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Who's In and Who's Out

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6-8 minutes

[I'm pleased to offer a transcript of my pithy, underdeveloped position paper at the "History and Future of Digital Humanities" panel at the 2011 [mla](#). The panel, which was organized and expertly chaired by [Kathleen Fitzpatrick](#) from Pomona, included [Alan Liu](#) from [uc](#) Santa Barbara, [Tara McPherson](#) from [usc](#), [Kathy Harris](#) from San Jose State, [Beth Nowviskie](#) (in absentia) from the University of Virginia, and [Brett Bobley](#) from the [neh](#). Beth Nowviskie's important (not to mention hilarious) intervention [is online](#), as are Alan Liu's remarks on [the role of cultural criticism in dh](#) and Kathy Harris's on [teaching \(and learning\) in dh](#).]

Kathleen has asked that we spend exactly three minutes giving our thoughts on this subject, and I like that a lot. With only three minutes, there's no way you can get your point across while at the same time defining your terms, allowing for alternative viewpoints, or making obsequious noises about the prior work of your esteemed colleagues. Really, you can't do much of anything except piss off half the people in the room. As I said, I like it a lot. Here goes:

"Digital Humanities" sounds for all the world like a revolutionary attitude — *digital* humanities, as opposed to old-

school analogue humanities. As such, it has most recently tended to welcome anyone and anything exemplifying a certain wired fervor. Nowadays, the term can mean anything from media studies to electronic art, from data mining to edutech, from scholarly editing to anarchic blogging, while inviting code junkies, digital artists, standards wonks, transhumanists, game theorists, free culture advocates, archivists, librarians, and edupunks under its capacious canvas.

Over the last year or so, I've heard lots of discussions — both on and offline — about who's in and who's out. For the most part, people agree that having a blog does not make you a digital humanist. But beyond that, things are a bit fuzzy. Do you have to know how to code? Does it have to be about text? Can you be a digital humanist if you've never been to a THATCamp?

"No, no, no," we all say. But we go further, and say that it doesn't really matter. Everyone is included. It's all about community and comity, collaboration and cooperation.

But this, of course, is complete nonsense. Community and collaboration are undoubtedly signs of the spirit, but to say that disciplinary definition doesn't really matter is to eschew the hard reality of life in the modern academy. Digital Humanities is not some airy Lyceum. It is a series of concrete instantiations involving money, students, funding agencies, big schools, little schools, programs, curricula, old guards, new guards, gatekeepers, and prestige. It might be more than these things, but it cannot not be these things.

Do you have to know how to code? I'm a tenured professor of

digital humanities and I say “yes.” So if you come to my program, you’re going to have to learn to do that eventually. Does it have to be about text? If you go to, say, the University of Alberta, I suspect the answer might be “no” — a reflection, again, of the faculty, many of whom have been in the field for a long time. But what if Duke or Yale were to offer a degree in Digital Humanities and they said “no” to code and “yes” to text? Or “no” to building and “yes” to theorizing? Or decided that Digital Humanities is what we used to call New Media Studies (which is the precise condition, as far as I can tell, at Dartmouth)? You might need to know how to code in order to be competitive for relevant grants with the [odh](#), [nsf](#), or Mellon. Maybe that means Yale’s [dh](#) ambitions will never get off the ground. Or maybe Yale is powerful enough to redefine the mission of those institutions with respect to the Humanities. Most institutions, for the record, are not.

Now, I’ve been in this game long enough to understand a few things about how disciplines develop. First, they really can destroy themselves through overprecise definition. That has already happened in Classics, and Philosophy may be next. You can also successfully create a polyglot discipline without schism (the average psych department successfully incorporates the tell-me-about-your-childhood psychologists and the slicing-open-rat-brains psychologists). You can also have a schism and have it not result in bloodshed (computational linguistics, a community now mostly separate from linguistics, comes to mind). But no discipline can survive without actively engaging with disciplinary questions. Not because there are definitive answers. Least of all because it’s important to alienate people. But simply because without

those questions, we cede the answers to institutions eager to oblige people who are paying attention.

Personally, I think Digital Humanities is about building things. I'm willing to entertain highly expansive definitions of what it means to build something. I also think the discipline includes and should include people who theorize about building, people who design so that others might build, and those who supervise building (the coding question is, for me, a canard, insofar as many people build without knowing how to program). I'd even include people who are working to rebuild systems like our present, irretrievably broken system of scholarly publishing. But if you are not making anything, you are not — in my less-than-three-minute opinion — a digital humanist. You might be something else that is good and worthy — maybe you're a scholar of new media, or maybe a game theorist, or maybe a classicist with a blog (the latter being very good thing indeed) — but if you aren't building, you are not engaged in the “methodologization” of the humanities, which, to me, is the hallmark of the discipline that was already decades old when I came to it.

Am I right about this? With less than three minutes, of course not. But ask yourself this: Does having an opinion like this move us forward or backward? Is this a good fight or a bad one? Or is it better to let the whole thing emerge as it will? I say that the institutional structures in which we work have already decided in favor of having this discussion, and that we can have it while still retaining our well-earned reputation for collaboration, cooperation, and good will.

[update: Boy, did this get me in trouble. But I made it all better (well, sort of) with [“On Building”](#).]