Inventing the Medium as a Humanistic Practice:
from deconstruction to meta-construction

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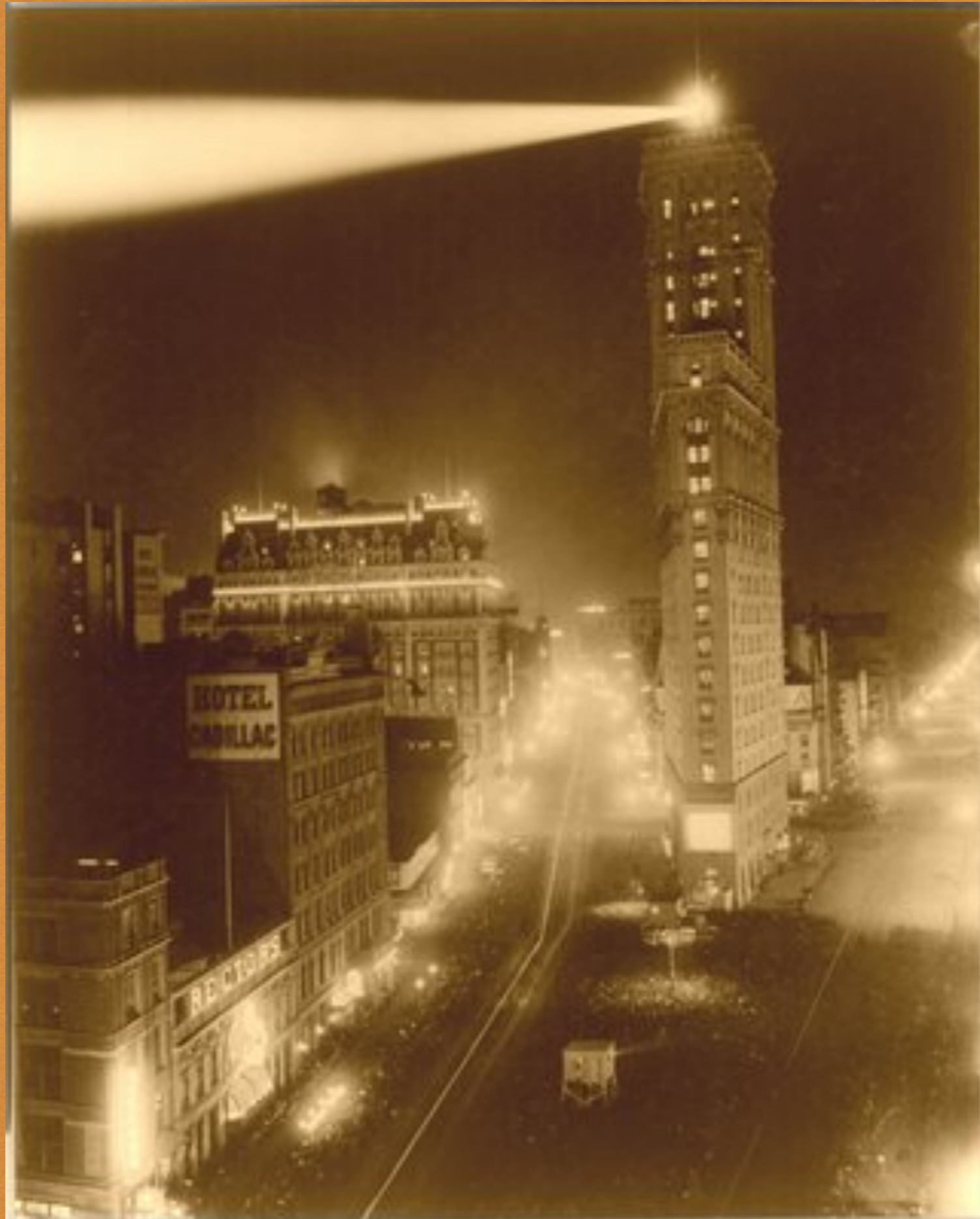Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts
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Lillian Horowitz 1908-2012

Digital Humanities:
oy vey!

- "Do we have a definition of the field?"

- "Can I tell by my twitter followers that I belong in it?"

- "Am I still a humanist?"

- "Will others see my work as part of my discipline?"

- "Will computer scientists co-op and trivialize humanistic inquiry?"

A humanistic perspective on the problem

- How does this look from a longer historical perspective?

- What are the values in play here?

- How do we re-affirm humanist professionalism in a new medium and for a post-postmodern world?

Literary Humanities Interpretation of Texts

- Media Studies, Comparative Media Studies, Genre Studies, Comparative Literature

- Cultural Studies, American Studies, Victorian Studies, Women's Studies, African-American Studies,

- Literary theory, Philoso-phism, Creative Writing

- Film Studies, Film Theory, Filmmaking

- Game Studies, Digital Media Studies

More Inventory or New Business?

- From dead white men, primarily writing in Latin and Greek

- PLUS English/French/German-speaking dead white men

- PLUS dead and contemporary white men, European and American

- PLUS men and women worldwide, writing and orally performing

- PLUS white male filmmakers

- TO white male theorists, mostly speaking French, and their American imitators and British detractors

- PLUS white male game designers

Academic Literary Studies since 1930s

- From biographical fallacy to "new criticism" explication

- From "new critical" context-free interpretation to social and cultural perspective

- From focus on works of the imagination to focus on theories of representation

- From unifying interpretations to disruptive interpretations

Humanities

The focus of the humanities is the human condition – past and present, actual and speculative, as it presents itself to human reason and the human imagination

- To preserve memory

- To offer multiple interpretations

- To recognize and clarify values

Master Narratives of Literary Modernism 1930s – 1980s

- Wounded writer reaching psychic integration

- Responding Reader constructing meaning

- Bildungsroman: moral education

- Courtship "the marriage plot": social order

- Raft plot: Romantic disruption of Civilization - poets as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world"

- Secular Earnestness: Critic / scholar as lay minister

Master Narratives of Post-modernism

- Subvert the hegemony of bourgeois mythology, capitalistic control, ideological control

- Heroism of disruptive critic – gaining professional authority by exposing and mocking cultural authority of any kind

- Author is dead, critics are now the unacknowledged legislators of the world

- Ironic Style: "To mean anything is not in vogue"

Anxiety of the Humanist

- Tiring of pomo master narrative for 20 years, but without other strategies of interpretation

- Fearful of falling into meaning, and serving the evil hegemony

- Looking for new objects of interpretation for established theorized methodologies: pop culture, science and technology, digital culture

Deconstructing Gravity

Social Text, May 1996

"Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,"

"It has thus become increasingly apparent that physical 'reality,' no less than social 'reality,' is at bottom a social and linguistic construct; that scientific 'knowledge,' far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it."

How could this happen?

How could humanistic study become so detached from common sense?

- Profound truth that our shared reality is consensual and socially constructed

- Profound anxiety over arbitrariness of the relationship between signifier and sign

- Literary dis(s)course that privileged the play of meaning over consistent definitions, logical argumentation, and standards of proof

First Wave Digital Humanities 1980s-ongoing

- Educational motivation

- Primary texts in multiple contexts

- Digital archives on line

- In sync with major pomo insights

  - Multiple perspectives

  - Rhizome rapture

Second Wave Challenges 2000s - ongoing

- Humanists are doing their own programming

- Humanists are using inadequate but proliferating off-the-shelf tools

- Identity crisis is unresolved on 2 levels

  - What is a humanist? What does a humanist do?

  - What is the value of things done in bits instead of ink?

Digital Challenge

- Dis-intermediation and speed-up of academic discourse: blogs, twitter, instead of established journals, but old guard still in place

  - Authority of the book in jeopardy: MLA Variorum Confrontation

- Rampant empiricism

  - Language itself penetrated by "brute force" over syntax

- How do we re-orient ourselves?

- How do we embrace tools of empiricism without collapsing humanistic discourse?

- How do we lose the irony and tedious wordplay but keep the deeper ideological skepticism of the pomo movement?

From deconstruction…

- Anxiety of the arbitrary sign

- Shame / resistance of the encoding of power

- Analytical power to problemitize the transparent

- Rapture of the rhizome

- Rapture of the indeterminate

through recognition of a new medium

- New affordances of representation

- New power to focus shared attention

- New ways to structure meaning

- New possibilities for creative expression

to meta-construction

- Creating meaning as a procedural system

- Creating meaning as multi-contextual

- Creating deeply playful, kaleidoscopic structures

- Creating standardized containers for primary texts as focus of joint attention and collective knowledge-making

From binary representation to system representation

- Not either / or

- Not hierarchy or flat network

- Proceduralized systems of meaning, understood in active engagement and replay

- Not hero-critic but collective community of practice

- Tim Berners-Lee and Semantic Web ontologies

- Simulations and replay games

Reframing Media

New Model :

Focus Shared Attention

Send Messages

Create Meaning

Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

Augment Humanity

Contest Power

British Museum Knucklebones (~300 BC)

1. Information Transmission Model: Telegraph

Shannon & Weaver (1949)

- Message relay

- Channel capacity

- Signal vs noise

- Coded signals

- Goal: accurate and efficient relay of a message from a sender to a receiver through a coded signal over a noise-free channel.

2. Semiotic Model: Language

Peirce through Derrida

Systems of Signifiers

Collective construction of meaning

Indexes, Icons, Signs

Metonymy, Metaphor

Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

3. Humanistic Augmentation Model: Printing Press

McLuhan, Engelbart

Technologies of human augmentation

Fear and desire aroused by media change

Cultural disruption to cognition and human scale

4. Political Model: TV, Mass Media

R. Williams, Foucault, Jenkins …

Producers vs audiences

Hegemony vs participation

Send Messages

Create Meaning

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Reframing Media

Existing Models

New Model :

Focus Shared Attention

Send Messages

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British Museum Knucklebones (~300 BC)

Merlin Donald's
4 stages of cultural/cognitive evolution

Episodic (events: e.g. shared danger)

Mimetic (gestures, imitation, mime, e.g. shared hunting)

Mythic (symbolic expression, language, e.g. epic poem)

Theoretic (abstraction, external memory, e.g. written document)

ORIGINS
· OF THE ·
MODERN
MIND
THREE STAGES IN THE EVOLUTION
OF CULTURE AND COGNITION
MERLIN DONALD
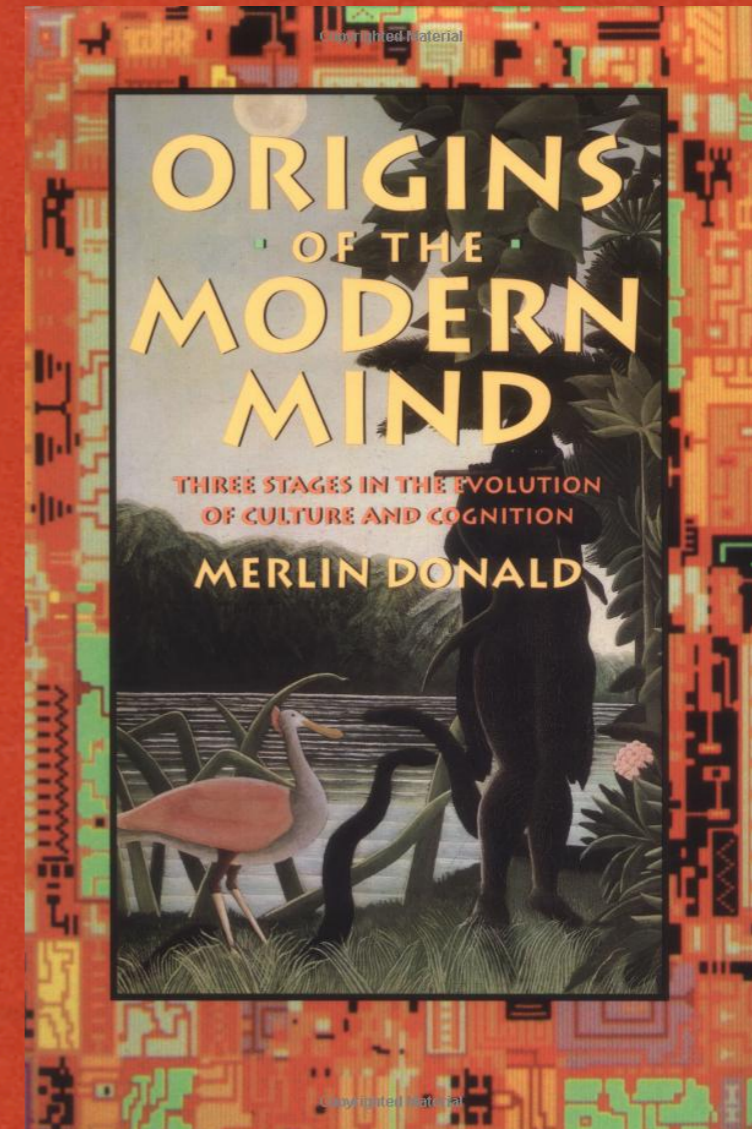
Wittgenstein was wrong about games ...

they all do have something in common

RING-A-ROUND A ROSY.

Consider Knucklebones ....

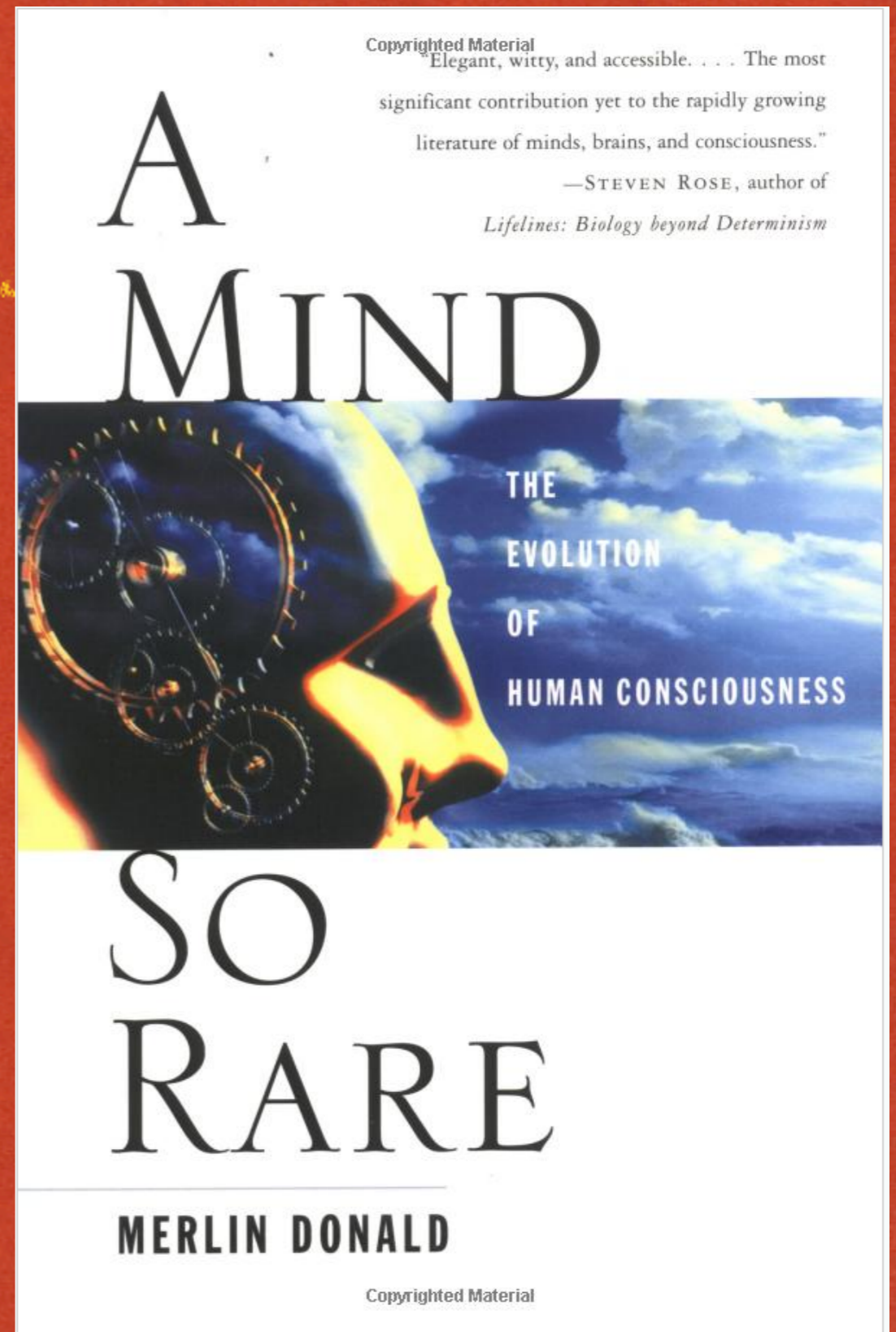Games ritualize the experience of the

"joint attentional scene"

Games allow us to practice shared focus on arbitrary symbolic objects like tokens, playing fields, numerical markings
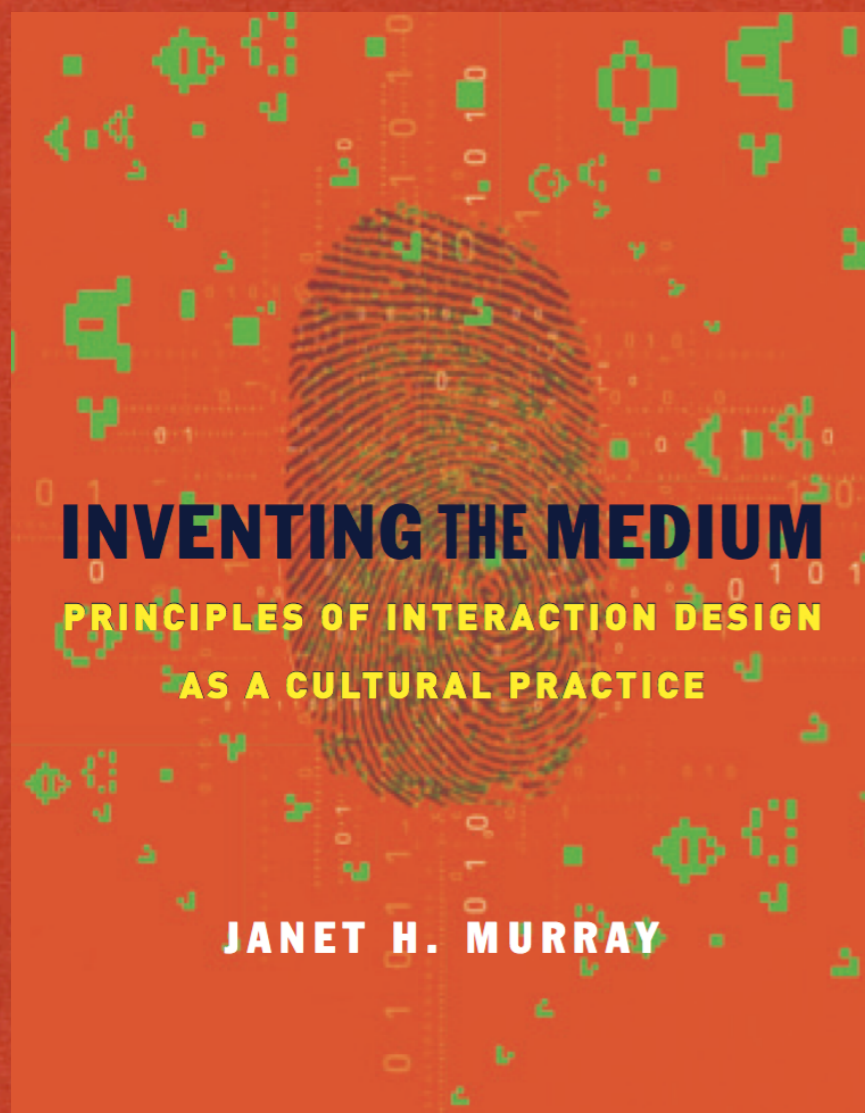
Language Focuses Attention

"Language differentiates experience for us.…

[W]ords and sentences … focus our attention. They elevate our awareness of whatever they specify. Moreover, when stories and ideas are juxtaposed, so that their meanings collide, they can shift our focus to new semantic spaces…. In a word, languages clarify the experienced world."

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"Elegant, witty, and accessible. . . . The most significant contribution yet to the rapidly growing literature of minds, brains, and consciousness."
—STEVEN ROSE, author of
Lifelines: Biology beyond Determinism

A MIND

THE
EVOLUTION
OF
HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

SO
RARE

MERLIN DONALD

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So… what is a medium?

INVENTING THE MEDIUM

PRINCIPLES OF INTERACTION DESIGN
AS A CULTURAL PRACTICE

JANET H. MURRAY

- A medium is a cultural construction made up of shared practices, strategies of interpretation, and conventionalized formats and genres that allows us to expand the scope and range of shared attention.

- Therefore the goal of digital (new) media design is to identify, refine, and (when necessary) invent the conventions of shared attention.
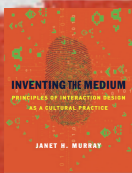
Inventing the Medium: A recipe

- Start with core activity, abstracted from its legacy media forms

- Map activity to core digital affordances

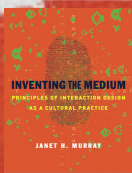- Reimagine how to serve core activity and core goals by maximizing digital affordances

Humanities

The focus of the humanities is the human condition – past and present, actual and speculative, as it presents itself to human reason and the human imagination

- To preserve memory

- To offer multiple interpretations

- To recognize and clarify values

Digital Humanities

The focus of the humanities is the human condition – past and present, actual and speculative, as it presents itself to human reason and the human imagination

- To preserve memory with digital affordances

- To offer multiple interpretations with digital affordances

- To recognize and clarify values with digital affordances

Inventing the Medium: A recipe

- Start with core activity, abstracted from its legacy media forms

    - E.g. Shakespeare variorum without shoeboxes of index cards or book or database or TEI

- Map activity to core digital affordances

- Reimagine how to serve core activity and core goals by maximizing digital affordances

Spatial

Blocked out staging
Juxtaposition of texts
Global reception

Encyclopedic

Every major production
All the sources
All the contemporary plays
All the succeeding major quotation references

Procedural

Searchable by multiple facets
Concordances and text analysis
Graphing of overlap in texts

Participatory

Discussion of points of interpretation
References to scholarship linked back and forward
Info architecture for adding links to items in distributed collections

Meaning-Making as Focus

- Celia Pearce *Communities of Play, MIT Press*
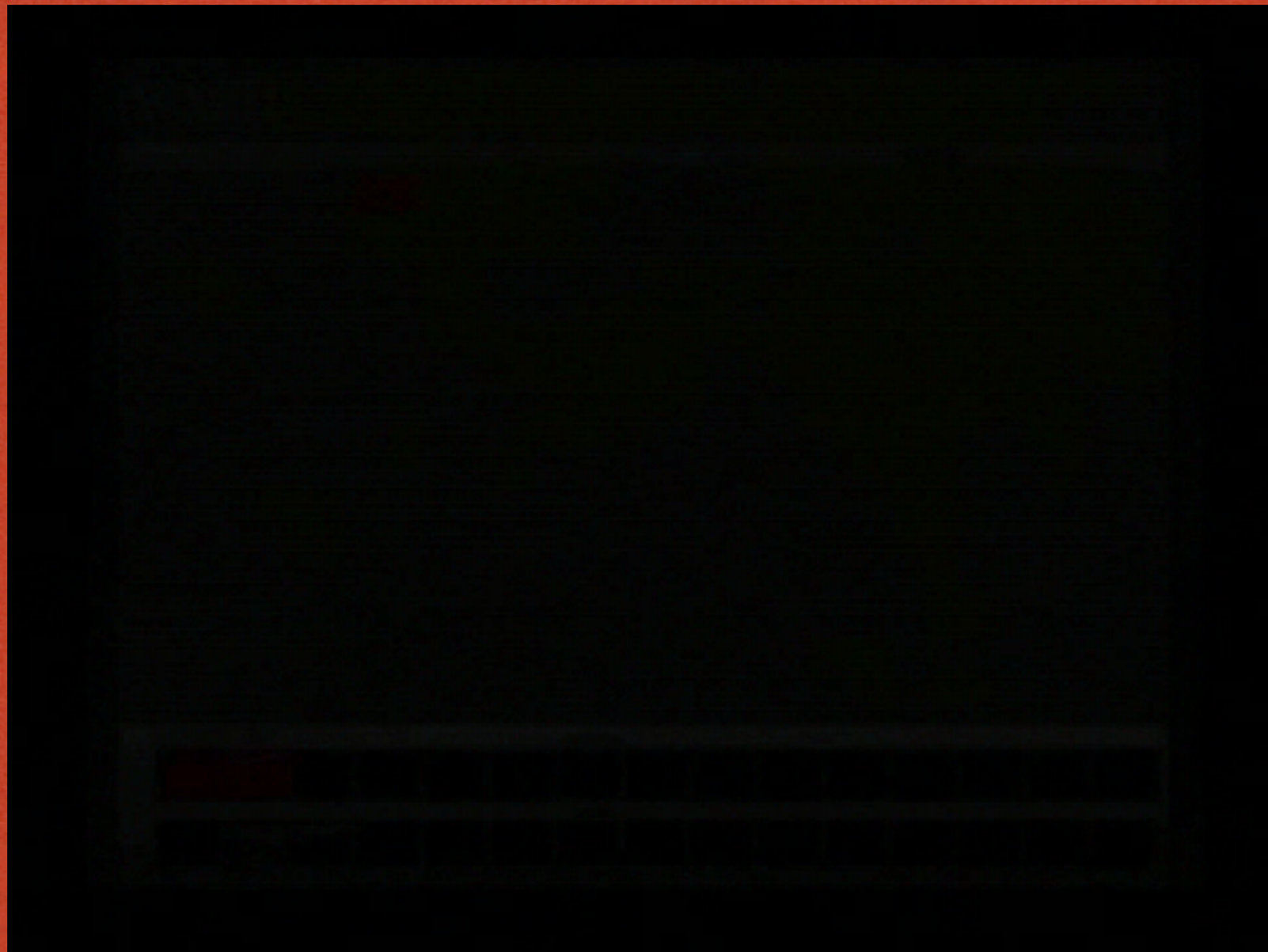
Expand Expressivity

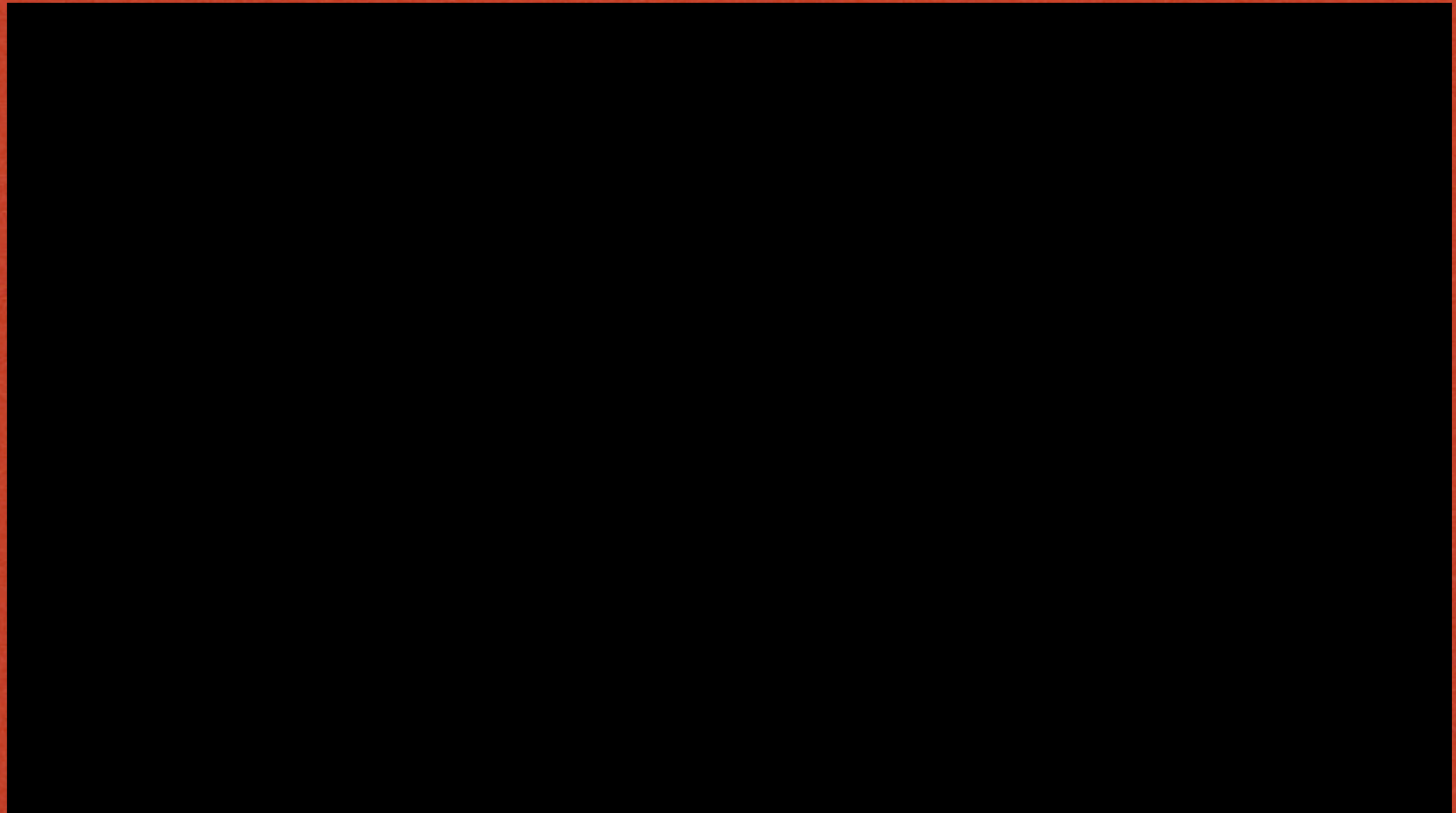

Mary Flanagan

Carl DiSalvo
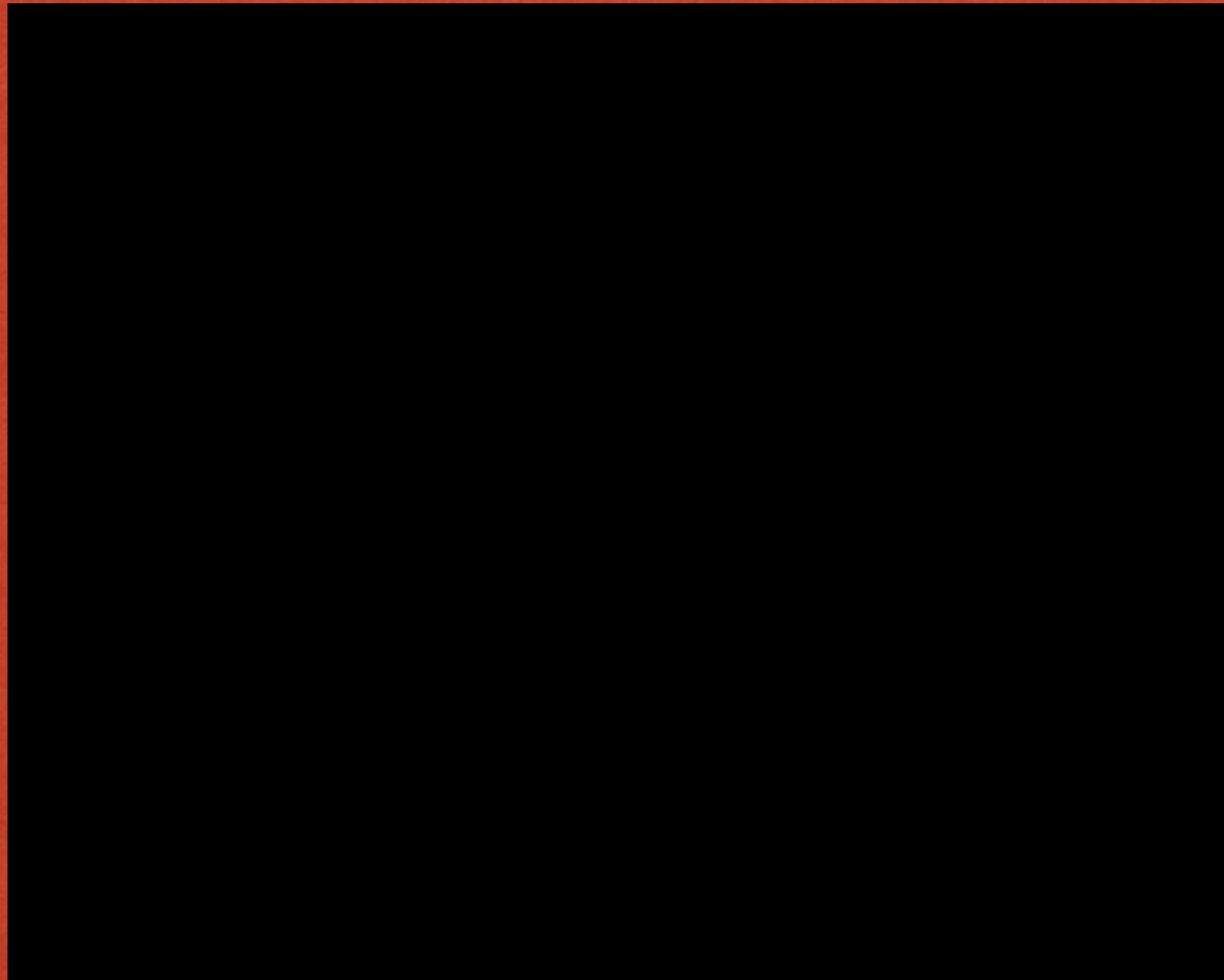
Casablanca Digital Edition

Reliving Last Night

Story-Map

From deconstruction…

- Anxiety of the arbitrary sign

- Shame / resistance of the encoding of power

- Rapture of the indeterminate

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- Creating standardized containers for collective knowledge creation

Digital Humanists:
Cheer Up and Collaborate!

- Larger circle of shared attention

- Standardization of editions

- Semantic segmentation of critical discourse

- Collective knowledge creation

Thank you!

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http://inventingthemedium.com

http://etv.gatech.edu

Digital Media MS and PhD at Georgia Tech

Jay Bolter * Ian Bogost * Carl DiSalvo * Chris LeDantec * Ali Mazalek * Brian Magerko * Janet Murray * Michael Nitsche * Celia Pearce * ? (search this year)