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Putting the 'Humanities' in 'Digital Humanities'

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Reflecting on the recent The Humanities and Technology conference (THAT Camp [1]) in San Francisco, what strikes me most is that digital humanities events consistently tip more toward the logic-structured *digital* side of things. That is, they are less balanced out by the *humanities* side. But what I mean by that itself has been a problem I've been mulling for some time now. What is the missing contribution from the humanities?

I think this digital dominance revolves around two problems.

The first is an old problem. The humanities' pattern of professional anxiety goes back to the 1800s and stems from pressure to incorporate the methods of science into our disciplines or to develop our own, uniquely humanistic, methods of scholarship. The "digital humanities" rubs salt in these still open wounds by demonstrating what cool things can be done with literature, history, poetry, or philosophy if only we render humanities scholarship compliant with cold, computational logic. Discussions concern how to structure the humanities as data.

The showy and often very visual products built on such data and the ease with which information contained within them is intuitively understood appear, at first blush, to be a triumph of quantitative thinking. The pretty, animated graphs or fluid screen forms belie the fact that boring spreadsheets and databases contain the details. Humanities scholars, too, often recoil from the presumably shallow grasp of a subject that data visualization invites.

For many of us trained in the humanities, to contribute data to such a project feels a bit like chopping up a Picasso into a million pieces and feeding those pieces one by one into a machine that promises to put it all back together, cleaner and prettier than it looked before.

Which leads to the second problem, the difficulty of quantifying an aesthetic experience and — more often — the resistance to doing so. A unique feature of humanities scholarship is that its objects of study evoke an aesthetic response from the reader (or viewer). While a sunset might be beautiful, recognizing its beauty is not critical to studying it scientifically. Failing to appreciate the economy of language in a poem about a sunset, however, is to miss the point.

Literature is more than the sum of its words on a page, just as an artwork is more than the sum of the molecules it comprises. To itemize every word or molecule on a spreadsheet is simply to

apply more anesthetizing structure than humanists can bear. And so it seems that the digital humanities is a paradox, trying to combine two incompatible sets of values.

Yet, humanities scholarship is already based on structure: language. "Code," the underlying set of languages that empowers all things digital, is just another language entering the profession. Since the application of digital tools to traditional humanities scholarship can yield fruitful results, perhaps what is often missing from the humanities is a clearer embrace of code.

In fact, "code" is a good example of how something that is more than the sum of its parts emerges from the atomic bits of text that logic demands must be lined up next to each other in just such-and-such a way. When well-structured code is combined with the right software (e.g., a browser, which itself is a product of code), we see William Blake's illuminated prints, [2] or hear Gertrude Stein reading a poem [3], or access a world-wide conversation on just what is the digital humanities [4]. As the folks at WordPress say, code is poetry.

I remember 7th-grade homework assignments programming onscreen fireworks explosions in BASIC. When I was in 7th grade, I was willing to patiently decipher code only because of the promise of cool graphics on the other end. When I was older, I realized the I was willing to read patiently through Hegel and Kant because I learned to see the fireworks in the code itself. To avid readers of literature, the characters of a story come alive to us, laying bare our own feelings or moral inclinations in the process.

Detecting patterns, interpreting symbolism, and analyzing logical inconsistencies in text are all techniques used in humanities scholarship. Perhaps the digital humanities' greatest gift to the humanities can be the ability to invest a generation of "users" in the techniques and practiced meticulous attention to detail required to become a scholar.

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[1] http://thatcamp.org/
[2] http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/
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