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Review of "Digital_Humanities"

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Abstract

John J. Taormina provides a review of *Digital_Humanities*

Keywords

Digital Humanities

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

John Taormina is Director of the Visual Media Center in the Department of Art, Art History & Visual Studies at Duke University, where is he also a member of the Wired! Lab for Digital Art History & Visual Culture. Additionally, he coordinates all departmental online and print publications and exhibitions. He is currently developing book project on the history of art museums in Ohio.

Anne Burdick, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp.
Digital_Humanities, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012.

Reviewed by John J. Taormina, Duke University



Digital_Humanities is one of a number of books on digital humanities that has been released in the last few years. The book is described as “a compact, game-changing report on the state of contemporary knowledge production. Answering the question ‘What *is* digital humanities,’ it provides an in-depth examination of an emerging field. This collaboratively authored and visually compelling volume explores methodologies and techniques new to traditional modes of humanistic inquiry—including geospatial analysis, data mining, corpus linguistics, visualization, and simulation—to show their relevance for contemporary culture.”

One of the strengths of this publication is the multidisciplinary background of its authors: media design (Burdick); library and information studies and book arts (Drucker); design media arts (Lunenfeld); Germanic languages and comparative literature (Presner); and romance literatures (Schnapp). Presner also chairs the Program in Digital Humanities at UCLA, while Schnapp is director of metaLAB (at) Harvard and co-director of their Berkman Center for Internet and Society. Except in a book of collected DH essays, it is not often we see such a variety of disciplines represented, and even more so with an emphasis on the visual. (“The visual does not necessarily represent an advance over the capabilities of text. It is simply a different, distinct medium for thinking, communicating, and working, with its own rigors and histories, its own skill-sets and language, and its own freedoms and constraints”).

It must be presumed that the layout of *Digital_Humanities* also reflects the visual background of many of its authors, as well as a concerted effort to use the layout to challenge standard linear book narrative and emphasize the included fictional case studies. In fact, the authors maintain “design” as a significant element of digital humanities throughout the book.

Complementing the visual qualities of the book is a powerful precision to the writing. Every sentence is strongly edited yet full of meaning, pared down to essential words and word order to explain, question, reference, and define.

In the Preface the authors put forth their view of what digital humanities means and take a stance “in support of a Digital Humanities that asks what it means to be a human being in the networked information age and to participate in fluid communities of practice, asking and answering research questions that cannot be reduced to a single genre, medium, discipline, or institution.” This expansive view pervades the book: “Digital Humanities represents a major expansion of the purview of the humanities, precisely because it brings the values, representational and interpretive practices, meaning-making strategies, complexities, and ambiguities of being human into every realm of experience and knowledge of the work. It is a global, trans-historical, and transmedia approach to knowledge and meaning-making.” Anyone familiar with the Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0 (launched 2009; primary authors: Lunenfeld, Pressner, and Schnapp) will see much of that document behind *Digital_Humanities*.

Digital_Humanities is divided into four chapters: Humanities to Digital Humanities, Emerging Methods and Genres, The Social Life of Digital Humanities, and Provocations. At the end of chapter 2 is a Portfolio of Case Studies. Mirroring that in Chapter 4 is A Short Guide to Digital_Humanities, which addresses the nuts-and-bolts of digital humanities activity. The four chapters are all prefaced by a lead sentence emphasized by page design and enlarged typeface sandwiched between black pages and diminishing text size. The sentences serve to set the stage beyond the chapter title and hint at things to come:

1. “Digital humanities is born of the encounter between traditional humanities and computational methods.”
2. “Humanities knowledge used to have a recognizable form.”
3. “Digital humanities engages a world of linked and lived experiences.”
4. “The era of digital humanities has just begun, but it may be coming to an end.”

Each chapter repeats the other in design and narrative and this process not only establishes a measured pace to absorb content, but also mimics similar iterative processes in digital projects. Clever that.

Quite contrary to what is often thought to be the dismissal of traditional humanistic activity in digital humanities, the authors emphasize just the opposite: “It envisages the present era as one of exceptional promise for the renewal of humanistic scholarship and sets out to demonstrate the contributions of contemporary humanities scholarship to new modes of knowledge formation enabled by networked, digital environments.”

Digital_Humanities provides a concise, well-written, and often provocative introduction to a quickly developing discipline affecting, challenging, interrogating, and inevitably impacting all the humanities.