
The *Blackwell Companion to Digital Humanities*: a Roundtable Discussion

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This session will reflect on the recently published *Blackwell Companion to Digital Humanities* by six of its contributors and its three editors. This collection marks a turning point in the field of digital humanities: for the first time, a wide range of theorists and practitioners, those who have been active in the field for decades, and those recently involved, disciplinary experts, computer scientists, and library and information studies specialists, have been brought together to consider digital humanities as a discipline in its own right, as well as to reflect on how it relates to areas of traditional humanities scholarship.

The participants for this panel discussion reflect the broad range of themes and disciplinary areas of interest that the 38 chapters of the *Companion* address. Rockwell's chapter "New Media" (co-authored with Andrew Mactavish) is part of the History section, which considers the field from disciplinary perspectives. Perry Willett's chapter, "Perspectives and Communities", and

Willard McCarty's chapter entitled "Modelling", represent the second section, 'Principles', which includes chapters on databases, text encoding, and communities. Martha Nell Smith, writing about "Electronic Scholarly Editing", and Claire Warwick, writing on "Print Scholarship and Digital Resources", are part of the *Companion*'s third section, entitled 'Applications', which covers a wide range of cross-disciplinary perspectives on how computer-mediation has changed our approach from fields as diverse as authorship studies, robotic poetics, and speculative computing. Abby Smith's chapter on "Preservation", is from the *Companion*'s last section entitled 'Production, Dissemination, Archiving', which covers a broad range of practical issues (including project design, conversion of primary sources, text tools, and preservation).

The panel will open with a discussion of the collection's origins in the research carried out over the past half a century on textually-focused computing in the humanities. It will, however, quickly move on to how broadly the field now defines itself, which is evident from even the most cursory glance at the *Companion*'s table of contents. The field remains deeply interested in text. But as advances in technology have made it first possible, then trivial to capture, manipulate, and process other media, the field has redefined itself to embrace the full range of multimedia. Especially over the last decade with the advent of the World-Wide Web, digital humanities has broadened its reach. At the same time, it has remained in touch with the goals that have animated it from the outset: using information technology to illuminate the human record, and bringing an understanding of the human record to bear on the development and use of information technology. In it is in these areas that the chapters by Willett and McCarty are especially relevant.

The first eleven chapters of the *Companion* address the field from disciplinary perspectives. Although the breadth of fields covered is wide, what is revealed is how computing has cut across disciplines to provide not only tools, but also methodological focal points. What the editors discovered when doing final editing of the volume is that there exists a common focus across disciplines on preserving physical artifacts whether these have been left to us by chance (ruin, and other debris of human activity), or that which has been near-impossible to capture in its intended form (music, performance, and event). Yet many disciplines have gone beyond simply wishing to preserve these artifacts, to re-representing and manipulating them so that their hidden properties and traits can be revealed. Moreover, digital humanities now also concerns itself with the creation of new artifacts which are born digital and require rigorous study and understanding in their own right.

What was also revealed in editing the volume was the widespread notion that there is a clear and direct relationship between the interpretive strategies that humanists employ and

the tools that facilitate exploration of original artifacts based on those interpretive strategies. More simply put, those working in the digital humanities have long held the view that application is as important as theory. This point is clearly demonstrated in the chapters by Martha Nell Smith and Clare Warwick. Thus exemplary tasks traditionally associated with humanities computing hold the digital representation of archival materials on par with analysis or critical inquiry, as well as theories of analysis or critical inquiry originating in the study of those materials. The field also places great importance on the means of disseminating the results of these activities as well as the realization that strategies for preserving digital objects must be built into the design process at the very earliest stages of project design, as evidenced by Abby Smith's contribution.

The panel will close with a discussion of how the *Companion* serves as a historical record of the field, capturing a sense of the digital humanities as they have evolved over the past half-century, and as they exist at the moment. Yet, if one looks at the issues that lie at the heart of nearly all contributions to this volume, one will see that taken as a whole, this collection reflects a relatively clear view of the future of the digital humanities, which the panel will also consider. Lastly, the panel will address how digital humanities is addressing many of the most basic research paradigms and methods in the disciplines, to focus our attention on important questions to be asked and answered, in addition to important new ways of asking and answering that are enabled by our interaction with the computer.

2005-03-21. <<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/~jmu2m/KR/>>

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