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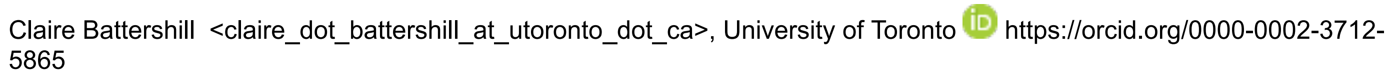
The Stories We Tell: Project Narratives, Project Endings, and the Affective Value of Collaboration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Abstract

This paper considers the the affective and narrative dimensions of considering project lifespans. How do collaborators feel about endings and how does that impact project outcomes and project planning? How might we consider digital projects as temporal and narrative forms deserving of analysis? How do professional relationships, team dynamics, and precarious labour conditions impact the longevity of projects? I argue in this paper that in addition to thoughtful sustainability planning on the technical side, there is value in thinking from a literary perspective about digital humanities projects, about the stories and relationships we are making along with the websites, digital archives, databases, tools, marked-up texts, maps, and innumerable other digital artifacts that arise from large-scale collaborations in this field. The provocation I offer is that applying some of the discursive analytical structures of literary genres to the construction of a digital project and foregrounding its human components of affect and relation can also show a team its ideal duration and ending. Thinking about these matters requires a multi-dimensional approach: we need to think beyond institutional repositories and mirror sites and consider the lived experience of project making and about the structure of the stories we tell about digital work. The paper uses examples from two collaborative projects of different types and durations that I have undertaken.

1

In a story beloved by many kindergarteners, *We are in a Book!*, by Mo Willems, early readers are introduced to an Elephant named Gerald and his friend Piggie. Gradually, Elephant and Piggie come to the realization that they are in fact characters in a book. They peer curiously out of their pages and stare at the reader before them. At first the whole situation seems amusing and they play games with the reader, exhorting them to say silly words out loud and to turn the pages. However, after an initially carefree time joking around about the absurdity of narrative, poor Gerald comes to a terrible recognition: that the story will come to an end. He proceeds to work his way through a crisis of completion, worrying that the ending will come too soon for him to tell his story in its fullness. As is the case with many brilliant works of children's literature, a lot of us can probably relate to Gerald. His cartoonish anguish at the prospect of an ending is familiar. A lot of academics who begin digital humanities projects start out just like this little elephant: enjoying a new way of doing scholarly work, relishing the collaborative possibilities that digital projects can offer, enjoying good company, and not thinking much about how the project will end or even acknowledging, really, that it will inevitably be over sooner or later [Carlin et al. 2018].[1]

2

The Endings Project initiative whose work occasioned this cluster of essays and the symposium on which they were based is asking those involved in DH projects to think deeply on hard questions. DH projects often begin with specific scholarly goals in mind, whether these are editorial, theoretical, archival, or methodological. When projects begin, all is promise, potential, and excitement. The grant funding structure on which many larger projects are founded also demands that projects begin with an optimistic view and a future-oriented perspective. Until recently, very little in the grant application process, at least in the Canadian context, had to do with sustainability.[2] The emergence of data management requirements at the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), for example, is a relatively recent phenomenon, and goes some way to address the open-ended futurity that throughout the 2010s was

often a hallmark of many DH projects.[3] Before such requirements and before the Endings Project suggestions, a team dreamt up a vision and created a plan for executing it, and it could be difficult both practically and epistemologically to think about an ending while constructing a beginning. Even with more stringent requirements for sustainability, these projects still begin in heightened moments of collegiality, collaboration, and shared vision among scholars; they're premised on new and exciting relationships as much as they are on research materials and anticipated scholarly outcomes. By devising this innovative and much-needed framework of "endings compliance," [Endings Principles for Digital Longevity] the Endings Project team offers future new projects the opportunity to think on their own sustainability from the very start of any DH workflow. The Endings project team is also making difficult questions easier by offering a set of technical standards that can help emergent projects conceive of their endings right from the start without taking the many common missteps (expensive technical contracts, unreliable server-side software requiring endless updates) that they otherwise might.

3

In this paper I'd like to argue that in addition to thoughtful sustainability planning on the technical side, there is value in thinking with a literary perspective about digital humanities projects, about the stories and relationships we are making along with the websites, digital archives, databases, tools, marked-up texts, maps, and innumerable other digital artifacts that arise from large-scale collaborations in this field. The provocation I offer here is that applying some of the discursive analytical structures of literary genres to the construction of a digital project and foregrounding its human components of affect and relation can also show a team its ideal duration and ending. These matters require a multi-dimensional approach: we need to think beyond institutional repositories and mirror sites to consider the lived experience of project making and the structure of the stories we tell about digital work.

4

If we think about endings and about projects in a literary sense, we can analyze and read digital projects as the creative and multifaceted texts that they are and become. We can perhaps approach them with intention and care not only as technical artifacts but also as works that we've made, often along with a number of collaborators. Thinking through stories and endings also necessitates thinking about, with, and through time and then about how time manifests in projects. Here, too, narratives and genres can be illuminating. Some notable projects in my own field of literary modernist studies, The Modernist Journals Project [Latham 2011] and The Orlando Project, [Brown et al. 2007] have decades-long stories involving hundreds of contributors and thousands of digitized artifacts. These are the digital humanities "epics": they are long, they are ambitious, and they carry on sometimes through several generations of scholars. They are the kinds of resources that might be almost impossible for users ever to know in their totalities. Others, again drawing from modernist studies, like the Mina Loy project's digital "flash mob," are momentary. These can perhaps be seen as the "lyrics": short in duration, beautiful in their immediacy, able to be apprehended, perhaps, in a sitting. Is your project more like an 800-page Victorian doorstopper, or is it an aphorism? Perhaps even a haiku? There might of course be a wide array of other genres to consider: what might a digital humanities comedy look like, for instance? In more practical terms, how does the project relate to the PI and other collaborators' own academic autobiographies? Will the project span a 35-year academic career and beyond, or a semester? Will the collaborators be life-long friends or collegial fleeting workplace acquaintances? If you know the type of project you're making, not only in the more practical sense of TEI standards or approaches to versioning, but also the more epistemological questions about why this project exists and how its story will be shaped, it becomes possible to orient labour and personnel and even affective connections to the project [Evalyn et al. 2020] in a more intentional fashion that serves a clear purpose and design and, yes, has an ending in mind that suits its overall form.

5

One of the important points to make about the different possibilities for project genres is that they do not all have to be big, or long, or consuming in order to make significant contributions. During a panel discussion in the symposium that gave rise to this cluster of papers, Jessica Otis and Jim McGrath expressed the "liberation" that they both had individually felt upon creating smaller projects "for fun" that might be completed in "a season." These short-duration projects contrast with what Otis in her remarks during the discussion identified as the tacit expectation in DH of always undertaking "huge career shaping long term project[s]." Small projects can be beautiful, and they can be freeing.

6

Here I'm offering a more general meditation on the matter of project genres, of the narrative endings of digital projects, and of the characters involved in the stories of DH. However, my remarks are informed by having worked on different types of projects in recent years. Two in particular have led me to my thinking in this piece: The Modernist Archives

Publishing Project (MAPP) (which I would consider, in this framework, an epic) and Make Believe: The Secret Library of M. Prudhomme (which feels more like a lyric). MAPP is a critical digital archive of early 20th-century publishing materials. The project began in 2013 and is ongoing. The team consists of six Co-Directors (Nicola Wilson, Alice Staveley, Helen Southworth, Elizabeth Willson-Gordon, and Matthew Hannah) who have formed friendships through this work. As literary scholars, we have been conscious of the need for narrative in the project from the start: we wrote a book together, *Scholarly Adventures in Digital Humanities* (2018), that told the scholarly story of how the project came to be and of the vision for our field that we wanted to realize in making it. We thought a lot about where we would store our images, our metadata, and our born-digital content for the long haul. We built in deliberate redundancies and we wrote sustainability plans. We thought very little, however, about the life of the project as a whole, beyond the digital "stuff" we were creating and beyond the sorts of things that are generally considered in technical terms when thinking about digital sustainability. We thought very little, in other words, about what it would mean for us personally to be five or ten or even fifteen years into a project like this. Like Elephant Gerald, we found and still find ourselves a little alarmed at the prospect of closing the metaphorical book, and the prospect has become more challenging the more our friendships have developed over the years. MAPP's story has a happy continuation: we want to keep this thing going, we have all committed to it, and we have agreed that every five years we will reassess. We've also created a strong network of feminist intergenerational mentorship above and beyond the day-to-day requirements of the project. We support each other's individual writing, we talk about our lives outside of work, and we look out for each other. We still want to keep this going, because we are having fun. As Sara Diamond put it in the discussion following our session at the Endings colloquium, "The affective bonds that form in creating these kinds of projects and archives are a really fundamental piece of the connective tissue and the survival [of the projects]." So fundamental that we can imagine, perhaps, that we may not in fact need to talk about endings to the affective or relational aspects of this kind of project work. Even if a website is no longer in active use, friendships and intergenerational mentorships can endure.

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Nowhere was this more true for me than with the Make Believe project, a research creation/creative research/historical fiction/conceptual art project and was funded by a Canada Council New Chapter Grant 2017-19 and consisted of an in-person exhibition that took place over the course of a summer in 2019, accompanied by a digital exhibition to supplement the site-specific in-person experiences. There were over a hundred artists, writers, students, translators, librarians, and others who worked on the project in various capacities, but at the core was the intimacy of female friendship. Heather Jessup, Jillian Povarchook, and I made the project sitting at each other's kitchen tables with babies in our laps. Heather and I had already been dear friends for many years, and the project came out of that friendship rather than the other way round. For that project, the ending was built into the project's story from the start and we recognized it when it came: we knew that when we took down the physical exhibition from the Vancouver Public Library in August 2019, that was it. It was wild and exhausting and wonderful and fleeting, and making it with Heather and all of our amazing collaborators opened a little locked door inside me. It felt, in other words, like a perfect lyric.

8

While I hope the broader ideas in this short essay about the narrative and affective dimensions of project work will resonate beyond these two specific and personal examples, all of my work and thinking in DH has been informed by the sustaining collaborations at the core of each of these very different projects.[4] In her call to action for a more humane approach to academic work, Kathleen Fitzpatrick suggests that "Grounding our work in generous thinking might […] lead us to place a greater emphasis on — and to attribute a greater value to — collaboration in academic life, and to understand how to properly credit all our collaborators. It might encourage us to support and value various means of working in the open, of sharing our writing at more and earlier stages in the process of its development, and of making the results of our research more readily accessible and usable by more readers" [Fitzpatrick 2019, 37]. Part of this openness, I think, can be found in narrating some of these lived experiences. Openness of course is not always ideal, and complexity is always attendant on even the most fruitful and fulfilling of collaborations: "Genuine generosity," Fitzpatrick reminds us, "is not a feel-good emotion, but an often painful, failure-filled process related to what Dominick LaCapra has called 'empathetic unsettlement,' in which we are continually called not just to feel for others but to simultaneously acknowledge their irreconcilable otherness" [Fitzpatrick 2019, 42]. Lest I seem too optimistic about collaboration and its affective rewards, I would like to turn now to some of the fears and vulnerabilities that also can attend DH project work. As Jim McGrath pointed out in his symposium presentation, "actually liking your collaborators" is tremendously important, but "the challenge is making sure our employers are aware of our value/the value of those

collaborations.” Too often the intangible values of collaborative practice are left out of discussions altogether.

No matter the genre, a digital project begins, and then its life proceeds and gets complicated. Of course, as project teams devise digital methods for exploring humanistic questions, they are often confronted with challenges and opportunities they would not have encountered were they writing a single-author monograph or creating a print edition. One such challenge, as the Endings Project team acknowledges, is defining the endpoint of the project in a digital environment that is by nature iterative and surrounded by a mythology of ongoingness and perpetuity. The print publishing process, conversely, naturally produces a moment of completion: a book is published and then it is out in the world and often that’s the end of the active day-to-day work on that particular project (leaving aside the “unfinished” nature of published textual artifacts which of course as a book historian I can never really leave aside). The developmental arc of the monograph is so well-established at this point that we’re used to it; it does not possess the same complexity as discussions of digital project endings. Much as the author might wish to continue to revise and augment a book after it’s done, the illusory fixity of the printed object at least imposes an artificial endpoint on the active work of the project. The existence of a physical object can also seem more definitive than any ending a digital project might devise or arrange for itself. The milestones in the life of a digital project — the launch of a website, say — are often possessed of a more malleable quality. One often launches a website with the idea that it will change and grow over time. However, the discourses of ongoingness and iteration in digital project work, while they do point to a truth about the type of media in question, have their limits. The edition release model [5] proposed by the Endings team creates, among other things, some narrative closure on particular phases of the project. It allows for the satisfaction of completion that is often absent from a more “agile” approach. The edition release also prevents slippage as digital project team members move through their careers — from PhD to postdoc to demanding jobs both within and outside the academy — and finding space for an ever-expanding and ever-continuing digital project within the team members’ individual careers can be a further challenge. Grant cycles come to an end, program centres open and close, and resources run out. Thinking about the long life of a project is twinned with thinking about the long future of an academic career, and even, these days, of the discipline. 9

One of the major factors that can turn DH practitioners into nervous “Elephant Geralds,” reluctant to engage in future thinking and afraid of endings, is precarious labour conditions. These conditions, of course, are not specific to DH, nor are they particular to the academic profession, though they are endemic in it. Contract faculty now outnumber tenure-track faculty in Canada, and as Deidre Rose notes, “non-regular faculty constitute a reserve of low-paid and marginalized academic workers, and an increase in the number of doctorates granted each year in Canada guarantees a continuous supply of highly exploitable workers” [Rose 2020, 7]. The situation is even worse in the United States, as amply documented in scholarly literature and online [Childress 2019]. This of course is not a new problem of capitalist work structures, though it is intensifying. In a 1997 talk at a gathering of economists in Grenoble, Pierre Bourdieu articulated the affective significance of increasing precarity in a capitalist system: “casualization,” he writes, “profoundly affects the person who suffers it: by making the whole future uncertain, it prevents all rational anticipation and, in particular, the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively, against present conditions, even the most intolerable” [Bourdieu 1998, 82]. While Bourdieu is speaking in part of the difficulty and even danger for precarious workers in engaging in strikes and other labour actions, the effect can be more general too: preventing “rational anticipation” is also preventing considered approaches to futurity. Precarious labour conditions, Bourdieu suggests, have more than an economic effect: they lead at their most extreme to what he describes as “the destructuring of existence, which is deprived among other things of its temporal structures, and the ensuing deterioration of the whole relationship to the world, time and space” [Bourdieu 1998, 82]. Narrative and endings are so deeply reliant on their connections to and structuring of time that any threat to that kind of order is necessarily perilous. Precarious conditions threaten to cut stories off before they can even begin. 10

Here, as in the domain of collaboration, affect becomes crucial to consider in thinking about digital projects as whole entities. However, the feelings associated with precarity are fearful and vulnerable ones that are more difficult to discuss and disclose. These are the tragedies of academia, the stories so painful they are hard to tell (although not speaking about them, as Bourdieu also notes, does not make them go away). Sometimes, as in my own experience through seven years of precarious work, the divergent affective dimensions of digital project work can create complexity: the 11

constant fear and uncertainty of precarious labour can be counterbalanced by the positive collegial and friendly relations that collaborative work can foster. It becomes possible to survive precarious conditions with the help of friends, as Gerald the Elephant also finds in his sweet and affirming relationship with Piggie. And yet, the fear of endings looms large for all precarious workers. How can it be possible to plan for a reasonable project ending when doing so requires confronting the reality of an uncertain personal future? If we want sustainable projects, we need sustainable labour practices.

12

In the end, Gerald and Piggie devise a solution to their endings conundrum: they ask the reader to start the book again from the beginning, creating an endless loop of repetition. Starting again from the beginning would seem like a genuine nightmare for most digital project PIs and collaborators and is obviously not an advisable sustainability plan, so perhaps this is where the analogy between digital projects and the genre of comic children's literature must end. It might, however, still be possible to draw encouragement from Elephant and Piggie's collaboration: they make their way from the first page to the last in one another's good company, finding their way together.

Notes

[1] See [Carlin et al. 2018] for an analysis of surveys and interviews of project directors, which indicated that the majority of those surveyed had not considered a specific end point for their DH project when they began to work on it.

[2] See Jessica Otis's essay in this issue for an analysis of the American context.

[3] For the most recent information about data management requirements in the Canadian context, see "Research Data Management."

[4] And through the equally rich collaboration on the topic of DH pedagogy that I've shared for several years now with Shawna Ross.

[5] See "Release Management" in Holmes and Takeda in this volume for details of this approach.

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