

The Age Old Question: A Review of *What is Digital History?* by Hannu Salmi

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Abstract

A book review of Hannu Salmi's *What is Digital History?*. Salmi's work offers a clear and coincide introduction to the history of digital humanities, notes the current state of the field, and address common criticism faced by digital humanists. In particular, this book would be of interest to those teaching undergraduate or graduate courses in historical methodology, public history, or digital history.

The latest addition to the *What is History?* series by Polity Books, Hannu Salmi's *What is Digital History?* provides a compelling introduction to the burgeoning field of digital history. Interdisciplinary in scope — including art history, public history, and the digital humanities — Salmi introduces major concepts, addresses well-known limitations, and broadly surveys the state of the field in the United States, Western Europe, and beyond. This is not a “how-to” manual for those building digital projects, but a “what-is” book, which deftly and concisely defines digital history as a branch of historical analysis. 1

Opening with an overview on digital culture and technology, Salmi grounds his study in its historical antecedents. The rapid development of technology in the decades following the Second World War provided new tools for scholars. The 1990s, in turn, saw the development of the World Wide Web and with it a rapid growth in digital scholarship — including the digitization of historical manuscripts and the development of online curatorial services. George Mason University's Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (RRCHNM) was founded in 1994; its mission, as Stephen Robertson noted, was “to democratize the past — to incorporate multiple voices, reach diverse audiences, and encourage popular participation in presenting and preserving the past” [Salmi 2020, 5]. Such pioneering projects paved the way for digital scholarship on a wider scale. Salmi, in particular, emphasizes the close association between digital history and public history within the United States. That was largely true for projects and digital centers developed in the 1990s, including the RRCHNM, but there are important methodological and philosophical differences between digital history and public history; recent digital history projects reflect this divergence. Salmi, however, minimizes the distinctions between these two subfields of the historical profession. 2

The opening chapter, “The Digital Past,” examines the distinction between “born-digital” and “digitized” data, and the limitations of both forms. From professional emails to personal Tweets, the digital age has brought with it a substantial amount of ephemera. If preserved, “born-digital” data offers underused but tantalizing subjects of future analysis for historians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Housing an effusion of paper letters, reports, and manuscripts, archives and libraries across the globe have made concerted efforts to convert their vast, physical holdings into digital representations. Examples of “digitized data” include the Library of Congress' American Memory Project, Google Books, and Spain's El Archive General de Indias. Salmi, a nineteenth-century historian at the University of Turku in Finland, provides myriad examples of European digitization projects aimed at historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, the merit of this work is its transnational scope. 3

Reading, Salmi argues, is not a straightforward process. In “Reading and Textuality in Digital History,” he considers “reading” in the digital age and the use of texts as “big data.” Close reading and textual interpretation “have always been 4

at the heart of history as a discipline” [Salmi 2020, 8]. Digital history, given the vast scope of the available data and the use of Optical Character Recognition (OCR), requires a different methodological approach: distant reading. Computer software and researchers mine ‘big data’ sets for micro and macro level patterns. Salmi, however, readily notes the limitations of OCR software and its many inaccuracies.

While not a major feature of the work, a cursory analysis of mapping and data visualization is included in “Mapping and Viewing History.” Influenced by the development and advancement of geospatial information systems, the spatial turn encouraged multidisciplinary collaborations: libraries digitized maps; scholars mapped historical data. Image digitization, too, has revolutionized the field, according to Salmi. Large-scale digitization of paintings, photographs, and other images have permitted “distant viewing,” a method of using computer software to interpret metadata. Focused mainly on art history and image digitization, Chapter 3 minimizes the importance of spatial analysis in digital history. Mapping is a powerful tool for historical research, and its importance is underestimated here.

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A short fourth chapter, “Interdisciplinarity: Challenges for Research,” surveys some of the complexities of doing digital history. By its very nature, digital history is collaborative and reaches across traditional disciplinary boundaries. That is not new nor are such problems confined to digital history, notes Salmi. In practice, interdisciplinary exploration is difficult given the “tension between disciplinary thinking and interdisciplinary pressure” [Salmi 2020, 77]. Salmi, however, still encourages collaboration while recognizing disciplinary boundaries and each fields’ unique idiosyncrasies. He concludes, “Digital history . . . is not a discipline; it is a branch of historical practice that can also be an interdisciplinary enterprise in which the researcher must enter the trading zone” [Salmi 2020, 77]. In this “trading zone,” historians may question their identity as scholars and must confront the innerworkings of their profession and articulate their research procedures to those outside their field.

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In his final chapter, “Presenting the Past in the Digital Age,” Salmi returns to public history. Many digital projects — The Texas Slavery Project, for example — strive to present historical information to the public via the internet. Other projects pair visualizations with textual information to convey historical data and narration. Open-source programs enable historians to create graphs, timelines, and word clouds. This chapter, in particular, is helpful for those eager to learn more about open-source programs and digital tools, and Salmi lists but does not evaluate several specific programs — AntConc, Voyant Tools, D3, ManyEyes, Gephi, and TextArc, just to name a few.

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Salmi is at times critical of digital history – addressing paywalls, OCR limitations, and interdisciplinary challenges – but he endorses this form of innovative methodology. Yet critics of digital history abound, and a more nuanced conversation regarding digital history’s limitations may have better served its practitioners, both current and future. Nonetheless, this slim volume fulfills an important purpose. Serving as a concise, clear introduction to the field, *What is Digital History?* is ideal for classroom instruction with advanced undergraduate or early-career graduate students. In particular, those teaching introductory historical methodology, public history, or digital history in the United States or Europe would be wise to incorporate this text into their classrooms. Raising key points and introducing innovative projects, this work would without a doubt inspire animated conversations and encourage others to enter the field.

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Works Cited

Salmi 2020 Salmi, H. *What is Digital History?* Polity, Cambridge (2020).



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