Introduction

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Abstract

The following contributions offer a comprehensive survey of the impeding turns in the scholarly agenda of digital studies. In so doing, they probe the future cultural scenarios looming beyond digital technologies and their related practices, concepts, and perspectives. Such a collective interrogation of our digital future investigates the full spectrum of the humanities. As a result, our notions of *subjectivity*, *identity*, *consciousness*, *literacy*, *text*, and *medium* emerge in these essays as significantly altered by the digital in unusual and unexpected ways. Papers scrutinize a variegated set of relationships between the human neurological network and the networked computer, real and virtual spaces, and subjectivity and procedurality. Scholars in this cluster re-envision such issues in the light of an all-encompassing ontological shift underway as a consequence of the increasingly pervasive presence of the digital in our relations with machines and their processes.

Futures of Digital Studies

The materials of the DHQ special clusters[1] on the Futures of Digital Studies were originally presented as papers during *Futures Of Digital Studies*, the 5th Digital Assembly conference held at University of Florida in February 2010. Since its formal inception in the fall of 2007, the Digital Assembly graduate organization has pursued an expansion of its areas of interest that closely mirrors the increasingly pervasive presence of the digital. From its prominent visibility in society and communication, to its less perceptible manifestations in culture, identity and consciousness, the digital is a site of scholarly investigation still negotiating discursive boundaries, critical approaches and methodological stances.

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Since the early period of its activities, and especially under the direction of the writers of this introduction (2008-11), the Digital Assembly has engaged and collaborated with several disciplines. The goal was not only to assess the import of digital technologies in the humanities, but also to promote a wider understanding of our contemporary "digital condition". As a condition, rather than as a technological prosthesis, the digital seems to function more and more as a true reality principle. Valuable partners in such an enterprise have included over the years the Digital Arts, Art History, Computer Science, Anthropology, and English programs at the University of Florida as well as scholars of literature, art, cinema, philosophy, and computing from other institutions around the world.

2

Operating in an English department that – in its devotion to the analysis of the cultural, ethnic, and social history of the Americas and their literary traditions – might be characterized as prominently new media-oriented, the Digital Assembly began coordinating interdepartmental connections in early 2008. With support from several academic units at the University of Florida, *Futures Of Digital Studies* turned a basic scholarly symposium firmly rooted in the literary field into an event accounting for a wider range of emerging practices in digital environments. The two days of conference panels from which the present articles originate were integrated with a fundamental attention to visual art, music and sound, computer science, and other aspects of digital culture.[2] We sought to expand the thematic focus on the "literary" in the digital age into a conversation among digital artists, theorists, and critics that would explore the state of the art of a variegated set of digitally-mediated practices. In particular, we wanted to create an occasion for meditation and reflection that might open space for (pre)figuring possible evolutions of scholarly disciplines, academic debates and

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various concepts and perspectives circulating in the age of digital technology.

Unforeseen Futures

Although *Futures Of Digital Studies* initially solicited contributions focusing on impeding turns in the methodological agenda of such an emerging field, many presentations – and the resulting papers included here – would end up pointing rather to the *subject position* that results from present and future collaborations between humans and their digital environments. In other words, critical attention would ultimately privilege the level of lived experience more often than the disciplinary one. As supervisors and coordinators of the evolution of these interconnected speculations on the digital, we interpret such an outcome as inherently meaningful. The result itself stands as a mark of how digital studies may imagine themselves precisely as a practice rather than as a concrete scholarly entity, one that rests firmly and predominantly in the experiential expression of the theoretical.

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Such an attention to subjective experience challenges the typical binaries to which digitality is often reduced: organic/machinic, language/code, self/other, or subject/object. More generally, it also implicitly questions the primacy of rational/analytical thinking in theoretical understanding. Interrogations of our digital future take the form of an open-ended question investing the full spectrum of intellectual resources we usually reserve for individuality, from highly abstract concepts to the most immediate intense feelings and intuitions. In Gregory Ulmer's " Avatar Emergency ", for instance, the term avatar shifts from iconic representation of the self to an oracle-like revelatory presence in the digital sphere. Terry Harpold's " The Underside of the Digital Field " takes on Jacques Lacan's four discourses to promote models of inquiry that thrive on the tension of the analyst/hysteric relationship. If the digital has often reconfigured notions of the self, authors in this special issue address subjectivity as digital theory in process. As a consequence, clearly demarcated disciplinary borders seem likely to frustrate an underlying methodological spirit that seems to emerge as multiple and simultaneous.

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The emphasis on the fundamental plurality of imaginative paths (the "futures" in the event's title) proves to be crucial. The title's provocation lies in its acknowledgement that, at the moment, digital studies hardly have a present – at least on the institutional level. Not surprisingly, papers have responded to such a contingent situation by positioning the scholarly subject in-between *gnosis* (conceptual grasp) and *poiesis* (speculative construction). The productive indeterminacy of such kind of intellectual critique fundamentally equates both the arbitrariness of sampling/quantization typical of digitization processes and the "dance between possibilities of representation" of what Loss Pequeño Glazier calls the "conditional" electronic text [Glazier 2002, 15]. Such a sense of multiplicity is often connected with the variety of subjective processes and therefore frequently treated as hardly reducible to the range of properties of an empirical technological tool. Rob Schoenbeck in "Playing with Chance: On Random Generation in Playable Media and Electronic Literature", in fact, advocates for an increased interconnection between the procedural and the experiential approach in our relation to the randomness instantiated by digital works.

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A consequent effect of such a focus on the variance and heterogeneity exhibited by the digital is the reconfigured role of the medium. Contrary to Rosalind Krauss's articulation of the necessity of maintaining a concept of a medium[3] regardless of current trends of conflating, converging, or transcending media characteristics, several presentations made at *Futures Of Digital Studies* leave aside the question of media or even genre convention. They often deemphasize the product, object, or device with which the reader, player, or user interacts in favor of an understanding of the multifariously inter-related behavioral practices instantiated by the digital condition. Craig Saper in " Readies Online " claims that the actual process of reading has genres and therefore expands the concept of genre away from the text object toward its relationship with users and platforms. The focus of analyzing media or genre falls substantially on the implications that such digital expressions have for the human subject. Possible futures of digital studies, from this point of view, seem not to lie in formalist critiques of digital objects or their methods of bending or blurring media and genre boundaries. As Maria Engberg and Jay David Bolter observe in " Digital Literature and the Modernist Problem ", while political critique or formalist experimentation form major motives of the historical avant-garde, these impulses do not necessarily apply to or translate into digital literary practices. As a consequence, we can imagine digital studies as increasingly turning scholarly attention toward the processes through which humans encounter themselves in a digital environment that is always inherently mediated.

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There is, perhaps most importantly, a recognizable emphasis on *life*. Such an emphasis spans from concerns for "articulating those things that ceaselessly transform life" [Thacker 2008, 135] (in Eugene Thacker's "biophilosophical" terms) to tendencies to anthropomorphize relational systems connected via processes of expression, mediation, and signification. For Lissa Holloway-Attaway social media spaces are no longer seen as writing surfaces but as life-worlds. In " Beyond Representation: Embodied Expression and Social Me-dia " she holds that, by developing a collective network rather than promoting personally motivated productions, social media artifacts not only conflate public and private space, but effectively subvert the subject's dimension. According to John Johnston's " Webbots and Machinic Agency ", the proliferation of web bots on the internet can be envisioned as the emergence of a new "low life" that we are more and more destined to acknowledge, face, or merge with. Writing itself is "alive" in its constantly reconfigurable existence as indexed presence on Google servers. John Cayley in " Writing to Be Found and Writing Readers " encourages us to view digital inscriptions as processes or practices of co-authorship rather than as products of concrete digital matter.

Digital existence – just like bio/analogic life - emerges as intrinsically contradictory and ambivalent. The same web spiders that threaten human intelligence itself can become the means of the artist's creative originality.[4] Similarly, the narrative event can be both the cause and the effect of our cognitive constructions: it can spill into the real world experience as much as it can penetrate our sensorial sphere from electronic "elsewheres". Brian Greenspan's " The New Place of Reading: Locative Media and the Future of Narrative " offers *StoryTrek* as one example of the first case. Greenspan shows how narrative can respond to a reader's physical location and movement through space and time by bringing to light shared yet conflicting concepts of navigation. Joseph Tabbi's " Graphic Sublime: On the Art and Designwriting of Kate Armstrong and Michael Tippett ", on the other hand, reveals how the digital can *de facto* reverse the process of recounting the human world. Automatized influxes of information made available via digital tools such as RSS Readers can reorient informational trajectories in ways that make data come to the reader already in the form of potential narrative bits. Such a turn, in Tabbi's view, makes readers of the digital era suspicious and anxious about their own view of the world virtually approximating literary authors' diegetic constructs.

In these essays we see, more generally, an explicit awareness that life, subjects, culture, art, and technological production might mirror their digital technologies. Aden Evens in " Web 2.0 and the Ontology of the Digital " charts an ontology of the digital premised upon abstraction and upon a binary code that betrays the subject as generic, anonymous, void of distinction, and confined to a closed set of choices that disallow expression of resistance. The digital not only recodes the whole set of practices and habits we enact on a daily basis – the way we type, the places we visit, the decisions we make – but also "reformats" their pre-existing conditions in space and time. In their digital instantiations, space can become incongruent and "eccentric" and time compresses itself to the utmost degree, pressing logos and reason towards instantaneity. Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux's " Stretched Skulls: Anamorphic Games and the Memento Mortem Mortis " examines spatial eccentricity in video games' digital environments that transcend consideration of anthropic needs while Gregory Ulmer elaborates on our need to reason, process, and act in ways suitable to the compressed model of time and space presented by digital technologies and real-time communication. The digital, from this point of view, channels our intellectual energies into a constant attempt to negotiate unfamiliar spatio-temporal conditions.

Exposure to digital procedurality ends up creating new modes of existence in ways that these pieces insightfully disclose: modified linguistic habits ("to avatar" as a *verb*), altered literary functions (the reader as constant "receiver" of dispersed multimedia textual bits), revised disciplinary authority (by "hystericizing" academia) and so on. In so doing, the digital can even expose our *fantasies* both at technological, institutional, and cultural levels. Aaron Kashtan's " Forward to the Past: Nostalgia for Handwriting in *Scribblenauts* and *The World Ends With You* " compellingly shows how practicing handwriting as gaming interface can reveal nostalgia for older media and ultimately produce a realization that handwriting was never a fully embodied writing technology. Similarly, in tracing the term *node* through the fields of neuroscience and psychology, Phillip H. Gochenour's " Nodalism " exposes a tendency in computing to replicate the structure and function of the human neural process, an inclination that often privileges lists and data over anomalies and narrative. In demystifying our intellectual procedures, digital studies reveal a remarkable desire to overcome categories as such. From this point of view, these papers seem to share the attention to the resurgence of Baroque, whose motives

are to confound or challenge the boundaries of categories rather than to categorize. Authors such as Omar Calabrese, Gregg Lamberg, Kresmir Purgar, Gilles Deleuze, Mieke Bal Angela Ndalianis, Norman Klein, or Timothy Murray frame such a perspective in connection with the late 20th and early 21st century and, in some cases, specifically with the digital.

The present papers seem to collectively suggest for the subject a potential recognizable role that can be named, perhaps, mainly by analogy. To use T. S. Eliot's words, the best analogy is probably that of the *catalyst*. Functional relationships between the human neurological network and the networked computer confound the individualization of the human from the machinic while deemphasizing the individual from the collective. As a result, productions and achievements in digital environments (be they artistic, socio-political or scientific in nature) seem to lie suspended until the proper juncture between catalyst and the chemical reactants make them possible.[5] The subjects of digital culture function, however, without assumptions of mastery.[6] They rather respond to the trauma of a gross ontological shift in what it means to think as a human in the era of digital machines and their processes.

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This tendency also has a collateral effect. The digital subject as catalyst finds its most charged reactions when negotiating the unexpected. The impulse of the digital subject is to proliferate models of thinking and behaving *through* digital apparati rather than ordering or dominating experience with digital tools and functions. The challenge seems less and less that of redirecting our fear of complexity toward concerns for bad design ([Norman 2010]) and more that of making the most of complexity's allure and richness in the exploration of its creative and heuristic dimension. This translates, on the disciplinary level, into using any term as a concept infinitely applicable to seemingly unrelated forms and discourses. "The digital" is perhaps more productively seen and treated as a travelling concept[7] than strictly as a genre or as a specific term. Hence, we simultaneously see the digital as nodal in neuroscience, rhizomatic in philosophy, and coded in literature.

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Contrary to the apparent micro-field specialization, an understanding of the digital as inter-related sets of processes seems to call for a return of global or Renaissance minds – no matter if single or distributed ones. The digital as a process, and as a travelling concept entertains new (heuristic) forms of intellectual curiosity. In its formulation as relational and associative rather than binary or oppositional, the digital can promote thought whose goal is not to grasp *a* global picture of cosmic relations (by means of digitized big data for instance) but to be seduced by an aesthetic vision and a "sense of wonder" of silicon-based future possibilities.

[14]

Adventurous thinkers such as Ray Kurzweil ([Kurzweil 2001]) and Nicholas Negroponte ([Negroponte 1995]) have frequently insisted on the importance of paying attention to the effects of the exponential rate of technological development. We need, however, to consider that the critical cognitive abilities of our digital self might not likely match such models of mathematical progression – at least in terms of corresponding changes in paradigmatic interpretive shifts.[8] While we genuinely hope that the papers assembled in these two issues might in time produce exponentially elaborate reflections, we also presently value them for their attempts to sketch trajectories still well anchored in our extant centuries-long intellectual heritage. Regardless of the specific direction they seem to face toward, the contents of the *Futures Of Digital Studies* cluster appear to us as visible platforms for tracks ideally pointing to infinity.

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Notes

[1] The first of these clusters is published in DHQ volume 5.3 (2011); the second cluster is published in DHQ volume 6.2 (2012). Articles in the both clusters are linked from this introduction.

[2] FDS 2010 also featured an art exhibit and a concluding roundtable videoconference session featuring an international group of scholars. See http://www.english.ufl.edu/fds/.

[3] Rosalind Krauss in her 1999 book, *"A Voyage On The North Sea": Art in the Age Of The Post-Medium Condition*, articulates that the concept of a medium must be preserved. Boundaries between media allow for a proper judgment of how an artist may have manipulated the standard. In such a reading, rules are quite literally made to be broken.

[4] Compare John Johnston's contention that, despite their non-hierarchical organization, automated bots enable capitalist society with John

Cayley's repurposing of Google corporation's search engine as a proper poetic collaborator.

[5] T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and Individual Talent" uses the chemistry metaphor to discuss how every poet confronts poetic creation in relation to any pre-existing body of work.

[6] Terry Harpold, in turning to Lacan's four discourses, troubles the role of the master and the university in producing new institutional and pedagogical models appropriate to the digital humanities.

[7] Mieke Bal in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* analyzes terms, like metaphor or narrative, that have crossed through several disciplines. For Bal, these terms are living concepts that create methodological anchors to heuristic interdisciplinary inquiry.

[8] See [Vicas 1998]. We may now be involved in what Lettrist Isidore Isou calls the amplique stage of aesthetic motives, one concerned with compiling increasingly complex stories. However, the amplique's counter motive of ordered reflection in the ciselant stage cannot be wholly discounted or ignored.

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