxious about their future, and *The Times* is ON IT.



There does seem to be one bright spot, however, in the vast darkness of the humanities today: the *digital* humanities, which by its very name indicates to many that it is *here*, it is *now*, and it is, above all, relevant. Beyond that, though, what exactly the term “digital humanities” signifies remains a bit opaque to those newly curious about the field. In fact, the term itself has produced a good bit of internal debate among its practitioners in recent years, as newer entrants have called into question what they see as the assumptions made by the existing community of practice. But interest in the digital humanities has grown significantly, not least as scholars outside the field have begun to recognize funder support for the kinds of work that have emerged from it. These same indicators of interest, perhaps needless to say, have also revealed an undercurrent of anxiety about what might become of the traditional forms that work in the humanities has taken, not to mention a strong concern that many institutions proposing to enter the field may not be fully prepared for what it entails.

There are many resources available for scholars and administrators trying to figure out what the digital humanities might be, including professional organizations, journals, and even books. Several of the major books, however, give the (mistaken) impression that readers must already be initiated: The venerable Blackwell *Companion to the Digital Humanities* is in large part quite technically oriented, and the brilliant Minnesota volume *Debates in the Digital Humanities* might cause new readers to think they need a more basic introduction before moving on to uncovering the internal fault lines within the field. (In fact, exploring those fault lines is an extraordinarily good way of develop a sense of the complexity of the landscape.) Hence, in any case, the desirability of a volume that serves as a primer: What exactly is it that makes the digital humanities a thing?

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The five authors of *Digital\_Humanities*, who are with one exception clustered around the Los Angeles area, have together produced a volume that is part primer, part manifesto. Their interest lies, they suggest early on, primarily in the underscore they have embedded in their title—the space between the digital and the humanities, which is where, for them, a set of new modes of knowledge creation are developing today. The volume begins with a chapter that sketches out the potentials that the digital adds to the humanities, before moving through an exploration of the field's emerging methods and genres (including a set of "speculative case studies" meant to highlight the possibilities ahead), through an interrogation of the field's "social life" (which is to say its situation within the university as well as more broadly conceived knowledge communities), to a cluster of provocations that propose a range of possible futures for the field. The book then concludes with a "short guide" to the digital humanities, meant to serve as an executive summary of sorts. Across the volume, *Digital\_Humanities* paints an engaging portrait of the field as an emergent networked environment within the university that is dedicated to hands-on practice, that is driven by design principles, and that is perhaps above all collaborative, focused around projects undertaken not just by teams within the field, but also interdisciplinary teams that reach across the campus and out toward a broader public.

While much of that characterization of the digital humanities is apt, certain aspects of it, and thus certain aspects of the volume, remain aspirational rather than descriptive: In a perfect world, the digital humanities would be thus. Given the actually existing state of the world, however, it's important to take a careful look at the claims being made on behalf of the digital humanities and to clarify where the field is today and where one cluster of its practitioners think it might be headed.

The book begins with a series of grandly compelling statements about the expanding importance of the humanities in the digital age: The digital humanities, the authors claim, "brings the values, representational and interpretive practices, meaning-making strategies, complexities, and ambiguities of being human into every realm of experience and knowledge of the world" (p. vii). Given the expanded sphere in which those values and practices operate, the contemporary moment marks "a fundamental shift in the perception of the core creative activities of being human, in which the values and knowledge of the humanities are seen as crucial for shaping every domain of culture and society" (ibid.). These are both statements to which I'd love to subscribe; I am convinced that a broad dissemination of the interpretive practices that we in the humanities share would help our culture become more critical, more nuanced, and more sensitive. I am also convinced, however, that if this is going to be so, we need not just humanists who are more digital, but also humanists who are *better humanists*. Some of the claims made on behalf of the humanities in the opening pages of *Digital\_Humanities* are highly idealized, in other words. If we are going to strive to bring together the best of the digital with the best of the humanities, we must cultivate both sides of that space.

It's true, after all, that "the values and knowledge of the humanities are seen as crucial" (p. vii) *within the humanities*, but out in the world for which *The New York Times* speaks, our fields are imagined to be on their last legs, a quaintly irrelevant set of finishing schools for (a) the already financially secure, or (b) future baristas. The world of *The New York Times* fails to see a practical value for the study of the humanities in no small part because we in the humanities have done a rotten job of making the case.

Even those public figures who have most benefitted from their high-quality liberal arts educations feel not just free but somehow compelled to denigrate the lack of utility of the humanities today. We are an open target, and I fear that airy rhetoric about “shaping every domain of culture and society” (ibid.) does not help, not when the work that we do as humanists engages critically with our culture but routinely fails to engage that culture in dialogue. The authors of *Digital\_Humanities* suggest that the emergent field might help us find our way into a better such engagement: “since the Digital Humanities studies and explicates what it means to be human in the networked information age, it expands the reach and relevance of the humanities far beyond small groups of specialists locked in hermetically sealed conversation” (p. 82). I would say rather that it has the *potential* to do so, but the transformation required to make this vision a reality is not just the addition of the digital, but instead a full rethinking of the humanities, its place in the university, and its relationship to the world beyond.

A willingness to participate in genuine dialogue—not just speaking to the world beyond but allowing that world to speak to us as well—is perhaps the element that is most important for us to cultivate and revalue in the humanities. This is true even within the closed field of our own colleagues: Humanists have long valued the individual voice, the single author; we must find ways to understand ourselves as speaking not just *to* but *with* others. The authors of *Digital\_Humanities* accordingly emphasize the importance of collaboration in the field: “In contrast with most traditional forms of scholarship, digital approaches are conspicuously collaborative and generative, even as they remain grounded in the traditions of humanistic inquiry” (p. 3). And this cowritten volume itself makes the point. As the authors detail in their afterword, their own process relied on collaborative methods drawn from the fields of architecture and design, in which the collaborators become a team, whose members have differentiated responsibilities but are nonetheless all focused on a common goal. Team-oriented projects such as this are the norm in the digital humanities, and they represent an important path forward for the humanities in general. And yet it’s arguable that the notion of the “team” emphasizes the competitive rather than the collaborative, carrying with it notions of in-groups and out-groups striving against one another to “win.” It’s worth considering how the definition of “us” involved in the team-oriented collaborations explored here subtly works to promote certain processes or institutional structures over others.

*Digital\_Humanities* puts forward a crucial vision of what can develop when the best of the digital and the best of the humanities are brought together—but it is in the end *one* vision of a possible future, and not *the* future toward which we are all moving. The issue raised by this distinction becomes most acute in the “short guide,” which is likely to be the most-read section of the book. While the foregoing pages have been ripe with possibilities, this guide presents a set of definitions and checklists that are restrictive rather than generative. That this chapter is designed to be used by “those who are asked to assess and fund Digital Humanities scholars, projects, and initiatives” (p. 121) makes it that much more troubling when the reader is suddenly presented with a reductive view of what had previously been a richly expansive terrain. One begins to wonder, at this point, how expansive that terrain could possibly have been—and, in fact, to recognize that the team-based collaborations proposed by the volume require access to stable sources of support in the form of research funding and technical labor, and within the American academy, at least, only a narrow range of existing institutions (the so-called R-1s, and even among them a diminishing subset) can reliably provide that support. So what of those future fully digital

humanists who are employed at teaching institutions without available sources of research support? What of a practitioner working at a small, distant institution where he or she may be the only person with a particular research interest, who therefore cannot put together a local team? What of the practitioners at R-1s who do not have tenure-track faculty status, and thus may not have the authority to take on any role on a digital humanities team other than that of support for someone else's project? The team-based model brings with it new modes of cooperation and collaboration, but it also potentially reinscribes certain hierarchies and exclusions, privileging those in some kinds of positions and marginalizing others.

The authors of *Digital\_Humanities* of course recognize that the norms of academic life will need significant transformation in order for their vision to take root, shifting the entirety of our fields from "an economy of knowledge production tending towards scarcity, centralized control, hierarchy, division of labor, property, and proprietary systems [to] an economy of knowledge production tending towards abundance, decentralization, peer creation, creative commons, and open-source models" (p. 77). But I am not entirely certain that the model they embody in this volume is the best means for achieving that goal. The volume's authors have worked together to reimagine the means of book production, and so they get some distance toward rethinking authorship, which is no longer imagined "as autonomous work or as the labor of a solitary genius" (p. 83)—a crucial intervention, to be sure. But I remain less convinced that they get as far as "the harnessing and expressiveness of the creative energies of an ever-expanding, virtually boundless community of practitioners" (ibid.), which they evoke in the very next phrase. Such community is perhaps a direction for the future; *Digital\_Humanities* explores quite compellingly our need both to harness those virtually boundless creative energies and to value and reward them appropriately. The volume doesn't, however, acknowledge the means by which the humanities have traditionally manifested the role of the community in its authorship practices—through quotation and citation, not just building upon the work of others but giving appropriate credit for that prior work. And this is where I have the greatest difficulty with the volume as it stands, as it was produced in a profoundly collaborative fashion *within its own team*, but it fails, at times quite radically, to engage collaboratively with other practitioners in the field. The case studies at the book's center provide an example. Rather than direct readers to exemplary projects being conducted across the field, projects that the readers could actually explore and evaluate for themselves, the book invents its own projects, fictionalized projects that highlight the methods being used and the questions being investigated in existing work but that remain the products of the authors' speculation. Why not use this opportunity to showcase and even promote the enormous range of exciting projects being built across the community?

The book's method, which minimizes indirect engagement with the work being done by others in the digital humanities in favor of the authors' direct presentation of their ideas about the field and its future, leaves me profoundly uneasy, both about the ways that the volume understands its field and about my own responses to it. It is true, after all, that the digital brings to the humanities new means of reusing, remixing, and enhancing work that's already been done, new means of bringing many voices together into richly harmonic experiences. Those new technologies and modes of production, however, do not and should not obviate the need to acknowledge the contributions of all of those individual voices. If the digital is truly to make us better humanists, we must become better, more generous collaborators—not just within our own teams, but with our fields in general and with the broader publics with which we hope to interact. And this is the deeply uncomfortable question: What does it mean that the form that

collaboration with other scholars outside of the authorial team takes in the book is not the bringing together of multiple voices but the absorption and deployment without citation of ideas that have originated elsewhere?

It's clear that the authors have made this choice with reason. As the preface indicates, the team worked consciously to create a singular "encompassing yet polemical voice" (p. ix) that works to represent the field to readers directly, without the speed bumps created by the standard scholarly apparatus. I raise this question of citation, however, not as a heels-dug-in defense of the ways that things have always been done, that is, a refusal to consider that this mode of discourse may in fact be more compelling for a generalist reader than the traditional academic structures are, but rather because of my belief that new modes of engagement in the digital humanities require us to develop, if anything, *deeper* citation practices that reflect as fully as possible the ways that we have been influenced by the work of our colleagues. The authors of *Digital\_Humanities* acknowledge their influences in a list of sources included at the volume's end, but with a few rare exceptions those influences are not credited in ways that are linked to the text itself, and thus the sources are not allowed to be full participants in dialogue with the authors. The result is a smoother reading experience within the text, to be sure, but the reader cannot trace the genealogy of particular ideas, cannot see the authors' engagement with or transformation of those ideas in action. The notion put forward in the volume of the "emerging fellowships of discourse" (p. 88) that are transforming knowledge production is a powerful one, but it does raise the question of who has been admitted into the fellowship of this book. The "authorship function" in digital humanities work must, as the volume argues, give way to something more collaborative, but true collaboration requires all interlocutors to be full participants, and credit to be given where credit is due. The book does demonstrate a tendency to cite "up": those towering figures like Foucault, Kittler, Benkler, and Hayles receive in-text credit for the ideas they have originated. The book is far less inclined, however, to name the sources for ideas that have come from across or below. This is perhaps a natural impulse; some ideas are so associated with those "initiators of discursive practices" Foucault saw as transcending the flattening effect of the author function that they cannot go without naming. But if we are to transform the humanities into an open, collaborative, dialogic enterprise, it requires a generous accounting of all of our collaborators, and of everyone to whom we owe debts. This is not an argument on behalf of preserving existing humanist assumptions about the nature of authorship as we move into the age of digital scholarship; it is, however, to say that if digital humanists are genuinely to be better humanists, we must be willing to engage fully with all of the people—team members, field colleagues, broader publics—that our work touches.

*Digital\_Humanities* presents a compelling perspective on the ways that traditional humanistic fields are today being changed in their encounter with the digital, and for the futures that this encounter may make possible. Those futures, with their emphasis on design principles, on public engagement, on interconnection, and on collaboration, are far brighter than any of the doomsaying pundits lamenting the humanities' decline into irrelevance have yet grasped. But we still need a vision of the digital humanities that extends beyond ourselves, beyond particular institutional settings, to include the broadest possible range of practitioners and projects in a robust, inclusive, ongoing discussion. In that way, we might genuinely make the crucial ideals espoused in *Digital\_Humanities* available to all.