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The Dark Side of the Digital Humanities

WENDY HUI KYONG CHUN, RICHARD GRUSIN,
PATRICK JAGODA, AND RITA RALEY

These four papers were presented at the 2013 MLA Convention in Boston, at a roundtable called “The Dark Side of Digital Humanities.” Held in a large packed room, the session provoked a great deal of often-heated commentary—in the Twitter feed during and after the roundtable, in the discussion following the presentations, and in several blog posts and articles in the days following the convention. To get a sense of the aim of the roundtable, here is a selection from the roundtable proposal made to the MLA selection committee:

The same neoliberal logic that informs the ongoing destruction of the mainstream humanities has encouraged foundations, corporations, and university administrations to devote new resources to the digital humanities. Indeed it is largely due to the apparently instrumental or utilitarian value of the digital humanities that university administrators, foundation officers, and government agencies are so eager to fund DH projects, create DH undergraduate and graduate programs, and hire DH faculty. And because there is no sign that these funding streams are going to dry up any time soon, and no sign on the horizon of an increase in funding for the “crisis humanities,” there is great potential for increased tension between the “haves” of digital humanities and the “have-nots” of mainstream humanities.

As a result of this tension, DH finds itself faced with a choice between what this roundtable playfully refers to as the “dark side” and “the light side” of the force. From the rise of for-profit universities to the push to develop online “content modules” branded with the names of established universities, it is clear that the 21st century university is fundamentally networked, nearly impossible to envisage without the objects and methodological practices of the computational sciences. What are the relations, then, between DH as a strict tool- and interface-based practice and the institutional logics of the new neoliberal networked universities? What can we make, further, of the links between the

claims made on behalf of both online learning initiatives and the new tools for digital humanities research: that they each have a radical, open, democratic aspect that is linked to mass literacy movements, making scholarly materials widely available to populations that had not previously had such access? What are the relations between new reading techniques (text mining, distant reading) and new modes of content delivery? Is it even possible to have “distant reading” without somehow also contributing to the project of distant education? Part of the work of this panel will be to envisage a model of digital humanities that is not rooted in technocratic rationality or neoliberal economic calculus but rather that emerges from as well as informs traditionary practices of humanist inquiry.

Our interest in this roundtable is on the impact of digital humanities on research and teaching in the humanities in higher education—the question of how digital humanities will impact the future of the humanities in general. Composed of entry-level, mid-career, and senior scholars with a history of curricular, scholarly, and hands-on engagement with digital media, this roundtable will pose several questions and challenges to the digital humanities. Taking neoliberalism as the economic framework within which we are reluctantly operating, we want to explore alternative paths on which digital humanists might travel to ameliorate, rather than exacerbate, some of the internecine divisions that this economic crisis has precipitated and intensified.

In order to preserve the flavor of the roundtable itself, the panelists have chosen to present their contributions in virtually unrevised form. Fuller versions, with appropriate scholarly apparatus, can be found in a special issue of *Differences* (vol. 25, no. 1) 2014.

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

This talk was given on January 4, 2013 at the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention. It focuses on a paradox surrounding DH: the disparity between the hype surrounding DH and the material work conditions surrounding much DH (adjunct/soft money positions, the constant drive to raise funds, the lack of scholarly recognition of DH work for promotions). In it, I call for us to work together—across the various fields and divisions—to create a university that is fair and just for all (teachers, students, researchers). I also call for us to find value in what is often discarded as “useless” in order to take on the really hard problems that face us.

We have been asked to be provocative, so I will use my eight minutes to provoke: to agitate and perhaps aggravate, excite, and perhaps incite. I want to propose that the dark side of the digital humanities is its bright side, its alleged promise: its alleged promise to save the humanities by making them and their graduates relevant, by

giving their graduates technical skills that will allow them to thrive in a difficult and precarious job market. Speaking partly as a former engineer, this promise strikes me as bull: knowing GIS or basic statistics or basic scripting (or even server-side scripting) is not going to make English majors competitive with engineers or CS geeks trained here or increasingly abroad (****straight up programming jobs are becoming increasingly less lucrative****).¹

But let me be clear. My critique is not directed at DH per se. DH projects have extended and renewed the humanities and revealed that the kind of critical thinking (close textual analysis) that the humanities have always been engaged in is and has always been central to crafting technology and society. DH projects such as “Feminist Dialogues in Technology,” a distributed online cooperative course that will be taught in fifteen universities across the globe—courses that use technology not simply to disseminate but also to rethink and regenerate cooperatively education at a global scale—these projects are central. As well, the humanities should play a big role in “big data” not simply because we are good at pattern recognition (because we can read narratives embedded in data), but also and more importantly because we can see what big data ignores. We can see the ways in which so many big data projects, by restricting themselves to certain databases and terms, shine a flashlight under a streetlamp.

I also want to stress that my sympathetic critique is not aimed at the humanities, but at the general euphoria surrounding technology and education. That is, it takes aim at the larger project of rewriting political and pedagogical problems into technological ones, into problems that technology can fix. This rewriting ranges from the idea that MOOCs, rather than a serious public commitment to education, can solve the problem of the spiraling cost of education (MOOCs that enroll, but do not graduate; MOOCs that miss the point of what we do, for when lectures work, they work because they create communities, because they are, to use Benedict Anderson’s phrase, “extraordinary mass ceremonies”) to the blind embrace of technical skills. To put it as plainly as possible: there are a lot of unemployed engineers out there, from forty-something assembly programmers in Silicon Valley to young kids graduating from community colleges with CS degrees and no jobs. Also, there is a huge gap between industrial skills and university training. Every good engineer has to be retaught how to program; every film graduate retaught how to make films.

My main argument is this: the vapid embrace of the digital is a form of what Lauren Berlant has called “cruel optimism.” Berlant argues, “[A] relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). She emphasizes that optimistic relations are not inherently cruel, but become so when “the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.” Crucially, this attachment is doubly cruel “insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming” (2).

So, the blind embrace of DH (****think here of “The Old Order Changeth”*) allows us to believe that this time (once again) graduate students will get jobs. It allows us to believe that the problem facing our students and our profession is a lack of technical savvy rather than an economic system that undermines the future of our students.

As Lauren Berlant points out, the hardest thing about cruel optimism is that, even as it destroys us in the long term, it sustains us in the short term. DH allows us to tread water: to survive, if not thrive (****think here of the ways in which so many DH projects and jobs depend on soft money and the ways in which DH projects are often—and very unfairly—not counted towards tenure or promotion****). It allows us to sustain ourselves and to justify our existence in an academy that is increasingly a sinking ship.

The humanities are sinking—if they are—not because of their earlier embrace of theory or multiculturalism, but because they have capitulated to a bureaucratic technocratic logic. They have conceded to a logic, an enframing (****to use Heidegger’s term****) that has made publishing a question of quantity rather than quality, so that we spew forth MPUs or minimum publishable units. A logic, an enframing that can make teaching a burden rather than a mission, so that professors and students are increasingly at odds. A logic, an enframing that has divided the profession and made us our own worst enemies so that those who have jobs for life, deny jobs to others—others who have often accomplished more than they (than we)—have.

The academy is a sinking ship—if it is—because it sinks our students into debt, and this debt, generated by this optimistic belief that a university degree automatically guarantees a job, is what both sustains and kills us. This residual belief/hope stems from another time when most of us could not go to university—another time when young adults with degrees received good jobs, not necessarily because of what they learned, but because of the society in which they lived.

Now, if the bright side of the digital humanities is the dark side, let me suggest that the dark side—what is now considered to be the dark side—may be where we need to be. The dark side, after all, is the side of passion. The dark side, or what has been made dark, is what all that bright talk has been turning away from (critical theory, critical race studies—all that fabulous work that #transformDH is doing).

This dark side also entails taking on our fears and biases to create deeper collaborations with the sciences and engineering. It entails forging joint (frictional and sometimes fractious) coalitions to take on problems such as education, global change, etc. It means realizing that the humanities do not have a lock on creative or critical thinking and realizing that research in the sciences can be as useless as research in the humanities—and that this is a good thing. It is called basic research.

It also entails realizing that what is most interesting about the digital in general is perhaps not what has been touted as its promise, but rather what is been discarded or decried as its trash (****think here of all those failed DH tools, which have*

*still opened up new directions****). It entails realizing that what is most interesting is what has been discarded or decried as inhuman: rampant publicity, anonymity, the ways in which the Internet vexes the relationship between public and private, the ways it compromises our autonomy and involves us with others and other machines in ways we do not entirely know and control (****think here of the constant and promiscuous exchange of information that drives the Internet, something that is usually hidden from us****).

As Natalia Cecire has argued DH is best when it takes on the humanities, as well as the digital. Maybe, just maybe, by taking on the inhumanities, we will transform the digital as well.

Richard Grusin

The proposal I submitted for the 2013 roundtable opened with the following questions: “Is it only an accident that the emergence of digital humanities has coincided with the intensification of the economic crisis in the humanities in higher education? Or is there a connection between these two developments?” I began with these questions to help make sense of a feeling that has bothered me since MLA 2011—the incommensurate affective moods between panels on “digital” humanities and those on what might be understood as “crisis” humanities. This mood did not appear suddenly in 2011 but has been emerging, largely unspoken or ignored, at least since the financial meltdown of 2008. Nor has it gone away, as demonstrated by the current MOOC bubble, which generates digital utopian arguments about the remaking of higher education while intensifying the sense of precarity that has come to replace the security of tenure as the predominant affective mood of the academy. (See Figure 38.1.)

The first convention held on the new January schedule, MLA11 had been premediated as something of a new start for the Modern Language Association. This sense of a new beginning was accompanied in Los Angeles by a sense of loss evident in panels devoted to the crisis in the humanities that had been produced by radical funding cuts in public support for education in Europe, Australia, and the United States. These cuts, and the concomitant transformation of the professoriate, have been under way for several decades now (particularly in the United States), but in the recessionary aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, they reached a level unimaginable to most academics. Panels on the immediacy of the crisis in the humanities were accompanied by widespread historical critique of the devastating effects of the neoliberal university and its catastrophic legacy for the future. The urgency of this new “critical university studies” was especially palpable in California, where the UC and CSU systems have only intensified their corporatism under continued funding cutbacks from the state.

Yet MLA11 was not all doom and gloom. The sessions I attended on the digital humanities were marked by an affectivity of vitality and growth, of optimism



Figure 38.1. “MOOC” search term trending for 2012.

and new beginnings. A comparatively prosperous IT funding climate created a set of issues and concerns for DH scholars very different from the economic crisis so palpable elsewhere. Packed panels on the future of digital humanities or the role of social media in fostering public intellectuals were filled with laughter, hope, and a sense of empowerment coming partly from the growing investment of human and economic capital in digital humanities projects by university administrators and partly from the financial resources available to DH teachers, scholars, and developers from corporate, nonprofit, and governmental foundations. DH panels, too, addressed challenges produced by the changing climate in the humanities. Of most concern among DHers was the difficulty in getting departmental and university tenure committees to provide appropriate credit to digital work that does not end up as refereed articles or scholarly monographs and the lack of professional recognition for technical labor, which was too often performed by nontenure track members of the academic precariate. For the purposes of this roundtable I would characterize the problem of reforming criteria for tenure and promotion a “first world problem” and note instead the way in which the institutional structure of digital humanities threatens to intensify (both within DH itself and among the humanities more broadly) the proliferation of temporary, insecure labor that is rampant not only in the academy but throughout twenty-first-century capitalism.

Paradoxically, the key to this dual intensification of academic precarity is the very act that digital humanists often use to distinguish themselves from the traditional humanities: “making things.” At MLA11, DH panels devoted a good deal of energy to boundary drawing, which often depended on the distinction between making or producing things and critiquing them. In the panel on “The History and Future of Digital Humanities,” for example, I learned that I was not a digital humanist because I did not code (“Keeping a blog does not make you a digital humanist”) or because I did not “make things” (tell that to anyone who has labored for an hour or more over a single sentence). In the aftermath of MLA11, this invidious distinction between making things and merely critiquing them has come to be one of the generally accepted differences that marks DH off from the humanities in general. One could see the distinction at play in the brief Twitter exchange between HASTAC co-founder Cathy Davidson and *Vectors* founding editor Tara McPherson (see Figure 38.2). To McPherson’s boundary-drawing “I worry that much of theory/cult studies tends toward critique as an end in itself,” Davidson quickly replies: “Could not agree more. Critique hard. New ideas much harder. Making stuff work really, really hard!”

Put most starkly, academics on the left (which is pretty much everyone doing theory and cultural studies) blame the crisis in the humanities on the corporatization of the academy and the neoliberal insistence that the value of higher education must be understood instrumentally in economic terms. Thus the shrinking of the tenured and tenure-track professoriate, which has resulted in the sharp growth of temporary and part-time labor in the academy, has been justified by university administrators and state legislatures in terms of bottom-line economics and the need for higher education to train students for jobs not to read literature or study culture. Consciously or not, McPherson and Davidson echo the instrumentalism of neoliberal administrators and politicians in devaluing critique (or by extension any other humanistic inquiry that does not make things) for being an end in itself as opposed to the more valuable and useful acts “of making stuff work.” But perhaps even more interestingly, as movements such as #transformDH have been articulating, it is the distinction between making things and doing more traditional scholarly work that perpetuates a class system *within* DH that generates an almost unbridgeable divide between those on the tenure-track, those in what have come to be called “alt-ac” positions, and those in even more precarious and temporary positions.

Sadly this pattern continues to reproduce itself in the current explosion of MOOC mania in print and online media, where much of the burgeoning interest in MOOCs has come from liberal administrators caught up in the convergence of neoliberal calculus and digital utopianism. At the same time that the market logic of neoliberalism has been used to decimate the mainstream humanities from within and without, this same logic has encouraged foundations, corporations, and university administrations to devote new resources to the digital humanities and to the development of MOOCs and other online forms of “content delivery.” If it is largely due to their instrumental or utilitarian value that university administrators,

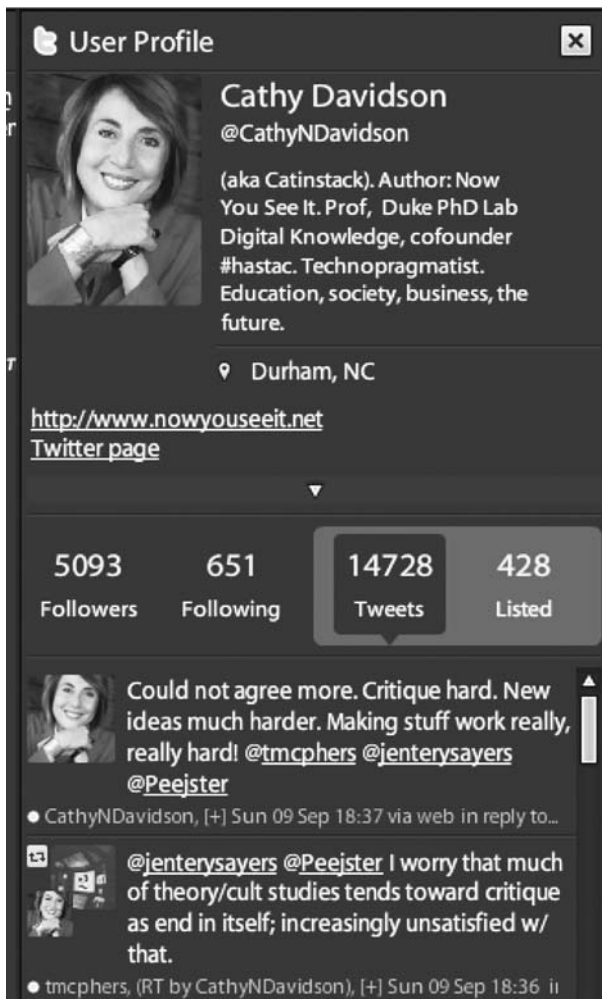


Figure 38.2. Cathy Davidson Twitter feed, September 9, 2012.

foundation officers, and government agencies are eager to fund DH projects, create DH undergraduate and graduate programs, and hire DH faculty, it is also the case that this neoliberal instrumentalism reproduces within the academy (both in traditional humanities and in digital humanities alike) the precaritization of labor that marks the dark side of information capitalism in the twenty-first century.

Patrick Jagoda

My remarks at the “Dark Side of the Digital Humanities” MLA roundtable on January 4, 2013, represent some preliminary thoughts and questions about games that I explore in greater detail in two essays that appeared in *boundary 2* and *Differences*.² My decision to include digital games in this conversation was not an attempt to claim the absolute centrality of games for the digital humanities. Additionally, my topic selection did not carry with it a necessary insistence upon a conflation between the

“digital humanities” and “new media studies.” Since 2013, and for the foreseeable future, these disciplinary categories, and the boundaries between them, are porous. They continue to be debated and renegotiated by scholars.

For the purpose of the broad and inclusive conversation that Richard Grusin organized for MLA, I decided to work within a broad rubric of “Comparative Media Studies,” especially as it has been developed by N. Katherine Hayles in 2012 in *How We Think*. This inclusive category encourages conversations among scholars working in areas that include the materiality of print and digital productions (John Cayley, Matthew Kirschenbaum, and Jerome McGann); critical code studies (Wendy Chun, Matthew Fuller, and Lev Manovich); platform studies (Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort); technologically mediated forms of social interaction (Jodi Dean and Geert Lovink), information networks (Tiziana Terranova and Eugene Thacker) and electronic literature and digital art forms (N. Katherine Hayles, Henry Jenkins, Mark Marino, and Stephanie Strickland); the philosophical dimensions of digital media (Alexander Galloway, Richard Grusin, Mark Hansen, Friedrich Kittler, and McKenzie Wark); the cultural implications of digital technologies (Lisa Nakamura, Tara McPherson, and Rita Raley); the educational affordances of digital technologies (Cathy Davidson, Nichole Pinkard, and Katie Salen); and so on. This category also allows us to discuss a number of projects that include data mining, social network analysis, digital editions of print works, historical simulations, electronic literature, digital art, game design, and much more.

During our MLA roundtable, I was interested in producing a provocation and, briefly, introducing what is likely to remain one major problem of and for the digital humanities: the problem of games and gamification. The text that follows is meant as a starting point for a continued exchange. Perhaps, like the beginning of a game, it can be conceived as an invitation to play.

In recent years, games have touched practically every aspect of contemporary life. This certainly has something to do with a colossal video game industry that saw about \$25 billion of revenue in 2011 in the United States alone with approximately 183 million American “active gamers” (that is, people who claim to play digital games an average of thirteen hours a week). Mobile gaming revenues rose to \$1.2 billion in 2012 from \$462 million just five years earlier.³ Even with some stagnation in U.S. console sales, global digital game markets have also seen significant growth.

The expanding centrality of games, however, has also in many ways exceeded the realm of “gamers” through what is often called “gamification.” Gamification, a term that derives from behavioral economics, refers to the use of game mechanics in traditionally nongame activities. This buzzword emerged only in the twenty-first century but has already found its way into writing on business, marketing, psychology, and design. We have seen the structure and logic of games creep into consumerism, crowdsourcing, and social media applications. For example, the *Chore*

Wars website, whose celebratory tagline claims that “finally, you can claim experience points for housework,” converts undesirable chores into a game complete with superheroic role-playing and points that spur competition among housemates. *Nike+* shoes use sensors to transform a tedious running routine into a daily contest by tracking statistics, assigning achievement points, and allowing users to interface with cute avatars. *TaskRabbit* provides an online space for outsourcing minor jobs such as grocery delivery to other users while motivating contributors through a leaderboard and a statistics tracker that resembles a video game progress bar. *Phylo*, a game released by Jérôme Waldispühl’s team at McGill University, invites players to help researchers with a common problem in comparative genomics—Multiple Sequence Alignments—by participating in pattern recognition challenges. All of these sites and apps (of which there are many others) suggest that life in the early twenty-first century is becoming permeated by games. Especially throughout the overdeveloped world in which digital media, smartphones, and high-speed Internet access have achieved a ubiquitous status for many people, games have become an exemplary cultural form that serves as a prominent metaphor of success.

Gamification is increasingly becoming a problem *of* and, in some ways, a problem *for* the digital humanities. This is especially noticeable in the realm of education. Over the last two years, we have seen numerous instances of game-based learning, including how-to guides (*Education Gamification Survival Kit*) and charter schools with gameplay curricula (Katie Salen’s *Quest to Learn* and *ChicagoQuest* schools). Another ongoing initiative that has received a great deal of attention is the MacArthur Foundation’s “Badges for Lifelong Learning” that began as a Digital Media and Learning competition. Subsequently, the badges concept was adopted by organizations such as the Digital Youth Network: a Chicago-based “digital literacy program that creates opportunities for youth to engage in learning environments that span both in-school and out-of-school contexts.”⁴ The Digital Youth Network awards badges to youth who develop skills in technology, new media art, and social media participation. The gamelike impulse to collect badges serves as motivation for continued learning and produces a “visual portfolio of competencies” for participating youth and mentors.

Adopters of gamification across different fields, including education, regularly proclaim it to be an unparalleled organizational technique. One leading proponent, Jane McGonigal, suggests that “reality is broken” and can only be saved through games that turn “a real problem into a voluntary obstacle” and activate “genuine interest, curiosity, motivation, effort, and optimism” among their players (*Reality Is Broken*, 311). Alongside beaming support for gamification as a cutting-edge panacea, however, there has been some resistance to this concept and its widespread application. Curiously, much of the criticism has come from game designers. Gamification has been condemned in these circles for adopting only the least artistic aspects of contemporary digital games—namely, their repetitive grinding and achievement-oriented operant conditioning. In a brief, polemical position

paper published in *The Atlantic*, Ian Bogost contends that, above all, gamification is, in a philosophical sense, “bullshit.” Drawing from moral philosopher Harry Frankfurt, he explains that “bullshit is used to conceal, to impress or to coerce.” Gamification, for Bogost, engages in precisely this form of obfuscation insofar as it “takes games—a mysterious, magical, powerful medium that has captured the attention of millions of people—and makes them accessible in the context of contemporary business.” Condemning the rhetorical deceptiveness of the term, Bogost suggests the alternative term “exploitationware,” which decouples “gamification” from “games” (“Gamification is Bullshit”).

As one starting point to this roundtable discussion, I hope this brief introduction to what we might call the problematic of gamification will suffice. As teachers, researchers, and university administrators, we are bound to see many more instances of gamification in the coming years. Digital games will remain a major topic of both the digital humanities and new media studies. So they are worth discussing. My own visceral reaction to the phenomenon has often been one of skepticism—or at least critical reflectiveness. Game-based badges or experience points motivate people to perform repetitive tasks but not necessarily to engage closely with texts or to undertake projects at a more complex level. At the same time, I am also a game designer and a scholar of digital games. In 2011, I co-founded an organization called Game Changer Chicago (GCC) with Melissa Gilliam, a professor of Obstetrics, Gynecology, and Pediatrics and Chief of Family Planning at the University of Chicago. GCC uses digital storytelling and game-oriented methods to teach disadvantaged youth on the South Side of Chicago about sexual and reproductive health.⁵ We have focused on topics that include teen pregnancy, sexual violence, and socioeconomic health disparities. At GCC, our team produces interactive graphic novels, card games, and Alternate Reality Games projects with youth and for other youth to play. Through this new media production work and the research associated with it, I have found that when games are well designed, they entail many benefits. Such games offer players interactive contexts for thinking through and experimenting with complex problems in a hands-on fashion. Digital games enable multiple learning styles and engage players at several levels simultaneously through text, graphics, animation, audio, algorithms, haptic feedback, and different forms of interactivity. They spur decision making, enable role-playing, encourage play and discussion, and do many other things that exceed the addictiveness of point accumulation and victory that characterizes gamification.

So, then, despite the use of gamification for questionable ends (e.g., slot machines in Las Vegas), games are not, for me, a categorical evil but rather a rich problematic through which we might think, feel, and process our historical present. For this reason, I include games under Richard Grusin’s heading of the “Dark Side of the Digital Humanities.” I finish with three sets of questions that seek to navigate that darkness—a darkness that is, at different moments, terrifying and thrilling:

1. How should we think about games at a historical moment when gamification is arguably not merely a local phenomenon (for instance, in business, marketing, or education) but increasingly the form that economic and social reality takes in our world? Does it make sense to “game” an educational system that is founded on inequalities in a world that already uses games as a dominant metaphor and method?
2. Do the benefits of “badges” and other techniques of gamification outweigh their potential to operate as a reductive form of behaviorism? What are the benefits and limitations of incorporating badges into our pedagogy? Can we imagine (as many educators, theorists, and organizers are already attempting to do) badges that move beyond the superficial level of short-term behavioral modification? Can we instead create an infrastructure that builds a desire for lifelong learning and material skills into narratives, journeys, and games that youth (especially those youth coming from flailing or failing school systems) find compelling?
3. How might we imagine what are called “serious games” or “countergames” as complicating gamification? I am not necessarily advocating for either of these terms. However, along with scholar-designers such as Ian Bogost, Mary Flanagan, and Tracy Fullerton, I am committed to creating games that do not simply condition behaviors but encourage more complex forms of thought, speculation, practice, and action. For example, in 2012, along with my co-directors Katherine Hayles and Patrick LeMieux, I created an Alternate Reality Game called *Speculation* that explored the greed-driven culture of Wall Street investment banks and the 2008 economic crisis through a number of mini-games, collaborative narratives, and online forums.⁶ This game experimented with a design that was more speculative (in a number of senses) than didactic. This final question, then, is one that I ask myself on a weekly basis. Within a period of gamification, how might we think, play, and act critically through games?

Rita Raley

For “The Dark Side of Digital Humanities” (tweeted at #s07), we were charged with producing eight-minute statements designed to provoke a wide-ranging discussion of the unsaid, understated, or under-theorized economic and political issues that are associated with, attend upon, or otherwise follow from the digital humanities as an institutional entity. In our respective prefatory statements we noted that we had been asked to provoke, but stimulate is closer to the thinking behind the roundtable. The formulation of the title of the roundtable was itself a provocation, however, and an exemplary instance of “behavioral priming,” to borrow a phrase from N. Katherine Hayles’s paper delivered the following day. One imagines that

even the addition of a question mark in the program copy might have produced a different affective response in the audience, among which there still seems to be a fair bit of indignation, at least insofar as one can glean the mood from Twitter and blog postings. That the indignant audience should now include many who were not even at the conference, much less at the session, can only confirm Teresa Brennan's thesis on the "transmission of affect"—it was not simply biochemical response but also suggestion that produced the (contagious) affects of #s07.⁷

The upset seems in part to derive from a misunderstanding about our critical object: though our roundtable referred in passing to existing projects, collectives, and games that we take to be affirmative and inspiring, the "digital humanities" under analysis was a discursive construction and, I should add, clearly noted as such throughout. That audience members should have professed not to recognize themselves in our presentations is thus to my mind all to the good, even if it somewhat misses the mark. Indeed I would say that humanists above all else 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. (My own cynicism about that institutional imaginary deepens with every administrative inquiry: I teach and write about digital media, so clearly I should want to participate in working groups and pilot programs for online education.)

Our topic is the dark side of the digital humanities. Not quite the evil side, as Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey term it, but, one hopes, not entirely unrelated. Evil media studies pursues "practices of trickery, deception, and manipulation"—one might even say tactics here—practices or tactics that endeavor "to escape [both] the order of critique" with all of its melancholic negativity, as well as "the postulates of representation," with their moralizing insistence on substance, essence, truth.⁸ The dark side might on the face of it seem to suggest precisely that "order of critique," but our objective today is not to diagnose so as to circumscribe and pronounce upon the truth of things—not to uniformly fix what is after all a diverse set of techniques and activities within a singular frame and to seek out the hidden ideological core buried deep within it; not then to bring to light "the" dark side of "the" digital humanities. But it is to suggest that there are critical blind spots and assumptions that ought to be discussed before we triumphantly embrace the notion that the digital humanities is the only game in town worth playing or, even, the only conference sessions worth attending, not simply the "next big thing" but the only thing. If, as sometimes seems to be the case, the digital humanities is the hill on which the humanities has chosen to stake its last claim for relevance, to fight its last battle for recognition, then we would do well to examine the field and identify not just the exploits but perhaps also the lines of escape.

This is not new thinking of course, and indeed the cultural politics of the digital humanities—its lacunae, protocols, and technocratic function—are central research

problems for many of my colleagues in the Transcriptions Center at UC Santa Barbara. For example, two of our graduate students, Amanda Phillips and Anne Cong-Huyen, have been active in a #transformDH initiative that explores the intersections of the digital humanities and race, gender, and sexuality.⁹ And at the MLA convention in 2011, Alan Liu succinctly formulated the as-yet unanswered question that continues to serve as a critical challenge for all of us today: How, he asked, do “the digital humanities advance, channel, or resist the great postindustrial, neoliberal, corporatist, and globalist flows of information-cum-capital”?¹⁰ To answer the question of how the digital humanities “advance and channel” such flows, one simply needs to track monetary circulation and study the attendant promotional materials. In our current mercantile knowledge regime, with its rational calculus of academic value—seats occupied, publications counted, funds procured—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 are 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”). In the “new world of brain-currency” shaped by engineers and economists, as Richard Hoggart once described it, it is the digital humanists who serve as cashiers, no longer ordinary schoolmasters peddling language as symbolic capital but academic service staff providing skills-based training—visual literacies, communicative competence, technological proficiency, data management—reinstantiating in the process the very categorical distinctions between theory and practice that DIY and maker culture have long sought to challenge (Hoggart, 229).

Advancing and channeling the great flows of information-cum-capital requires a certain elasticity, more specifically, the capacity to become more agile so as to achieve operability and move to market more quickly. Agility is more easily attained without the practical and financial burdens of infrastructure; if networking, storage, and computing are automated, if they are virtualized, redundancy is eliminated and companies (universities, labs, centers) are left with legacy hardware that can only be repurposed as art and furniture. Why invest in servers, then, if Amazon, Microsoft, and Google can offer IT as a service? Contemporary doxa holds that treating infrastructure and platform as services makes it possible to free up resources for innovation and experimentation, for the symbolic work claimed as the particular province of the human: architecture and design. But accepting IT as a service also means accepting terms of use, and if the digital humanities has had very little to say about protocols of finance and governance, it has arguably had even less to say about the very protocols that govern our everyday use of university Gmail accounts

(or indeed the whole of Google Education).¹¹ As many have suggested but fewer have done, we ought to be marshaling the full critical, philosophical, and rhetorical resources at our disposal in order to think about all of the criteria that structure our communicative acts, from RFC standards and interface design, to privacy policies and terms of service.

The lesson one would like to think that the UC Office of the President had to learn, with its attempt to modernize its logo, is that interfaces and corporations alike have short life spans. Perhaps we too have to be jolted out of the cycle of innovating for the next grant cycle so that we might collaboratively speculate on 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 framing of our projects, initiatives, and entrepreneurial efforts.

To conclude, here are the questions I offer for discussion.

- (1) Daniel Bell argued in *The Intellectual and the University* that the principle task of *humanitas* was to defend against the “increasingly powerful armory of intellectual techniques” (game theory, cybernetics, simulation) at the disposal of technocracy (Bell, 4–6). How are we now to regard the embrace of these very techniques, particularly when the actual work is outsourced to technical staff or when putatively interdisciplinary collaborations between humanists and computer scientists rely on a textbook division of labor? How, moreover, are we to regard the schism between high-end tool development as research and undergraduate pedagogy that maintains traditional disciplinary structures?
- (2) What are the connections between the production of the aesthetic as *techné* in digital humanities research and contemporary courseware initiatives, and in what sense is each oriented toward technocratic knowledge production? What are the relations between new reading techniques (text mining, distant reading) and new modes of content delivery? We might also ask what we can make of the links between the political claims made for online learning platforms and the digital humanities: each is said to be radical, open, and democratic because of the varying efforts to make scholarly materials available to populations that have not previously had such access. Put another way, is it possible to have “distant reading” without somehow also contributing to the project of distant education?
- (3) It is universally acknowledged that the digital humanities have made important contributions to traditional scholarship in literary studies, in particular introducing provocative questions about scale, multimodal scholarship, and changing reading and writing practices. Still one might ask why and how it is that it has come to function as the solution to every

crisis of disciplinary legitimacy and every methodological impasse. For example, the project of symptomatic reading is said to be exhausted, thus necessitating the turn toward surface reading, of which “digital modes” of reading serve as the preferred instance (Best and Marcus). 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 universities such as P2P.¹² Can we then 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 cover for our belatedness?¹³ (Administrator: you can have any faculty position you like, as long as it is digital.)

NOTES

1. ***The sections in asterisks were either points implied in my visuals or in my 2013 MLA talk, which I have elaborated on in this written version. For an almost word-for-word transcription, see Alexis Lothian’s excellent notes: <http://www.queergeektheory.org/2013/01/mla13-the-dark-side-of-digital-humanities/>.

2. This chapter appears essentially in its original form, with minor revisions and additions that gesture toward related and future work. For the essays I mention in the text, see Jagoda, “Gamification,” and Jagoda, “Gaming the Humanities.”

3. For updated numbers, see, for instance, Newzoo, “2015 Global Games Market Report,” <http://www.newzoo.com/product/2015-global-games-market-report/>. These earlier numbers about mobile gaming are drawn from Jason Ankeny, “Independent Video Game Companies Gain Market Share,” *NBC News*, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/50046922/ns/business-small_business/t/independent-video-game-companies-gain-market-share/#.VZboEPIVhBc.

4. Digital Youth Network, <http://www.digitallyouthnetwork.org>.

5. Game Changer Chicago, <http://gamechanger.uchicago.edu/>.

6. *Speculation*, <http://speculation.net/>.

7. Steven Pile succinctly outlines the spatial transfer of affect. See Pile, “Distant Feelings.”

8. See Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey, “Towards an Evil Media Studies,” March 2007, <http://www.spc.org/fuller/texts/towardsevil/>.

9. See Amanda Phillips, #transformDH—A Call to Action Following ASA 2011,” *HASTAC*, October 26, 2011, <http://hastac.org/blogs/amanda-phillips/2011/10/26/transformdh-call-action-following-asa-2011>.

10. See Liu. His January 7, 2011, conference presentation was revised and expanded for *Debates in the Digital Humanities*. Conference version available from <http://liu.english.ucsb.edu/where-is-cultural-criticism-in-the-digital-humanities>.

11. Google for Education, <http://www.google.com/edu/>.

12. “P2PU helps you navigate the wealth of open education materials that are out there, creates small groups of motivated learners, and supports the design and facilitation of courses.” See <https://www.p2pu.org/en/>.

13. Strenuous individual efforts aside, such as Katherine Hayles’s showcasing media studies at the MLA during her tenure as chair of the Division on Literary Criticism (Washington, D.C., 2005), it is, I hope, 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 exuberant embrace of social media platforms such as Twitter as compensatory.

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