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

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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
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
"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

Existing Models

New Model:
Focus Shared Attention

Send Messages
Create Meaning
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

Leci n'est pas une pipe.

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
Reframing Media

Existing Models

Send Messages
Create Meaning
Augment Humanity
Contest Power

New Model:
Focus Shared Attention

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)
Wittgenstein was wrong about games ... they all do have something in common.
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 differentiates experience for us....

[Words 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.”
So... what is a medium?

- 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
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
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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
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spatial</th>
<th>Encyclopedic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Every major production</td>
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- **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...

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Digital Humanists: Cheer Up and Collaborate!

- Larger circle of shared attention
- Standardization of editions
- Semantic segmentation of critical discourse
- Collective knowledge creation
INVENTING THE MEDIUM
PRINCIPLES OF INTERACTION DESIGN
AS A CULTURAL PRACTICE

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Thank you!

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