

Digital Humanities for the Next Five Minutes

Alternatives are clearly needed, not
merely objections.
—Drucker

I am convinced that the answers don't
lie in what we have been, but in what
we could be.
—Rockwell

*T*here are numerous origin stories for the *digital humanities* as an institutional entity.¹ What they do not yet include is the advertisement for a faculty position in the English department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, written by Alan Liu and committee in 2000 and quite clearly specifying the desire for candidates whose work is recognizably literary, to some degree practice-based, and informed by cultural criticism. It read:

Assistant Professor, tenure track, digital humanities. We anticipate making one appointment effective July 1, 2001. We seek candidates who, while working in any literary field, have a major commitment to studying the historical and theoretical aspects of information technology and new media. Applicants should also be committed to some dimension of digital practice such as web authoring or multimedia. We anticipate that the person appointed would teach courses on such subjects as the culture and aesthetics of information, hypertext literature, past and present writing technologies, and the relationship between information society and gender, ethnicity, or global cultures (as well as courses on

topics related to the candidate's other literary interests). (UCSB Department of English)

At once descriptive and prescriptive, this advertisement for the position that eventually became mine gestured toward a nascent disciplinary field and articulated “digital humanities” in terms that we would do well to recuperate—not, it should be stressed, because this is a vision of what the field ought properly to be, but because this formulation tactically summons a diverse and dispersed body of media, technological, and informatic practices and associates them as distinct but overlapping components of a shared enterprise.

In the intervening years, however, the identity, role, and investments of the digital humanities, or “DH,” have been subjects of impassioned debate within both profession and field. Once out of the “wilderness that was humanities computing” (Rockwell) and given a new title, the digital humanities became available to competing claims for intellectual and institutional territory, and even now its semantic instability invites attempts to secure its meaning. A professional community not susceptible to factions and center/periphery dynamics is difficult to imagine, but the “anxiety of self-definition,” as Rafael Alvarado has written, clearly indicates “the emergence of a territorial instinct in an environment of scarce resources” (50). It is thus not incidental that within our sociotechnological milieu, “digital humanities” should have come to function, as Matthew Kirschenbaum has argued, as a “free-floating signifier, one that increasingly serves to focus the anxiety and even outrage of individual scholars over their own lack of agency amid the turmoil in their institutions and profession” (“What Is” 60). Particularly in a context of perpetual institutional crisis, uncertainty, and precarity, then, the argumentative stakes in the debate over “what is” are ineluctably economic, affective, and psychic. Its locus is twofold: who are *we*? and who are *they*?

The exercise of defining the digital humanities *for* the digital humanities—who are *we*?—has become almost absurdly self-referential. Even as the digital humanities are formally declared to be a “transdiscipline” by THATCAMP attendees, “embodying all the methods, systems and heuristic perspectives linked to the digital within the fields of humanities and the social sciences,” debates over who or what deserves the name seem unrelenting (Dacos). Consider here the sheer number of manifestos, vision statements, FAQs, short guides, and outlines of operational principles that are, by turns, reiterative and fundamentally contradictory. We must necessarily

code, build, make; we must have some institutional recognition of our status (although the number of start-up DH centers desperately seeking staff means even this is no membership guarantee); we must fight the good fight against tradition and the status quo; we have always already been digital so DH itself is redundant (Hall); and so on. But answering the question “what is DH” need not necessitate the wholesale adoption of a particular worldview or the pronouncement of an ontological truth. Rather, the deployment of the “digital humanities” as a rubric can be, as Kirschenbaum suggests, wholly practical and instrumental: it is one that can be recognized within different institutions, discourses, and disciplines, and it is an idea around which communities can form through the identification of shared investments.² As he notes in a follow-up essay, this usage is fundamentally tactical: “[D]igital humanities is a term possessed of enough currency and escape velocity to penetrate layers of administrative strata to get funds allocated, initiatives under way, and plans set in motion” (“Digital” 417). Indeed, a “tactical” usage acknowledges one’s position within an institutional structure that orders and conditions but can nevertheless be negotiated to advantage.

For all of the bandwidth devoted to the problem of self-definition, it is the question “who are *they*” that brings the players off the sidelines and the crowd out of the bleachers. The battles are semantic and substantive, practical and ideological, individual and tribal, and wholly academic. Gauntlets in the form of sweeping assessments are thrown: quantitative analysis is unthinking and its investments in “precise measurement” hopelessly naive; the epistemological certainty that data visualization seems to offer is equally fantastic; DH itself is a capitulation to market logics of assessment and outcomes and the organizational forms of corporate culture; DH desacralizes the traditional humanities and legitimates the increasingly vocal proclamations of its inutility and irrelevance within a twenty-first-century economy—and several permutations of the same.³ New fields, particularly those that challenge extant paradigms and introduce “alien change,” will inevitably meet with resistance both thoughtful and intransigent (Liu, “Digital” 31). This is expected and even welcome to the extent that opposition tends to clarify one’s arguments. Even so, the frequent response to the “vectors—i.e., carriers, viruses, bugs” that are carrying “alien disciplinary genes” (e.g., quantitative analysis) is prophylaxis, inoculation, and even outright eradication (17). Seal off the disciplinary gates, isolate and expunge that which is foreign, and communicate the methodological principles that will prevent future outbreak. But too often, the counter response to the alarmist attempts at containment is equally dismissive generalization, as in the notion

that those who do not participate in or who even express skepticism about the digital humanities are “uni-medium scholars (most likely of print) who have been lulled into centuries of somnolence” (UCLA).⁴

It seems necessary to rehearse what otherwise might be disregarded as counterproductive and even uninteresting personal squabbles because the very occasion for this special issue was a public forum that in hindsight might seem a watershed. The “Dark Side of the Digital Humanities” roundtable organized by Richard Grusin at the MLA convention in 2013 had been preceded by debates and *Debates*, by a collection of sharp and at times sharply critical essays in *Cultural Machine*, by the active #TransformDH movement, and by vibrant exchanges at THATcamp events in the United States and Europe. Its direct predecessors were the MLA convention in 2011, when the place of coding and cultural criticism in the digital humanities was energetically examined, and the 2012 convention, marked, as Grusin reports, by “incommensurate affective moods” between the celebration of the digital and the worry over the crisis of the humanities and the university itself.⁵ And it is difficult to overestimate the disproportionate “network effects” (Kirschenbaum, “What Is” 60) of William Pannapacker’s now notorious pronouncement in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* at the close of the 2009 convention: “The digital humanities seem like the first ‘next big thing’ in a long time.” In a moment of economic surplus, such a pronouncement would rightly have been disregarded as “click bait”—a sensational statement designed to increase web traffic—but from a professional community in stiff competition for ever diminishing resources, it elicited responses ranging from caustic resentment to the zealous enthusiasm of financial bubbles.

For the “dark side” roundtable, my fellow participants and I were asked to produce short statements designed to stimulate wide-ranging discussion of the unsaid, understated, or undertheorized economic and political issues that are associated with, attend upon, or otherwise follow from the digital humanities as an institutional entity, administrative idea, and discursive formulation. The objective of the roundtable, and the ensuing journal issue, is not uniformly to fix what is after all a diverse set of techniques and activities within a singular homogenous frame so as to seek out the hidden ideological core buried deep within it: not, then, to bring to light “the” dark side of “the” digital humanities. In our respective prefatory statements we noted that we had been asked to provoke, but stimulate is closer to the thinking behind the event. The title of the roundtable was itself a provocation, however, and one imagines that even the addition of a question mark in the program copy might have produced a different affective

response from the audience, which as it was might be fairly characterized as widespread indignation. That the indignation was reinforced with every blog post, comment, and retweet can only confirm Kirschenbaum's thesis about the "network topology" of the digital humanities community as it is constituted through social media, with "lines drawn by aggregates of affinities, formally and functionally manifest in who follows whom, who friends whom, who tweets whom, and who links to what" ("What Is" 59). The upset seemed in part to derive from a misunderstanding about the critical object at hand: though our roundtable referred in passing to actually existing projects, collectives, and games that we took to be affirmative and inspiring, the "digital humanities" under analysis was a discursive construction and clearly noted as such throughout. That audience members should have professed in response not to recognize themselves in our presentations is thus to my mind all to the good, even if it somewhat misses the mark.

The digital humanities as the "next big thing" makes a claim to the virtual in the sense of an ideal that has yet to be realized. That is, the field "seems to be alive and well"—it has already arrived—but it might in the future be even bigger (Pannapacker). But what if we were instead to consider the digital humanities as virtual in terms of potentialities—not what it is, but what it might have been if things had been otherwise, if there had been different conferences, different grant lines and funding streams, different jobs, even different personalities? In other words, the digital humanities might make a claim to the virtual with respect to the circumstances, conditions, and contexts that might have produced, and might still produce, different research questions. The relations between the digital humanities and new media studies could have been otherwise, and their potential to be such has not yet been exhausted. So, too, the relations between the digital humanities and, variously, science and technology studies, race and ethnic studies, feminist studies, disability studies, and communication (Liu, "Meaning"; Lothian and Phillips; McPherson; Williams). Let us then seize the opportunity to consider collectively, as Geoffrey Rockwell suggests, "what we could be." This is by no means to suggest that we must discover and embrace a singular idealized and teleological rationale for the field; it is rather to note that its still amorphous aspects, along with the intellectual energies that lie behind it, have a generative potential that we would do well not to foreclose in the rush to institutionalize.

The correlation between the rise of the digital humanities as the "next big thing" and the worst job market in MLA history has been frequently noted (Jaschik). John Unsworth discerns a hint of causation in what we ought

not to misrecognize as coincidence, speculating that the relative availability of digital humanities positions might be attributable to the readymade argument that could be presented for hiring lines: the methodological “next best thing” is likely to result in external funding, and institutions would do well to get ahead of the crowd, particularly in the current organizational climate of continuing assessment. The entrepreneurial jockeying for soft money, physical space, and FTES (full-time equivalents)—the “gold rush”—is not unlike the start-up frenzy of the 1990s, and there is more than a hint of speculative mania within the exuberant investment in centers and initiatives (Fiormonte 61). In a variation on the untitled Barbara Kruger print about the commodification of culture, when the innovative administrator hears the words “digital humanities,” he takes out his checkbook. The follow-up line: you can have any faculty or “alt-ac” position you like, as long as it is framed as digital.⁶ But keeping the checkbook reasonably balanced necessitates a reshuffling of resources and even divestment as manifest in the clustering or outright closure of departments and the elimination of faculty lines. As Unsworth succinctly concludes, the uneasy relationship between the digital and traditional humanities is thus at core “about jobs.” Grusin goes further in his identification of a causal relation between the arrival of the digital humanities at center stage and the macroeconomic conditions that have made it possible: “I would assert that it is no coincidence that the digital humanities has emerged as ‘the next big thing’ at the same moment that the neoliberalization and corporatization of higher education has intensified in the first decades of the 21st century.”

In a report on the state of the digital humanities, Liu sketches an account of a “purely economic rationale” for the field, which “might thus be that they re-engineer higher education for knowledge work by providing ever smarter tools for working with increasingly global-scale knowledge resources, all the while trimming the need to invest proportionally in the traditional facilities, support staff, and perhaps permanent faculty of what Bill Gates—in widely reported comments at the 2010 Technonomy conference—calls obsolete ‘place-based’ campuses” (10). The state of the digital humanities, in other words, is that it serves both the postindustrial state and the University of Excellence, which itself operates in accordance with postindustrial business principles of accounting and administration (Readings). The idea of the digital humanities might therefore appeal to administrators—who distribute faculty lines, funds for postdoctoral fellows and technical staff, and equipment—even in a moment of scarcity in part because external grants determine institutional rankings. As well, certificate programs

make traditional disciplines more marketable to potential students who seek added value for their escalating tuition payments. In this regard, the digital humanities as an administrative idea is a “rebranding” of the traditional humanities for the very institutions from which support is sought (Liu, “State” 9).

In our current mercantile knowledge regime, with its rational calculus of academic value—seats occupied, publications counted, funds procured, degrees obtained—the digital humanities are particularly well positioned to answer administrative and public demands to make knowledge useful: after all, research based on quantification is itself readily available to quantification. Cynically, in an institutional context in which a corporate administrative class is already mystified by humanities research that it cannot assess in terms of the amorphous metrics of “excellence” and “innovation,” one might say that the digital humanities is also particularly well positioned to exploit the expectation that we should be affectively awed by instrumentation (“oh my god, this lab, this application, is so cool”). But we might also ask if there is a sense in which our institutions have been caught flat-footed by the forces of disruptive innovation and by the disaggregation of higher education: university education conceived as piecemeal is apportioned to tutors and lecturers; tutoring centers develop on the model of the call center; online study groups develop and gradually morph into online learning projects such as Peer 2 Peer University (P2PU). Can we therefore understand the exuberance that surrounds the digital humanities to be less of an attempt to shape a future than a salvific attempt to develop a sustainable organizational model for our profession that would include evaluative criteria and pedagogical practices particular to our current sociotechnological milieu? Are we still playing catch-up, and is the enthusiastic, transmedial promotion of the digital humanities a cover for our belatedness?⁷

In the “new world of brain-currency” shaped by engineers and economists, as Richard Hoggart once described it (229), it is no longer ordinary schoolmasters peddling language as symbolic capital, but the digital humanists that serve as cashiers, academic service staff providing skills-based training—visual literacies, communicative competence, technological proficiency, data management—and reinstating in the process the very categorical distinctions between theory and practice that DIY (do-it-yourself) and maker culture have long sought to challenge. Perhaps, then, the structural division of labor that Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter identify as an inevitable aspect of the start-up culture of the digital humanities, with IT (information technology) staff often providing technical expertise and

performing service work for “clueless arts and humanities scholars,” can tell us something about both the field and the university (70). In an institutional context in which “expert dependent high-end tools” are the exclusive province of computer engineers, collaborative knowledge production is an idea rather than actual practice (70). It is not that humanists do not want to read manuals, but that their particular aptitude for symbolicity is not useful as it once was because the dominant languages of the university (transactional, operational) are now those of computing. Lovink and Rossiter’s offhand remark concerning “servitude to the IT staff and their authoritarian imaginations” might then be more significant than it otherwise seems (71). If the paradigmatic practitioners of the Idea of the Multiversity were administrators, as Clark Kerr suggested (so, too, for the University of Excellence), managerial support staff from the Office of Research to the Office of Instructional Technology fulfill that role for the contemporary university. New instrumentalities (accounting systems, clinical trials, ethical protocols, IT regimes) require new professionals (advocates, evaluators, principle investigators, ethicists). “Faculty are no longer the only important group of professionals within universities”—and that importance, that bottom-line value, as we have seen from institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom alike, is easily rendered as calculable (Slaughter and Rhoades 28).

As Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades document, universities and the new economy are increasingly indissociable. Nostalgic yearnings for the golden age of knowledge for the public goodwill thus remain fantasy: universities cannot be disentangled from the capitalist knowledge regime because that regime is itself fundamentally academic. Their theory of academic capitalism “focuses on networks—new circuits of knowledge, interstitial organizational emergence, networks that intermedialize between public and private sector, extended managerial capacity—that link institutions as well as faculty, administrators, academic professionals and students to the new economy” (15). Knowledge production has been administratively captured, as is evinced by patent deals, copyright disputes, measurable impact, pay-to-publish schemes, and corporate sponsorship of facilities and research processes alike.⁸ Within the academic-capitalist regime, knowledge is fungible, alienable, and, of course, copyrightable. Here, too, we might think of Philip Mirowski’s incisive analysis of the neoliberal corruption of scientific knowledge, an economy for which American universities are now merely the cash cows.

There are various labels for the contemporary university, among them the corpiversity, the global university, and the global networked

university. But none of these descriptors quite speak to its driving force and governing idea: accumulation and acquisition. All of the vision statements, entrepreneurial activity, and strategic development plans oriented toward innovation and the disruption of business as usual arguably boil down to this basic objective. The University of Acquisition seeks global campuses, property, and new buildings, along with more exclusive architectural designs, artworks, endowment funds, stock portfolios, donors, patents, industry partnerships, state-of-the-art laboratories, new logo designs, athletic titles, higher rankings, star faculty whose perceived value exceeds formulaic calculation, and, more recently, celebrity presidents who will enhance the prestige of the name. Instead of the “Wisconsin Idea” of extension, bringing the university to the public, it is a campus on Saadiyat Island that expands a real estate portfolio. If the multiversity was additive through fractionalization, with its “separate endeavors” of an “infinite variety,” the contemporary university functions, rather, as aggregator, pulling all manner of services and enterprises within its proverbial walls (Kerr 51). Like that which has come before, it has a massive bureaucratic structure, but governance no longer occurs through checks and balances, mediation, and committee consensus. The autocratic presidential figure was superseded by bureaucracy, which has in turn been superseded by politically appointed trustees whose primary concern is to reduce operational expenses and grow the brand. The University of Acquisition is a status machine, qualitatively different from the dawn of the “PhD Octopus,” when the currency of the realm was the degree titles shining “like the stars in the firmament” (James 132). It claims as property research outcomes (books, cell lines, software) and services (distance education, tech training) alike. The historical function of the humanities, as Thorstein Veblen incisively claimed, was to “shape the character of the student in accordance with a traditional self-centred scheme of consumption” (390). When consumption, status, and acquisition are the governing ideas of the university, however, the humanities must necessarily rebrand their mission.

My suggestion, not mine alone, is that we need more critical reflection upon, and ironic self-awareness about, the embedded place of digital humanities in the contemporary knowledge economy. Liu has posed the now legendary but not as yet fully answered question, asking how the field of the digital humanities “advances, channels, or resists today’s great postindustrial, neoliberal, corporate, and global flows of information-cum-capital” (“Where Is” 491). The digital humanities has indeed had very little to say about protocols of finance and governance, but it has equally pressing

tasks. Perhaps more than other academic professional communities, digital humanists need continually to work to perceive and negotiate the institutional imaginary of informational technology so as not to fall into the trap of unconsciously adopting its optics. This institutional imaginary informs the conditions of our labor. It shapes intellectual rhythms according to administrative calendars and asks that we adopt the habit of innovating for the next grant cycle. It mandates that knowledge become encoded into specific repeatable forms—the graph, the map, the timeline, the scatter plot—in other words, grammatized, which for Bernard Stiegler means that it has been rendered “industrially discretisable, reproducible, standardisable, calculable and controllable by automata” (13). In the context of the medial environment of the university, computational techniques also facilitate the grammatization of the disciplines, their “modularization and recombination” in lockstep with discrete binary digits (Berry, “Computational” 13). We ought, in my view, to be marshalling the full critical, philosophical, and rhetorical resources at our disposal in order to think about the very universities in which we are embedded, their organizational structures, instrumentalities, and governing ideas. We might even need a small dose of the self-reflexivity about situatedness that was inherent in cultural studies in its prime, a self-reflexivity announced in the critic’s account of herself both as a subject and in relation to her object. This need not involve the self-laceration of academic apology, but simply a willingness to investigate with some measured skepticism the institutional frameworks in which one operates. Burdick et al. have made the case that we need more fully to engage “the structured spaces and processes” of our computational environments, “the graphical interfaces, the data types, the database relations” (135). I would go further to suggest that this engagement ought to extend to the very procedures that govern our everyday use of university Gmail accounts and indeed the whole of Google Education. A fully realized “critical digital humanities,” to borrow David Berry’s formulation, would thus direct its attention to all of the protocols that structure our communicative acts, from RFC (Request for Comments) standards and interface design to Unicode and the ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) character set, the assignment of domain names and IP (Internet Protocol) addresses, privacy policies, and terms of service.⁹

Computational techniques and methods affect the imagination just as they shape organizational structures. As Johanna Drucker has argued, we need to learn to negotiate the imperative to conform humanistic thought to the “logical systematicity” of computational processes (431).

With some regret, Drucker contends that “from a distance, even a middle distance of practical engagement, much of what is currently done in digital humanities has the look of automation” (432). Claims that digital humanities projects are “not simply mechanistic applications of technical knowledge, but occasions for critical self-consciousness” must, she insists, be substantiated (432). For Drucker, the work of “speculative computing” is, in part, to think otherwise, to facilitate dynamic inquiry rather than “procedural and mechanistic” processing (431). Herein, then, lies the possibility of a true rapprochement between the digital humanities and new media studies: speculative play (building, tinkering, experimenting) coupled with critical reflection and critique—neither wholly or exclusively romanticized, and neither regarded as subordinate, but each attending upon and informing the other.

If at the time of Kirschenbaum’s meditation on the digital humanities as a term the definitional statement was already a genre piece, a few years later, the critiques and calls to transform are much the same, and they firmly occupy the conversational center. It is not for nothing that “critiquing the digital humanities” in Matthew Gold’s formative *Debates* volume should be the pivot point between definition and theory, on the one hand, and teaching and practice, on the other. (The cultural politics of the digital humanities—its lacunae, protocols, and technocratic function—are primary research problems for many who work in the Transcriptions Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara. For example, our graduate students have been remarkably active in the #TransformDH initiative that explores the intersections of the digital humanities with race, gender, and sexuality [Lothian and Phillips].) Alongside calls for politics are visions of what Jaime Bianco names “an ethical turn” (97), with the Berne DH Summer School Declaration on Research Ethics in the digital humanities asking practitioners and administrators to reflect on the “environmental and social consequences” of technology together with “global inequalities in access to scholarly information and digital literacies” and to adopt a “duty of care towards precariously employed staff.”

The importance of these directives is, one hopes, indisputable, but they presume a given institutional entity that is tasked with certain political and ethical responsibilities. What if we were instead to extend Kirschenbaum’s account of the digital humanities as a *tactical term* and take a “tactical media” approach to the field? How might we think about the significance of asymmetric interventions manifested in hacktivism, networked art, and performance in relation to institutional and infrastructural

investment, the spatiotemporal horizon of which is markedly different from more immediate tactical events with an operational field circumscribed as the “next five minutes”?¹⁰ How might Critical Art Ensemble’s delineation of tactics as “immediate,” “ad hoc,” and grounded in community and concrete circumstance inform a digital humanist’s thinking about practice and method? The field is admittedly somewhat cluttered with manifestos and FAQs, but it seems appropriate to suggest that a truly tactical approach to the digital humanities would necessitate the following:

- 1) a structural shift away from the question of what is or is not properly DH and an openness to all manner of tactics, tools, and techniques, an openness to a “plurality of approaches” and a “constellation of concepts”;¹¹ a corresponding abandonment of attempts to fix the digital humanities as a monolithic entity with an ontological core (good, bad, dark);
- 2) the seeking of alliances regardless of differences that may be methodological and theoretical, aesthetic and political; a regarding of DH as a means of “creating ‘temporary consensus zones’” (Lovink 271; see also Shapiro);
- 3) exploitation of the inevitable “social-technical ephemerality” of a field aligned with technological development, whose archives, centers, and labs are a veritable graveyard of discarded tools and projects (Lovink and Rossiter 70);¹² caution against bureaucratic stasis and fantasies of institutional permanence; consideration of what is made possible when the emphasis shifts from annual results and infrastructural development to the here and now;
- 4) wariness of top-down administrative agendas and directives that would harness creative energies for publicity and profit; recognition of the constraints that grant cycles impose on thought and practice and a more ironic and knowing negotiation of institutional demands for impact, outcomes, results;
- 5) cognizance and even acceptance of one’s parasitic relationship to the institution as host; continuous adaptation to circumstance and environment that endeavors instead to approximate symbiosis.

A tactical media-informed approach to the digital humanities would begin from the problem of definition and codification. It is difficult to imagine a DH curriculum, much less a course, that would satisfactorily train students in different modes of text analysis and preservation, visualization

techniques, and GIS (geographic information systems) applications, along with media arts and literature and a philosophical approach to informatics. So, too, the diversity of artists and interventions that might plausibly be tagged as “tactical”—from the Barbie Liberation Organization to the development of mobile labs and alternative networks such as Wifi Bedouin—makes for a rather unwieldy taxonomy. In each instance, the variety of work that could be so classified stretches the descriptive category to a kind of limit. But it is precisely this abstraction that makes it possible to articulate temporary, nonessential commonalities among disparate practices.

From the *Anarchist Cookbook* to *The Culture Jammer's Encyclopedia* to the more recent *Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution*, there are a number of guidebooks for direct action: how to reverse engineer, how to sabotage, how to organize a clown protest, all “recipes for disaster” outlining tactics for synergizing artistic practice and political action.¹⁵ Manuals prescribe—they illustrate “how to”—but they are also a means by which to document experiences, share information, and build a knowledge base. Tactical activities are increasingly framed in terms of community and infrastructural investment, and the result has been a proliferation of community labs and gardens and alternative systems of exchange. To take a tactical, media-informed approach to the digital humanities is thus to renew one's commitments to the sharing of knowledge—not simply references and links but, more important, ideas. The DHCommons and HASTAC Scholars program are exemplary instances. Equally necessary are DH labs that function as maker communities in their local contexts. The Scanner Praxis project in our Transcriptions Center evinces this DIY sensibility. Led by my colleague Jeremy Douglass, a team recently built a low-cost book scanner from parts using open hardware and software. Designed as a resource for the department as a whole, it makes digitization processes visible and invites dialogue about the medial and conceptual relations between the DIY scanner and the multipurpose copy machine in our administrative office. As has been frequently noted, academic disciplines tend toward “silo construction” at the expense of truly transdisciplinary collaboration (Lovink and Rossiter 64). The digital humanities is in a position to present a challenge to these isolating structures if it can resist the lure of patents, trademarks, and brand identities, that is, if it prioritizes sharing over ownership.

The lesson one would like to think that the University of California Office of the President had to learn with its attempt to modernize its logo is that interfaces and corporations alike have short life spans. Indeed, the whole of the “institutional and social landscape of work” is arguably

marked by a kind of “short-termism”: temporary work, freelance production, adjunct teaching, “portfolio careers and project-driven jobs” (Lovink and Rossiter 72). Digital humanities centers are no exception, particularly those that need continually to secure grant funding for staff salaries. And the technological environment is of course itself structured in relation to the interval: versions, updates, and the half-lives of hard drives, optical media, platforms, applications, and devices. To exploit “social-technical ephemerality” is not, however, necessarily to recapitulate the postindustrial logic of short-termism. It is, rather, to seize the opportunity to experiment in and for the present, without the expectation that one’s activities necessarily eventuate in a consumable or citable product. Ephemerality in the form of absent or weak infrastructure can be an asset rather than a liability.

A key touchstone here is Kavita Philip, Lilly Irani, and Paul Dourish’s articulation of “postcolonial computing” as a tactical approach to technoscience:

Tactics lead not to the true or final design solution but to the contingent and collaborative construction of other narratives. These other narratives remain partial and approximate, but they are irrevocably opened up to problematization. Such instability might earlier have been viewed as a problem (stability implying lack of truth, contingency showing lack of universality), but perhaps we can recognize, now, how instability can be a strength, not a weakness, of technoscientific practice and theory. (27)

The authors’ embrace of uncertainty is an ethical and political refusal of epistemic closure. Tactics are designed to produce open-ended questions rather than definitive answers, to lead to new discovery rather than diagnostic evaluation, such that the researcher remains continually aware of the mechanics of knowledge production and attuned to the possibilities of alternate techniques, frames, and paradigms.

A tactical approach to the digital humanities would mean experimenting rather than delivering, building prototypes to test a concept without the determination to actualize, regardless of circumstance or discovery. Following Drucker and uncertain commons, it would mean speculating rather than prescribing or programming outcomes, affirming rather than foreclosing latent potentialities. Anticipating market testing and performance assessment constrains the imagination to “what will work” instead of “what can be.” Regarding all building as inherently in a “middle state” between execution and completion means, rather, that the temporal scope

of projects is not technologically defined and that emphasis falls on process rather than outcome.¹⁴ A tactical approach would, moreover, not seek to manage creative activity in accordance with best practices or Frederick Taylor's "one best way."

The digital humanities should not, and cannot, bear the burden of transforming technocracy, the academic-corporate situation in which we are all mired. But within that situation, it has the capacity to tinker with the symbolic order of computing, such that it is not ultimately constrained by an agenda of efficiency, rationality, and optimization. The Institute for Applied Autonomy, a tactical R&D organization, is a case in point. With "contestational robotics" projects that appropriate defense-industry rhetoric about the utility of UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles), they position themselves as "Trojan horses" who have been able to "infiltrate" engineering culture and reflect critically upon it through playful interventions (99). Just as IAA members perform as engineers in order to undermine the banal compromise of bureaucratic pragmatism, one might imagine how the experimental and playful activities of digital humanists could thwart expectations of efficient activity, of "getting things done," and challenge the technocratic calculus of output (Bell 354).

Semantic battles about the institutional identity of the digital humanities are a symptom of a discipline that is perhaps overly fixated upon making a permanent space for itself within institutions. It perhaps goes without saying that infrastructure and a physical institutional presence facilitate fundraising and raise the profile of traditional departments and academic divisions. But projects and programs should not be built to specifications as actualizations of vision statements that foreclose the possibility of improvisation. Digital humanities initiatives would do well to remain adaptable to new situations and collaborations and not use established real estate as the pretext for maintaining the status quo. Sometimes the mobile community library is preferable to the architectural monument. Ad hoc formations are especially ideal for institutions new to the game because they are situational and often insure a more organic connection with existing research and pedagogic practices.

As a descriptor, "digital humanities" need not circumscribe or mandate. It can, in the more ordinary sense of *tactical*, facilitate the recognition of continuing lines of effort in both creative production and critical analysis. Bureaucratization has not fully captured DH and crystallized its institutional identity. With a more expansive and flexible sense of the field, we might continue to speculate collaboratively upon a less

instrumental future for the humanities as a whole, one that brings into play the affordances of digital media but does so with a measured skepticism that might serve as a buffer against the irrational exuberance that too often characterizes the administrative framing of our projects, initiatives, and entrepreneurial efforts.

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Notes

- 1 Some of the more widely circulated accounts of the history of the digital humanities as a field in relation to humanities computing and new media studies include Berry, “Computational”; Hayles; Kirschenbaum, “What Is”; Liu, “State”; Schreibman, Siemens, and Unsworth; Svensson; and Unsworth.
- 2 In his thoughtful lecture to the Digital Humanities Summer Institute in 2010, Unsworth politely dismissed the imperative to define who is and who is not “doing DH” properly and suggested that the field needs to remain open to a new generation of scholars who have come of age with Wikipedia and Google Books and are thinking about the creative use of digital tools without necessarily being mindful of the history of humanities computing or of disciplinary battles.
- 3 Variations on these themes are ubiquitous, but the most reductive statements are, as one might expect, often encountered in blog comments and 140-character tweets. The argument for the scientific inquiry and quantitative investigation (“precise measurement”) of cultural trends appears in one of the inaugural statements on culturomics (Michel et al. 176).
- 4 In contrast, the annual “A Day in the Life of the Digital Humanities” is a serious attempt at educational outreach (centerNet). In their voluntary documentation of schedules, activities, and even bodily rhythms, participating digital humanists endeavor to translate the work of the field to a lay audience.
- 5 Many of the essays in *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (Gold) emerge from or otherwise respond to the conversations during and after the 2011 convention, particularly those occasioned by papers from Ramsay and Liu (“Where Is”).
- 6 On the genesis of the alt-ac movement, see Nowviskie.
- 7 Heroic individual efforts aside, it is, I trust, not controversial to suggest that the MLA as an organization was slow to make structural adjustments that would reflect the profound transformations in our medial environments and practices and that, from one angle, it is possible to read the overenthusiastic embrace of social networking platforms, particularly Twitter, as somewhat compensatory.
- 8 Anyone who has written an external grant application and thought about ways to increase cost-share

- for overhead will have a too intimate knowledge of the terms of measurable impact. At my own institution, “cost-share” is now known as “project contributions,” which makes the indebtedness that accompanies the gift more apparent.
- 9 For calls for a humanistic understanding of technology, see Berry, *Understanding*; Frabetti. Also see Fiormonte on the “cultural, political, linguistic bias of digital standards, protocols, and interfaces” (59).
 - 10 Beginning in 1993, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs funded four 5M events as part of a program to stimulate international cultural cooperation. The festivals did not lead to a conventional institutional infrastructure with structural funding and standard practices, but there are even now a significant number of tactical media collectives, labs, and centers around the world (Next 5 Minutes). The definitive resource is *Tactical Media Files*, a “living archive” that connects past and present.
 - 11 Berry, “Critical”; CAE refers to “tactical media” with some regret as the “alt.everything” of culture and politics (“Framing” 7). The tendency toward the definitive and singular version and the stabilizing of ad hoc practices as “best practices” are the inevitable consequences of a discursive frame; here, the parallels with DH as an institutional entity should be evident.
 - 12 Liu reminds us that “the evolutionary path of the digital mutation, as it were, is littered with the dead bodies of hung servers, hacked sites, and aborted classes” (“Digital” 18).
 - 13 As another example, consider the activities and publications of the CrimethInc. Collective, esp. *Recipes for Disaster: An Anarchist Cookbook*. Related are open-source software platforms for the sharing of resources such as *DIY for Vagabonds: Tactics on the Move*.
 - 14 For varied documentation of “middle-state” artifacts, see the MediaCommons cluster “Rough Cuts,” edited by Kari Kraus.

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