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On Building

Stephen Ramsay

7-9 minutes

i've said a few controversial things over the course of my career, and it seems to me that if you are so honored as to have other people talking about what you said, you should probably sit back and let people respond without trying to defend yourself against every countercharge.

But I'm worried that [my late remarks at mla 11](#) are touching a nerve in a way that is not provocative (in the good sense), but blithely exclusionary. The particular remarks are as follows:

“Do you have to know how to code? I'm a tenured professor of Digital Humanities and I say 'yes.'”

“Personally, I think Digital Humanities is about building things. [. . .] If you are not making anything, you are not...a digital humanist.”

I suppose I could say that both of those quotes are taken out of context, but given that all quotes are by nature taken out of context, it doesn't seem exactly fair to protest. But just stating things like this (as I soon discovered) really does touch upon a number of anxieties both in [dh](#) and among those who bid participation. I don't know if I can alleviate that anxiety. I'm not even sure that I want to, insofar as some anxieties can be oddly productive. But there's a lot more to be said here.

I've had the pleasure of talking with lots and lots of people in Digital Humanities from among a wide range of disciplines. And I've been having that conversation since the mid-nineties. I've discovered that there are lots of things that distinguish an historian from, say, a literary critic or a philosopher, and there are a lot of differences between 1995 and 2011. But to me, there's always been a profound — and profoundly exciting and enabling — commonality to everyone who finds their way to dh. And that commonality, I think, involves moving from reading and critiquing to building and making.

As humanists, we are inclined to read maps (to pick one example) as texts, as instruments of cultural desire, as visualizations of imperial ideology, as records of the emergence of national identity, and so forth. This is all very good. In fact, I would say it's at the root of what it means to engage in humanistic inquiry. Almost everyone in Digital Humanities was taught to do this and loves to do this. But *making* a map (with a gis system, say) is an entirely different experience. dh-ers insist — again and again — that this process of creation yields insights that are difficult to acquire otherwise. It's the thing I've been hearing for as long as I've been in this. People who *mark up* texts say it, as do those who *build* software, *hack* social networks, *create* visualizations, and pursue the dozens of other forms of haptic engagement that bring dh-ers to the same table. Building is, for us, a new kind of hermeneutic — one that is quite a bit more radical than taking the traditional methods of humanistic inquiry and applying them to digital objects. Media studies, game studies, critical code studies, and various other

disciplines have brought wonderful new things to humanistic study, but I will say (at my peril) that none of these represent as radical a shift as the move from reading to making.

This partially explains why we have so long been accused of being “undertheorized.” At its most sneering, this is a charge of willful exogamy: we’re not quoting the usual people when we speak. But there’s frankly some truth to it. [As Geoffrey Rockwell wisely noted:](#)

[dh] is undertheorized the way any craft field that developed to share knowledge that can’t be adequately captured in discourse is. It is undertheorized the way carpentry or computer science are. To new researchers who have struggled to master the baroque discourses associated with the postmodern theoretical turn there appears to be something naive and secretive about the digital humanities when it mindlessly ignores the rich emerging field of new media theory. It shouldn’t be so. We should be able to be clear about the importance of project management and thing knowledge — the tacit knowledge of fabrication and its cultures — even if the very nature of that poiesis (knowledge of making) itself cannot easily (and shouldn’t have to) be put into words. We should be able to welcome theoretical perspectives without fear of being swallowed in postmodernisms that are exclusive as our craft knowledge.

Now that this scrappy band of naive gear-heads [are becoming the “cool kids,”](#) an anxiety that has also been around for a long time re-emerges with new vigor: Do I have to know how to X?

Most readers of this blog know that I have devoted my life as

a teacher to teaching other humanists how to code. I do that for the exact same reason that others devote their lives to the study of Shakespeare or the American Civil War: because it's fascinating and soul charging. Like any passionate enthusiast — indeed, like any teacher worth their salt — I'm inclined to say that everyone should do as I do. But really, that's as far as it goes. Learn to code because it's fun and because it will change the way you look at the world. Then notice that we could substitute any other subject for “learn to code” in that sentence.

“Build,” though, casts a wider net (and is, I think, a more useful candidate for *x* above). All the *technai* of Digital Humanities — data mining, xml encoding, text analysis, gis, Web design, visualization, programming, tool design, database design, etc — involve building; only a few of them require *programming*, per se. Only a radical subset of the dh community knows how to code; nearly all are engaged in building something. “Procedural literacy” has been suggested as a substitute, and I like that term. Still, I think some of the people who use it are trying to answer the question, “How much tech do I need to know to do cultural studies?” not “What is distinctive about dh?”

In the panel that set this off, Alan Liu tried to describe himself as not being a builder, but those of us with long memories know better. Because truly, we can date Alan's entry into the field (literally, as well as spiritually) to a very precise moment: namely, the day he started building [Voice of the Shuttle](#). Being a man of great range, he has gone on to do other very brilliant things (most significantly, in media studies), but I doubt very much if he'd be associated with dh at all had he

not found his way to shop class with the rest of us bumbling hackers in the early nineties. He's one of many crossover acts in dh, and those of us with less talent are surely more honored by the association. One of the reasons the dh community is so fond of Alan is because we feel like he gets it/us. He can talk all he wants about being a *bricoleur*, but we can see the grease under his fingernails. That is true of every "big name" I can think of in dh. Every single one.

Now, some of my closest friends in the community bailed about five paragraphs ago, because they're sick to the teeth of this endless meta-discussion that another crossover dh-er once described as the "dh whine." They're especially tired of the "who's in who's out" discussion, and being generous folks, they're much more inclined to say that anyone can join. I feel their pain. And anyone *can* join (the "cool kids" metaphor, honestly, makes me worry about my career). If I had been less prone to provocation, I might have found a way to put things more positively. But in the end, I feel obliged to say that there *is* something different about dh, and that it's okay to say what that something is, even if to do so is indirectly to say that some are doing it and some are not.

[update: Irena Marinski of the [Belrade Center for Digital Humanities](#) has kindly [translated this essay into Serbian](#).]