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What is Digital History? A Look at Some Exemplar Projects

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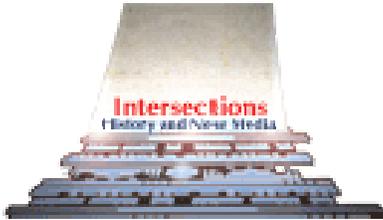*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, wthomas4@unl.edu

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What is Digital History? A Look at Some Exemplar Projects

By Douglas Seefeldt and William G. Thomas

Both of us came into the history profession in the early 1990s and went through graduate school just before the remarkable emergence of the World Wide Web. Of course, we can see now that a communication revolution was taking place during those years and that it was changing the way we do historical scholarship and teaching. After the development of browsers like Mosaic Netscape and Netscape Navigator in 1994, the web grew at an astonishing rate into a global information network. Even at the early stages of the web's growth, history was all over the web. Amazingly, people rushed to put their own histories on the web and to create sites dedicated to their favorite subjects. Big organizations, such as the National Park Service and the Library of Congress, put up web sites on major historical places and topics. Eventually, new tools, such as JSTOR and ProQuest, opened up full-text facsimiles of journal articles and major newspapers. Research libraries took the lead in developing their catalogs and collections for online access. Teaching everything from the U.S. history survey to specialized research seminars became more dynamic and student-centered. The primary sources of the past were open for students in ways unimaginable only a decade earlier. But just as research techniques and tools were being transformed by the new media, would scholarship also change? If so, how, and in what ways?

A whole new field opened up around the concept of digital history as historians tried to experiment with the new medium. They began using new tools that computational systems and networked information made available. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) have become prominent because of the wide interest in more spatial approaches to the past, but a whole range of technologies proved

useful: Flash animation, XML coding, digital video, blogs, and wikis.[1] Because the medium is still so new in comparison to traditional modes of communication, and the technology is still rapidly changing, we historians have only just begun to explore what history looks like in the digital medium. Increasingly, university departments are seeking scholars to translate history into this fast-paced, widely accessible environment and to work in digital history; however, they have found that without well-defined examples of digital scholarship, established best practices, and, especially, clear standards of review for tenure, few scholars have fully engaged with the digital medium.[2] So, what is digital history and how should we understand its characteristics?

What is Digital History?

Digital history might be understood broadly as an approach to examining and representing the past that works with the new communication technologies of the computer, the internet network, and software systems. On one level, digital history is an open arena of scholarly production and communication, encompassing the development of new course materials and scholarly data collection efforts. On another level, digital history is a methodological approach framed by the hypertextual power of these technologies to make, define, query, and annotate associations in the human record of the past. To do digital history, then, is to digitize the past certainly, but it is much more than that. It is to create a framework through the technology for people to experience, read, and follow an argument about a major historical problem.[3]

At the Virginia Center for Digital History from 1998–2005, we tried to experiment with the medium of the web and to develop different models of digital history scholarship. Collaborating with librarians, technology professionals, and historians from different fields, we quickly realized that digital projects crossed traditional boundaries. Aiming to explore scholarly techniques and means of communication, we began to distinguish between digitization projects and digital history scholarship. The former, far more prevalent both within the academy and without, took collections and made them accessible in digital form and was largely the work of digital library or for-profit digital archive initiatives. Two successful examples of digitization projects include the Library of Congress' American Memory project (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/) and the National Archives digitization efforts (www.archives.gov/index.html). Scholars have access to the records of the past on an unprecedented scale through these important initiatives: millions of pages of newspapers, government documents, and letters and diaries are searchable, indexed, and immediately retrievable. Digital history

projects, however, tended to arrange a more discrete collection of sources and materials around a historiographical question. Projects, such as The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War (http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/), Race and Place: An African American Community in the Jim Crow South (http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/afam/raceandplace), Victoria's Victoria (http://web.uvic.ca/vv/), and Los Angeles and the Problem of Urban Historical Knowledge (http://cwis.usc.edu/dept/LAS/history/historylab/LAPUHK/index.html), began to establish a different model of historical scholarship, one that had an ambitious goal to both democratize the past and attempt alternative historical, theoretical, and methodological approaches.

Historians might do a great deal of digitizing as a part of their work, but our focus is different from that of the librarian. Digital history projects proceeded from a core historical question, such as what is the social history of the American Civil War, how do local communities resist something like racial segregation, how can a student-created digital archive of Victoria's early history allow for dynamic teaching and learning, or, how do urban historians map the knowledge claims of a dynamic metropolis?

Digital history scholarship, in addition, opens the question up for readers to investigate and form interpretive associations of their own. This might be the defining characteristic of this genre. Readers of this work are not presented with an exhibit, or an article with many appendices, or any other analog form simply reprocessed into a web-deliverable format. Instead, they are presented with a suite of interpretive elements, ways to gain leverage on the problem under investigation.

The Next Stage of Digital History

The late Roy Rosenzweig presciently noted the need for this transition in January 2004 at an event he organized prior to the 118th annual meeting of the American Historical Association titled, "Entering the Second Stage of Online History Scholarship."4 Roy identified the necessary shift from experimentation with the tools and theories of digital scholarship to something more permanent. This second stage will require interdisciplinary collaboration, the likes of which most historians have yet to embrace; cooperative initiatives that involve historians, programmers, information architects, designers, and publishers. Libraries are al-

ready creating the infrastructure to collect, manage, explore, and manipulate these sources and to support and sustain the various forms of "new-model scholarship" that might come out of them; historians must join in this essential next step or, as Abby Smith warns us, face losing our scholarship to the "dustbin of history."[5]

Several model digital history projects, we argue, give us a sense of the range of scholarship attempted so far. For the last three years as we have hosted and run the Nebraska Digital Workshop we have seen some of the best and most important new work in digital history from graduate students and early career faculty.[6] The Texas Slavery Project (www.texasslaveryproject.org/) by Andrew Torget at the University of North Texas shows how a digital project might extend, deepen, and launch interpretive aspects of a dissertation. Torget's project began as an investigation into the borderlands between Texas and Mexico, the growth of slavery in the region, and the consequences of spatial relationships that developed around slavery. Torget quickly adapted his detailed database of yearly censuses of slaveholders into a mapping project for the web. Going beyond presentation of the data, he then began using the digital platform to integrate and open for investigation the many sources related to his subject. The resulting digital history project has shaped his dissertation's argument and method.

Another model of digital history comes from our colleague Timothy Mahoney, a 19th-century U.S. urban historian, who has developed a rich tapestry of "spatial narratives" in his Gilded Age Plains City: The Great Sheedy Murder Trial and the Booster Ethos of Lincoln, Nebraska (http://gildedage.unl.edu). Beginning with a published peer-reviewed essay he wrote on the subject, Mahoney developed Great Plains City to draw the reader into the complex story of the murder of a notorious "sporting man," gambler, and city booster. Mahoney's project allows for the self-directed exploration of the social, cultural, legal, and political concerns raised in the course of the trial providing insight into understanding the origins of Progressivism and modernity.

What happens when a senior scholar takes up digital tools to advance a new interpretation and help him or her understand the complex patterns they are seeing in their sources? Richard White at Stanford University, who has written numerous books on Western U.S. history and served recently as president of the Organization of American Historians, hopes to model and investigate the ways railroads shaped the American West in the late 19th century. His Spatial History Project (http://spatialhistory.stanford.edu) also supports other research aimed at understanding how spatial relationships—the spaces we live in and inhabit—are distorted or warped rather than geometric or linear. Demonstration projects

are underway within White's project, exploring Rio de Janeiro urban development, environmental change in California, settlement around San Francisco Bay, and a wiki for "Tooling up for Digital Histories."

These tools can allow scholars to approach familiar subjects in exciting new ways as Jack Censer, Lynn Hunt, et al., did in Imaging the French Revolution (http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/imaging/home.html). This project features the interpretive work of seven scholars collaborating—both synchronously and asynchronously—to shed new light on these rich but problematic sources. Using a digital image tool to zoom in on detail in the collection of 42 images of crowds and crowd violence in the French Revolution, and a combination of single-author essays and collaborative online discussions, these scholars are able to re-interpret the scenes in all of their nuanced complexity.[7]

Future Digital History

For history, the future digital environment might challenge some of our traditional methods, perhaps even the craft-oriented practices of our discipline. Our sources alone in the future will be almost entirely digital—instant messages, e-mails, doc files, pdfs, digital video, podcasts, and databases. Their scale and complexity will demand that historians use tools and techniques not yet a part of our practice to create their own digital sources and employ those created by others. To this end, we need to expose our graduate students to the variety of research and teaching tools already at their disposal—Zotero, del.icio.us, Google Earth, Google Books, Wikipedia, SIMILE, Scribe, and TokenX. In fact, we, as a field, must endeavor to shift the focus of digital historical scholarship away from the product-oriented exhibit or "web site" and move it more toward the process-oriented work of employing new media tools in our research and analysis—"doing" digital history.[8] But in order for digital history data to be considered a scholarly product in and of itself, to inform our own research and to be shared with others, we will need to more fully address the accompanying challenges of quality (peer review), preservation, and open access.[9]

The characteristics of future digital history works might be computational/algorithmic, large-scale, and visual. We certainly need to think about digital history in integrative terms, and Rosenzweig has more than anyone pointed the way and the key issues that scholars will face.[10] He recognized as well that digital history, perhaps more than analog, invites students and the public into the

digital process. It is fundamentally concerned with the integration of teaching, research, and outreach. These exemplar projects offer us inspiration and much to consider as we discover what history looks like in the digital medium.

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Notes

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