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SHAPING THE DIGITAL DISSERTATION

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN THE
ARTS AND HUMANITIES





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7. Navigating Institutions and Fully Embracing the Interdisciplinary Humanities

American Studies and the Digital Dissertation

Katherine Walden and Thomas Oates

In recent decades, new allowances for multimodal, digital forms of American Studies scholarship have been palpable. For example, members of the American Studies Association created a Digital Humanities Caucus in 2009, while its flagship journal *American Quarterly* recently expanded its reviews section to include assessments of digital projects, and announced plans for a special issue titled 'Towards a Critically Engaged Digital Practice: American Studies and the Digital Humanities', which was published in October 2018.¹ But while American Studies as a field has recently advocated for and accepted alternative forms of scholarship, many questions and uncertainties linger for PhD-granting programs faced with the prospect of credentialing new forms of scholarship as sufficient to meet the completion requirements for the subject area's terminal degree. For doctoral programs whose mission and vision maintains an enduring commitment to training future generations of the professoriate, moving into the unknown territory (and attendant uncertain career trajectories and prospects) of alternative forms of scholarship raises the following fundamental questions:

1 'Special Issue: Toward a Critically Engaged Digital Practice: American Studies and the Digital Humanities', ed. by Lauren Tilton et al., *American Quarterly*, 70.3 (2018).

- What is a dissertation?
- What are the core intellectual tasks and academic skills doctoral students must master to successfully complete a dissertation?
- Where does the dissertation fit in relation to evaluating a doctoral candidate's successful completion of the PhD degree program?
- How will investing in and advocating for digital forms of scholarship impact student prospects and competitiveness on the job market?

As evidenced by our experience with a born-digital American Studies dissertation project at the University of Iowa, graduate students and faculty interested in proposing and advocating for an alternative dissertation project can encounter significant obstacles in this process, even at campuses where there is institutional or administrative support for emerging forms of scholarship and new approaches to graduate education. This chapter addresses the steps and resources academic departments can take to effectively support and equip graduate students for completing large-scale digital projects. It highlights the challenges graduate students and faculty face in advocating for alternate dissertation forms, and addresses the institutional and intellectual challenges digital dissertations present, in order to shed light on the logistics of preparing for, undertaking, and completing a digital dissertation. Additionally, we explore how graduate students and faculty advocates invested in large-scale digital projects can utilize and leverage institutional resources, professional organizations, and other communities and networks to expand the possibilities for humanities dissertation forms.

The idea for 'Remapping and Visualizing Baseball Labor: A Digital Humanities Project' began in an Archives and Media course that, at the time, was a required course for the University of Iowa's Certificate in Public Digital Humanities. This course included a semester-long data management and visualization project. Through gathering, organizing, analyzing and visualizing a small sample of baseball-related data, and the research questions and areas of inquiry facilitated by that experience, the idea of a larger project based on a more complete data set emerged.

Multimodal Digital Content as Argument

Contemporary digital humanities (DH) scholarship includes vigorous calls for humanists to create meaningful contributions to scholarship. For instance, the authors of the *Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0* envision the use of digital tools or resources to address core humanities methodological commitments like ‘attention to complexity, medium specificity, historical context, analytical depth, critique and interpretation’.²

The scholars and projects featured in the 2018 *American Quarterly* special issue, among others, have marked American Studies as a versatile, interdisciplinary home from which can emerge DH projects that have the capacity to inform and shape ongoing scholarly conversations. American Studies adjacent projects such as *Digital Harlem*³ and *Early African-American Film Database*⁴ render textual data—whether text from a newspaper primary source or descriptive information for a film—in tabular form, visualized or graphically rendered in a way that illuminates compelling narratives and unexpected intersections. More than a mere illustration of written arguments, *Digital Harlem* utilizes newspaper accounts from the African-American press to map the spread of black cultural institutions in a particular geographic space in a way that traditional forms could not. *Early African-American Film Database* uses filmmaker and production information for a corpus of race films in a dynamic online site that includes humanities-oriented discussions of the dissertation’s method and significance, as well as tutorials on a range of ways to interact with and visualize the archive. Both projects offer compelling examples of the utility of digital humanities scholarship and serve as models for interactivity and visualization within the field of American Studies.

While much DH work has utilized digital tools and employed digital methods to explore primarily textual sources, data visualization practices in journalism offer a rich body of examples that illustrate the potential value and utility of data mapping and visualization approaches to topics,

2 Humanities Blast, *Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0*. (2009), p. 2, http://www.humanitiesblast.com/manifesto/Manifesto_V2.pdf

3 See <http://digitalharlem.org/>

4 See <https://web.archive.org/web/20201109105514/http://dhbasecamp.humanities.ucla.edu/afamfilm>

issues and questions of interest to humanities scholars..⁵ In addition to advocating for digital alternatives to the traditional dissertation, this project seeks to illustrate how digital dissertations can move beyond textual studies and engage digital approaches and resources to expand the types of argumentation and knowledge communication central to the humanities dissertation.

The path, however, was more complicated than either of us anticipated.

Power of Precedent

The most immediate obstacles to the proposed project were logistical. The graduate college did not have a formal mechanism to support the deposit of a project that could not be manifested as a PDF. Fortunately, however, a Digital Studio for Scholarship and Publishing had been established, headed by Dr. Deborah Whaley, a faculty member in American Studies at Iowa and a member of this dissertation committee with expertise in DH projects. With Dr. Whaley's assistance, arrangements were made to house the final version of the dissertation. Even after resolving this fundamental issue, however, another logistical obstacle remained. The American Studies Department's graduate handbook described the dissertation stage of the program as follows: 'A PhD dissertation or thesis in American Studies is a substantive book-length manuscript that involves interdisciplinary research, analysis, and represents an original contribution to knowledge'.⁶ Thus, we began a conversation among American Studies faculty about the possibility of changing the language

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- 5 Martyn Jessop, 'Digital Visualization as a Scholarly Activity', *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, 23 (2008), 281–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqn016>; A. V. Pandey et al., 'The Persuasive Power of Data Visualization', *Transactions on Visualization and Computer Graphic*, IEEE, 20 (2014), 2211–20, <https://doi.org/10.1109/tvcg.2014.2346419>; John Theibault, 'Visualizations and Historical arguments', in *Writing History in the Digital Age*, ed. by J. Dougherty and K. Nawrotz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), pp. 173–85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv65sx57.19>; Erik Malcolm Champion, 'DH is Text Heavy, Visualization Light, and Simulation Poor', *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, 32 (2017), i25–32 (at 25), <https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqw053>; Elijah Meeks, 'Is Digital Humanities too Text-Heavy?', *Digital Humanities Specialist*, *Stanford University Libraries* (July 26, 2013), <https://dhs.stanford.edu/spatial-humanities/is-digital-humanities-too-text-heavy>
- 6 American Studies at the University of Iowa, 'Guidelines for American Studies Graduate Students' (2017), p. 3, https://clas.uiowa.edu/american-studies/sites/clas.uiowa.edu.american-studies/files/handbook_revised_Fall17.pdf

in the handbook to facilitate digital projects. This petition for a more flexible definition of what could constitute a dissertation in the program led to a much larger conversation about the place of digital methods and digital scholarship in the graduate program, the appropriateness of alternate forms of scholarship for graduate students in the program, and larger ontological and epistemological questions about what constitutes a dissertation, writ large as well as within American Studies.

As we learned, graduate students, faculty advisors, department faculty and graduate college administrators face a number of challenges when trying to establish procedures or conventions for non-standard dissertation projects. The language that many academic organizations have produced, created or adopted around digital scholarship standards in relation to faculty promotion and tenure suggests there is some hope for articulating, with some degree of concreteness and clarity, the expectations for digital work. But, as Virginia Kuhn points out, the existence of those standards and guidelines often is of little material benefit to junior faculty in departments that are slow to fully adopt or implement those digital standards. Across disciplines, but particularly within the humanities, the dissertation is framed as a single-author scholarly project that represents a student's intellectual contributions, analysis and arguments. While the conversations about intellectual/academic labor and authorship clearly demonstrate that all scholarship is inherently collaborative, there is little precedent for a dissertation project that is conceived of and proposed as a collaborative project.⁷ At least within humanities disciplines, the philosophies and assumptions about academic labor undergirding the dissertation make it challenging to see a clear path toward adopting or adapting guidelines for collaboration that can be applied to faculty scholarly work. Similarly, the logistical and administrative challenges of having external readers or members on a dissertation committee make it difficult to advocate for external peer review as a feasible model for evaluating digital dissertation projects.

As our discussions about the handbook language progressed, the value of precedents became clear. Specifically, studying peer institutions who have supported alternative dissertations can help those proposing

7 Whearty, Bridget, 'Invisible in "The Archive": Librarians, Archivists, and The Caswell Test', *Medieval(ist) Librarians and Archivists: A Roundtable*, 53rd International Congress of Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, MI, May 10–13, 2018.

or advocating for new dissertation forms, since they have a fuller understanding of the administrative and institutional complexities and challenges these projects can raise, while they also point the way toward strategies for navigating such obstacles. The digital scholarship undertaken by faculty on our own campus as part of their research agenda also helped position a digital dissertation project as within the scope of legitimate scholarly activity happening on our campus.

The conversations happening in forums like HASTAC 2015's *Remix the Diss* panel, Amanda Visconti's personal blog⁸ and other spaces are a useful starting place for gathering resources and information to advocate for, propose revised handbook language for, and evaluate alternative types of dissertation projects. Similarly, the handbook language used in fields or programs that accept alternative theses and dissertations can also be a useful starting place for developing a handbook language revision proposal, while it can inform discussions between a student and advisor when establishing the tangible deliverable components of a digital project. For example, the language that George Mason University's History and Art History Department adopted in 2015 for digital projects was the inspiration for the proposed handbook language that was eventually adopted by the University of Iowa's American Studies Department. As more professional organizations and academic departments come to terms with the reality of an increasing number of alternative and digital dissertation projects, we hope institutions will follow George Mason's precedent of making those materials available online.⁹

These conversations raised interesting intellectual and pedagogical questions, but they took months to play out. On a practical level, graduate students and advisors need to consider issues of degree timeline and time to degree when proposing digital projects. As anyone with experience undertaking digital projects or learning new digital skills can attest, taking a digital or nontraditional approach to a scholarly project is not a shortcut to a lighter workload, a less grueling dissertation, or a faster completion timeline. If the experience of this

8 See <http://literaturegeek.com/tag/dissertation>

9 Department of History and Art at George Mason University, 'Digital Dissertation Guidelines', <https://historyarthistory.gmu.edu/graduate/phd-history/digital-dissertation-guidelines>

project is an instructive model, the process of navigating department and administrative conventions and procedures, while also negotiating within a committee about what exactly the digital project will look like, makes the dissertating process more laborious and time-intensive.

Collaboration, Project Management and Single-Authorship

We believe that a fully transparent collaborative dissertation model is likely the major transformation or discussion that will follow the debates around alternative dissertation projects. However, in the current framework for humanities graduate training that usually requires single-authored dissertations, one of the key challenges an alternate dissertation project presents for doctoral students, graduate advisors, committees and departments is how to best support or facilitate the collaboration needed to acquire sufficient skills to undertake and execute an alternate dissertation project.

For some alternative dissertations, students come to the project with a pre-existing set of technical, digital, or creative skills, as in the case of Nick Sousanis' *Unflattening* (2015) graphic novel or A. D. Carson's *Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics Of Rhymes & Revolutions* (2016) album. For students who come to the dissertation stage with the skills necessary to execute an alternative project, the process of proposing and gaining approval will likely involve demonstrating and leveraging those existing skills and illustrating how the dissertation forms made available via those skills constitute a valid or substantive scholarly contribution.

However, as graduate schools and some graduate programs become increasingly invested in and committed to increasing graduate students' digital competency and capacity to communicate or disseminate their scholarship in multiple forms, the skills necessary to accomplish those goals can strain the limits of existing graduate curricula. More practically, those hybrid curriculum initiatives are more likely to succeed in equipping graduate students with those skills when they include cluster hires for tenure-track digital scholars. Otherwise the impetus to train graduate students with digital and multimodal skills comes up against the limitation of faculty teaching graduate courses who do not engage in that type of work in their own research practice, and who

are often operating within a tenure and promotion structure that places greater weight on traditional forms of scholarship.

While widespread acceptance for collaborative dissertations has yet to be fully realized, graduate students, faculty, and institutions can identify and make available institutional resources that are able to provide students with opportunities to gain the additional skills necessary to execute or even imagine an alternative dissertation project. The digital dissertation highlighted in this article began in a Library and Information Science course that was a required component of a Public Digital Humanities Certificate program. From an introduction in digital humanities and digital pedagogy to more specialized technical training, the Certificate coursework at the University of Iowa is one initiative that formalizes institutional partnerships and affiliations to identify the faculty, departments, and courses that can support students interested in digital or alternative forms of scholarship, whether they be more interested in digital pedagogy or a full-scale alternative dissertation project.

In addition to collaboration as a means of skill acquisition, forming connections and relationships with other campus units that will be able to provide technical, infrastructure and preservation support is also a necessary step for the long-term stability of digital dissertation projects. While cloud or site-hosted programs like WordPress, Omeka and Scalar have lowered the barriers of entry for scholars interested in pursuing alternative forms of scholarship, the technical infrastructure needed to carry out a digital dissertation likely moves beyond the capacity of many site-hosted programs, and depending on the type and scale of the data may require database, computing, or server resources not typically available to graduate students. At the University of Iowa, the Digital Studio for Scholarship and Publishing has established itself as a digital humanities center on campus that can support graduate students with data management and preservation, while also providing resources like subscription programs and server space. Some institutions may house staff with these specializations within their university library, but connecting graduate students and departments with the expertise and resources necessary to successfully execute, maintain, and preserve dissertation-level digital projects can help allay concerns about long-term stability for and access to alternative projects. Such connections

can also help graduate students make informed decisions about what platforms or programs are best suited for their project, before investing significant amounts of time in a particular technology.

While connecting graduate students with specialized resources is a significant component of successful digital dissertation projects, collaboration across graduate program administrators is also necessary to navigate the unique and atypical dimensions of an alternative dissertation. In an ideal environment, graduate programs could be proactive in establishing procedures for depositing or archiving the various components of an alternative dissertation, like many graduate colleges have done for creative MFA or DMA theses. But starting conversations and opening lines of communication early with various administrative bodies that oversee thesis deposit can help clarify expectations and procedures early in the planning process for a digital dissertation, so student, advisor, and committee can all have consistent expectations around final deliverables.

One of the most important components of an alternative dissertation project is the selection of an advisor and committee to help guide it. On one hand, having faculty with subject area expertise who can guide the student in crafting, developing and articulating the central arguments for the dissertation is necessary and beneficial. However, depending on the institution and department, the faculty with subject area expertise may or may not be familiar with emerging forms of scholarship and the digital methods for analysis and argumentation. A committee comprised of faculty with subject area knowledge and digital scholarship expertise can be a useful way to approach the committee as a collaborative structure who are able to come together to effectively guide and shape the digital dissertation project. The dissertation highlighted in this chapter has co-directors, one with subject-area expertise and one who was a digital scholar in the School of Library and Information Science. Other faculty included individuals with subject area expertise as well as those actively involved in digital and multimodal scholarly communities.

For the student and advisor, one of the most significant challenges of an alternative dissertation project is the continual conversation, negotiation and clarification about how the project is unfolding. A significant thread in that relationship is the process of learning how to ask meaningful questions and provide meaningful progress about a type

of scholarship in-process that will likely be unfamiliar to the advisor, and for the student represents their first sustained attempt at a dissertation-scale alternative project. A willingness to clearly define in early stages the core, central, or driving research questions, and how the student will or intends to take up narrative argumentation and digital methods to address those questions, helps the project continue to move forward. Learning to operate on the parallel tracks of 'what the argument is' and 'how the argument is being delivered or communicated' is a starting point for establishing an effective student-advisor relationship for alternative projects. Whether digital or conventional, every dissertation should make a meaningful intervention in ongoing scholarly debates. It is our firm conviction that digital projects can do this, so long as the technologies work in the service of the arguments and not the other way around.

Conclusion

In spite of the many challenges a digital or alternative dissertation project presents, the process of navigating an alternative dissertation can be valuable for students, advisors, and graduate programs. Regardless of any personal reservations faculty may have about digital methods or the 'turn' to digital humanities, the reality remains that graduate students, professional organizations, institutions and employers are becoming increasingly interested and invested in the emerging forms of scholarship facilitated by digital technologies. A proactive approach to developing curricular partnerships, department guidelines, or faculty professional development to facilitate alternative dissertation projects will help current and future students interested in gaining digital skills or undertaking a large-scale alternative project. While many alternative dissertation projects have emerged without necessitating or requiring formal institution or department policy changes, graduate students and faculty will have an easier time navigating the landscape of alternative projects if guidelines and expectations are publicly available and clearly articulated, rather than negotiated in real-time as a graduate student is attempting to propose and craft an alternative dissertation.

For graduate students, a digital dissertation presents the opportunity to construct not only the content and argument of a dissertation,

but also to make a variety of choices about how that argument will be produced, represented and communicated. However, the skills necessary to undertake a dissertation-scale digital project are not frequently included in graduate curricula. Thinking concretely about how coursework and other opportunities can be used to become familiar with digital scholarship models and digital methods, while also gaining some level of technical facility, is a valuable step toward evaluating if a digital dissertation project is something worth undertaking. Starting small with a digital project in a graduate seminar or a digital humanities class can help establish confidence and experience with the tools and resources necessary to take on a digital dissertation. Possibly of greatest significance, graduate students interested in pursuing a digital dissertation need to think critically about their long-term research goals and agenda, as well as their personal and professional career aspirations and expectations. Networking and finding mentors within the community of digital scholars working in traditional faculty positions, as well as those working outside traditional faculty roles, is crucial. The continuum of what can constitute 'digital' within a dissertation is broad, and the conversations happening within this collection and across scholarly communities can help students, faculty and programs anticipate and articulate a response to these shifts.

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