

NOT SO FAST, or
How the Grinch Stole Your Digital Christmas

W. J. T. Mitchell

The 2007 Modern Language Association panel on “Digital Pedagogy and Professionalism” provided a partial survey of the impact of digital technologies on the humanities today. Ian Lancashire (University of Toronto) immersed us in the new world of online teaching; Jennifer Crewe (Columbia University Press) took us through some highly possible futures in the publishing industry; and Katherine Hayles (UCLA) presented a utopian manifesto of a world beyond academic departments, when networks of scholars will cluster around problems rather than disciplines. Before I comment on each of their presentations, however, I want to place this discussion in the larger context of the so-called “digital humanities,” a phrase that denotes three basic areas of interaction between the new technologies and the study of culture: 1) the transmission of humanistic knowledge in pedagogy and publication (the primary subject of this panel); 2) research in the humanities which has the effect of turning culture into an archive for data-mining; 3) the treatment of the new informational technologies as themselves the object of cultural analysis.

The pedagogical dimension is, I think, the most straightforward, and it is the one I know the most about, having taught highly wired introductory courses called “The Arts of Memory,” “Visual Culture” and “Theories of Media,” in recent years, featuring everything from gaming to texting to live, actual performance. I confess to being a pedagogical technophile, though not a very gifted one. I am addicted to PowerPoint, and the coming of the digital image has made it possible for me to impersonate an art historian in a way that old-fashioned lantern slides never could. I also love digital pedagogy for the way it makes possible what I call “lateral learning” and “collective intelligence.” Having students write to and for each other, rather than only for the eyes of the instructor, is for me the most important innovation made possible by the wired *class*, as distinct from the wired *classroom*. The students in my classes complain sometimes, in fact, about being *too* wired in to their classmates. They need relief, some quiet time off the web, away from the terminal. And I have to admit that the amount of labour time spent in front of a screen is sometimes overwhelming. The discussion boards, blogs, and on-line glossaries are all wonderful in principle, but I wonder what the cost of all this good stuff is in terms of the proportion of time spent on the primary readings for a course, and the tendency to accelerate processes of speed-up and forced productivity that are already out of control? We need to ask ourselves what is happening to slow, contemplative reading, and to re-reading, in a time when texts are “processed” so rapidly and often mindlessly. And I want to raise at least one question for Ian Lancashire: how can he be so sure that “teachers and students come to know one another’s minds better online than in a physical classroom.” Is this just a personal observation, or is it based on something more than his own experience?

The publication side of the digital humanities is ably represented by Jennifer Crewe. I feel terrible pangs, however, and a sense of disbelief, at the projected demise of the book, and I harbor a not-so-secret desire to hold out for its return. I wonder what sort of world Crewe envisions: one in which books become, on the one hand, art objects that occupy a rare niche in the market for words, and very low-end POD books that are cranked out on demand? And I would like to raise some questions for graduate students who are being enticed to “publish” their dissertations on line, and assistant professors who are being advised to publish their first books electronically. Is the on-line diss anything more than the old microfilm deposit, only more easily retrievable and searchable? And which of you assistant professors facing a tenure decision wants to volunteer to publish your first book electronically rather than in hard copy, given the choice? (No hands were raised in the audience of over a hundred that attended this panel).

There is another whole dimension to this topic that has not been mentioned, and that is the use of digital technologies in the production as opposed to dissemination of humanistic knowledge. This approach is exemplified by the work of Franco Moretti, which substitutes *counting* for reading as the basic operation of literary research, using statistical methods to generalize patterns of literary history, and to produce abstract models such as graphs, maps, and trees to chart the evolution of genres. My own students recently attempted (and failed) to produce not just a literary atlas, but a Media HyperAtlas, a program for producing the first cartography and taxonomy of media species and environments. (See <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/projects/hyperatlas.htm> for the fossil remains of this experiment). And it strikes me that failure, the willingness to risk false starts, to experiment within time-honored strategies like hunches, guesses, and trial and error—this is the spirit of the best work of this kind, though it is not a work that I feel drawn to myself.

I see Katherine Hayles’ utopian proposal as mainly a pedagogical one, with broader implications for the entire institutional structure of humanistic learning. It urges us to dissolve departments and, I presume, the disciplines they represent, in order to bring students more rapidly into a research program devoted to a cluster of problems. At first I was properly shocked by Kate’s proposal, but upon reflection, I think it is not especially radical after all. Everywhere I look, at the University of Chicago and elsewhere, I see interdisciplinary formations springing up in the interstices among departments and disciplines. I’m not sure why Kate thinks that bringing film and literature together is a “flabby” form of interdisciplinarity, as opposed to the muscular work of urban studies and climate change. What I suspect is that “muscle” here is associated with the promise of new power and productivity—in short, “growth and development”—in technology and science. And one can certainly understand why this is attractive: New media is (are?) where the money is in the humanities. We should acknowledge this fact frankly in our discussions here, and not pretend that the digital humanities exists in a social or economic vacuum. We should also register the fact that the dissolution of departments and disciplines is a favored management technique for the down-sizing of faculties, and the de-skilling of students, as departments and programs in cultural studies have discovered to their dismay.

There would be many other questions to raise about Kate's proposal: is a department the same thing as a discipline? Didn't disciplines and departments generally begin as "problem clusters" that drew together scholars and teachers who shared a sense of those problems? Won't these clusters, if long-lived, quickly evolve into bureaucratic entities with names like "cultural geography" and "urban studies." And to what extent are innovative "clusters" dependent upon the disciplinary skills of the established institutional clusters known as "departments." If you are going to have a cluster that involves research in, say, law and literature, doesn't that depend on the existence of prior disciplinary formations such as literature departments and law schools where the relevant skills are taught, and a canonical body of texts is mastered? Isn't, in fact, the difference between a "problem cluster" and a discipline the notion that, in a discipline you have to learn a lot of things whose immediate relevance is not apparent to anyone except those who have long since mastered those basics? A problem, by contrast, will probably strike at least some people as immediately urgent or interesting, but that does not guarantee that it will turn out to be important in the long run.

But I think to pursue these questions about interdisciplinarity and the institutional structure of the academy would take us rather far afield from the central questions of "digital pedagogy and professionalism," and the larger issue of the "digital humanities" as such. I am somewhat alarmed when Kate urges us to find radically new models for the organization of learning, and complains that we are trying to "meet these challenges with the medieval organizations known as universities and with disciplinary structures formed in the early nineteenth century."(2) I would want to argue that, on the contrary, this is exactly the moment when we should be investigating the historical processes that led to the formation of disciplines in the 19th century, the discourse networks and epistemic frameworks that made possible academic departments in anthropology, literary study, art history, and philology. As for the medieval university, I take some solace in the fact that this is an institutional framework that pre-dates the rise of the nation-state, and might conceivably outlive it in a globalizing economy. The most powerful academic use of digital technology that I have seen in recent years was the use of the internet and streaming real-time video to make it possible for students in an-Najaf University in the West Bank to communicate with symposia of students in Midwestern liberal arts colleges.

An Najaf is a university under siege, many of its students coming from the nearby Palestinian refugee camp of Jenin into the ancient city of Nablus, where the university is located. The students are of course unable to travel outside Israel, and it is often difficult for them even to get to the university. But the technical capacities of their new media program helps them to overcome, not departmental or disciplinary boundaries, but the political barriers, military checkpoints, and security "fences" that cut them off from each other and the world. Although I understand the motives and frustrations of those who support a boycott of Israeli universities as a counter-strategy, I think it is a deeply problematic strategy, practically, politically, and morally. We should instead support the raising of the de facto boycott of Palestinian universities, their isolation from the world and even from their own neighborhoods, by every means necessary. Digital technologies

are a crucial means of overcoming these obstacles to the circulation of humanistic knowledge, and humane social relations.

I would think, therefore, that the medieval university should be of special interest in our time, especially if Friedrich Kittler is correct in arguing that the middle ages was the last time that “universities ...succeeded in forming ... a complete media system,” based upon a shared, international language (Latin) and a “shared hardware,” consisting of “the lecture” (data processing), “the library” (data storage), and a postal system (e-mail and the internet). As Kittler puts it in his recent article in Critical Inquiry:

universities have finally succeeded in forming once again a complete media system. Turing's universal machine, vulgo the computer, processes, stores, and transmits whatever data it receives, whether textbooks, measurements, or algebras. Computers, therefore, have come full circle: from the mathematics departments where they once began, making their way through physics, chemistry, and medicine, they have finally arrived in the humanities. For the second time in its eight centuries, the university is technically uniform, simply because all departments share one and the same hardware.¹

This uniformity, notes Kittler, created a system that “enabled a cumulative and recursive production of knowledge for almost three centuries before two highly correlated events changed the whole structure of academia: first, Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press; second, the emergence of national, that is to say, territorial states.”

So I want to leave the question of what the digital humanities means for departments and disciplines on the side; Kate herself has suggested that she might be a bit off topic, and I agree, for a much more important component of her work is the treatment of new technologies as an object of research in the study of culture, media, the arts, and literature, that Kate’s work has informed. And this is what I think has been most conspicuously missing from the presentations here. Of course the digital revolution has impacted that tiny, marginal, and endangered constituency among institutions of higher education known as the humanities. What I would like to know is: what impact has the humanities had, what impact *can* it have, on the study of technology, its history, effects, experiential character, etc? What can we, as professional humanists, say to the scientists and technologists who are transforming the conditions of human life on this planet?

Saying that we are now “post-human” has been a good polemical start on this question, but I think it needs to be followed up with further questions. What *is* the digital, and what exactly is it supposed to be displacing, overturning, or rendering obsolete? What is the status of the whole language of innovation and obsolescence in relation to the fortunes of the *human* animal.

Of course one the first things a humanist does with the digital is listen to the word itself, and notice its literalization in the fingers at the ends of the hands typing these very words.

¹ “Universities: Wet, Hard, Soft, and Harder,” *Critical Inquiry* 30:1 (Autumn, 2003),

The digital age is the *digital* age (as Bill Brown has noted), the age of carpal tunnel syndrome. It is not just the time in which the digital “triumphs” (over what is not usually very clear: is it the analog? A logical impossibility. The mechanical? Not hardly) over everything else. It is a time of resistance, hesitation, and caution. Resistance to the digital, escaping from e-mail, insisting on the role of the analog, of embodied liveness in performance, of real time—and space. That is why I think that a better description of our current moment is not simply the triumph of the digital or the computer, but the emergence of a new dialectic (and sometimes a new synthesis) between the digital and the biological, hardware and wetware, what we might call the “biocybernetic.”² This characterization of our period would help us to recognize the possibility of new convergences (such as Eugene Thacker’s biomedica, the alliance of genetics with information science), and of new contradictions, conflicts, and strange bedfellows: the rise of anti-scientific religious and political movements facilitated by internet communication; the uneven development and distribution of technologies; the resistance to technology that is often built into the machines themselves, exemplified by viruses, hackers, and the new Babel of gadgets that continually require second order gadgets to mediate between them. I would ask you to consider exactly how many remote-control devices it takes to use your television set today.

So my call to professional humanists who are fascinated by the digital is to put their disciplines to work on this fascination, which is to say, to criticize, analyze, historicize, and above all resist the automatic reflexes and routines that technology offers. With David Cronenberg I want to say, “long live the new flesh!” At the end of the day, wetware still rules.

² See “The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction,” in What Do Pictures Want? (University of Chicago Press, 2005), for a fuller discussion.