

It's Time to Historicize DH: A Review of *Digital Humanities and the Cyberspace Decade, 1990-2001: A World Elsewhere*

Shawna Ross <shawnaross_at_tamu_dot_edu>, Texas A&M University  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5485-7822>

Abstract

This review of Claire Warwick's *Digital Humanities and the Cyberspace Decade, 1990-2001: A World Elsewhere* (2024) praises the monograph's unique value to the digital humanities as a comprehensive reconstruction of 1990s attitudes and practices regarding cyberspace. Warwick's justification for her hybrid methodology, which combines history, analysis, thick description, and autoethnography, is discussed, as well as its basic premise that the 1990s should be of interest to digital humanists and humanist academics more broadly. The review then summarizes the monograph's narrative arc, which traces the ultimate failure of cyberspace's promises to offer freedom and community in a space apart from the constraints of the everyday world, with special attention to the way that Warwick positions humanist academics and the publishing industry as significant parts of internet history. The review ends with a recommendation that other academics adopt Warwick's hybrid methodology in the service of historicizing the digital humanities.

Among the multitudes of posts, articles, and books that have entered the never-ending quest to define the digital humanities, there are very few references to the decade poised just before the millennium's end. Definitions that invoke prehistories of the digital humanities typically focus on humanities computing from the 1960s to the 1980s, eliciting images of punch cards, vacuum tubes, Selectric ribbons, and green-glowing monospace glyphs beyond the lived experience of most of the field's contemporary practitioners. Such distance lends a venerable, even romantic, aura to the machines and formats that preceded DH *qua* DH. While that aura has been pierced by scholars who have rightly critiqued the era's exclusionary practices and politics, the central significance of the older era for the development of DH has not been questioned. The 1990s, nearer to lived experience but no less rich or strange as a topic of humanistic inquiry, are all but ignored. One might be forgiven the impression that the chief achievement of the World Wide Web was to provide a medium for developing and publishing digital scholarly projects.

Enter Claire Warwick's *Digital Humanities and the Cyberspace Decade, 1990-2001: A World Elsewhere* [Warwick 2024]. Warwick blends cultural history, autoethnography, humanistic analysis, and Wayback Machine-enabled readings of early websites to reconstruct the exhilarating intellectual and affective atmosphere of "cyberspace," the monograph's titular "world elsewhere," "an enticing place, removed from everyday activities" and full of "hope for its utopian possibilities" [Warwick 2024, 2]. She defines the cyberspace period as the period bookended by two geopolitical events that deeply influenced the construction and deflation of cyberspace's association with freedom: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the attacks of September 11, 2001. "My aim," Warwick discloses, "is to lure readers back to an age, and a digital place, that seemed more hopeful, more innocent and almost miraculous" [Warwick 2024, 3], not to idealize a utopianism now dismissed as naivety, but to contextualize it as an historical phenomenon, explain why it amassed so much rhetorical power, and chart its rise and fall over the long 1990s. As part of that larger project, Warwick reconstructs the overlapping territory between the contemporaneous popularization of the internet as an everyday infrastructure and the development of DH as a scholarly field and practice. She thus departs refreshingly from pop-cultural norms that narrate technological development as product of isolated tech-industry geniuses, instead populating the monograph with a variety of average users, distributed communities, and ahead-of-the-curve humanities scholars.

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One academic early adopter profiled in *Digital Humanities and the Cyberspace Decade, 1990-2001* is Warwick herself, an early consumer of cyberspace discourse and practitioner of web development and humanities computing. She sedulously explains how she applies autoethnography and postmodern historiography to neutralize personal bias and imperfect memory as much as possible while reaping the advantages of firsthand experience. In another effort to counter the objections she anticipates readers will bring to her choice of primary sources, Warwick opines,

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Some of the most perceptive material to be written about the nature of cyberspace, digital textuality and hypertext was produced in its first decade, when this phenomenon was new... Although few of these accounts and critiques were taken seriously at that time, they still have much to teach us about the nature of the digital world and the place of humans within it [Warwick 2024, 9]

. Far from exposing any faults in her methods, these explanations are salient reminders of the humanities' fundamental investment in human values, perceptions, and perspectives as worthy of study and part of reality. The passage of three decades may have witnessed the promising premises of cyberspace culture "proved wrong, or at least very premature... [or] increasingly implausible" [Warwick 2024, 12–13], but their problems and failures should not disqualify them as objects of academic analysis. On the contrary, they are all the more imperative because "the study of the past of cyberspace [is] a way to defamiliarize contemporary digital culture" [Warwick 2024, 6], making it a matter of some urgency to understand how "many of the problems associated with cyberspace, then and now, were caused because insufficient attention was paid to the human aspects of the use and adoption of cyberspace technologies" [Warwick 2024, 10].

Establishing that argument across a number of online environments over the long 1990s is, methodologically speaking, a big ask. *Digital Humanities and the Cyberspace Decade, 1990-2001* is up to the task, applying Clifford Geertzian thick description to bridge the book's dual identity as a history of ideas and a history of practices. Warwick thus unites the broad conceptual reach of the former with the satisfying concrete groundedness of the latter. Thick description also means that the book is jolly good fun as a treasury of interesting anecdotes, thoughtfully buoying up readers as they follow the tragic arc traced by the deflation of celebratory narratives of freedom and opportunity by deregulation, neoliberalism, and internet harassment. After delivering a perfectly proportioned introduction to the book's purpose and methodology in Chapter 1, Warwick begins tracing this arc with Chapter 2, "A Consensual Hallucination: Imagining Cyberspace," which reconstructs early definitions of cyberspace. The choice of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* as a central text may be overdetermined, but Gibson's influence cannot be ignored, and Warwick devotes plenty of attention in the chapter to competing influences on early cyberculture and basic facts about the development of the internet. Its wide coverage, together with the use of vivid autobiographical passages to illustrate the human dimensions of dates, acronyms, and technical facts, makes Chapter 2 especially accessible for readers new to the topic and ideal for assigning as a course reading.

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Chapters 3 and 4 form a natural dyad, best read together. "Virtual Communities: Cyberspace Before the Web," describes the lively interactions supported by email lists, UseNet groups, BBS (Bulletin Board Systems), IRC (Internet Relay Chat), WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), MUDs and MOOs (game-playing communities), and other mechanisms that preceded social media. Warwick recounts how, as users were busy connecting to strangers with similar interests, flaming and being flamed, and (almost accidentally) developing new business models, debates about the "reality" of such communities raged on- and offline, sparking the first of what are now-familiar hand-wringing episodes about the pernicious effects of virtual experiences on "real" life. In the next chapter, "Wired Women: From a Bird on the List to a Rape in Cyberspace," Warwick focuses on dangers that proved quite real. The positivity of female-only communities and prominent female figures in and theorists of cyberspace, like Sadie Plant and Donna Haraway, crashes against a variety of exclusions and assaults (including text-based cybersexual encounters) that were "sometimes excused as evidence of the social awkwardness and ineptitude of some male cyber enthusiasts" yet were nevertheless "deliberate... attempts to drive women away from online spaces" [Warwick 2024, 68].

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Chapters 5 and 6 shift gears from communities of leisure to academia, business, and professional life. Chapter 5, "A Design for Life: Building Digital Identity on the World Wide Web" documents how academics were quick to understand the text-based static websites "as a medium through which they could present their research and allow users to access

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digital resources, irrespective of the hardware they were using” [Warwick 2024, 75]. Warwick enriches her catalog of early humanities computing projects far beyond well-known milestones like Father Busa’s *Index Thomisticus*, TEI-XML, and quantitative linguistics to include the founding of academic societies, journals, conferences, degrees, departments, labs, and centers. Especially welcome is the elucidation, description, and screen-shotting of virtual libraries created by academics or under the auspices of universities, such as OTA (the Oxford Text Archive), Sunsite, The Labyrinth, The Voice of the Shuttle, and the Decameron Web. Warwick uses the Wayback Machine (that indispensable history of the internet, a nonprofit reference resource run by the legally embattled Internet Archive) to view early versions of those ambitious libraries, as well as early editions of grant-winning juggernauts still online today (e.g., the Walt Whitman Archive and the William Blake Archive) and personal academic websites (such as Matthew Kirschenbaum’s). The resulting descriptions and screenshots perform far more work than one might assume, more than Warwick’s understated claim that they provide “a unique insight into the state of the web when it was young,” as they demonstrate how humanist academics “were part of a movement that propelled the web out of its niche in cyberspace and into the commercial professional, and scholarly mainstream” [Warwick 2024, 107].

Chapter 6, “The Triumph of Virtuality,” somewhat hastily recounts the economic promise of the dotcom era, whose high hopes for online retailing and working from home were temporarily dashed in the early 2001 bust. (Peeking out of the 90s timeline to enfold the frauds and scandals of recent history of startup culture and venture capital into Warwick’s analysis would have yielded some crisper insights about dotcom discourse, but doing so would have disrupted the book’s beautifully constructed narrative arc and intricate interweaving of technology, culture, politics, economics, discourse, and textuality). The section on electronic publishing is the most original in a chapter that seems to want to skip over itself in preparation for the next chapter, “Ceci Tuera Cela: Digital Textuality and the Death of the Book.” Like Chapter 5, Chapter 6 restores the influence of academia and the publishing industry in cyberspace history, in this case tackling fears that the internet would signal the end of the book — that is, the textual format of the physical codex — in the wake of e-texts, electronic literature and e-journals. Warwick adds a new dimension to her capable summaries of conversations held by Sven Birkerts, Jay David Bolter, Umberto Eco, George Landow, Richard Lanham, Janet Murray, and others about the potential of electronic text, by contextualizing them alongside academic participation in (and resistance against) the digitization of humanities texts and research publications. Some readers will be surprised that, although the daily life of readers and writers in the 2020s is very much screen-bound, Warwick mostly sees failures, concluding that e-books did not sway readers from the physical book form and hypertext did not “effect the complete transformation of literature, literacy, and academic culture that had been predicted” [Warwick 2024, 146]. Such failures only come into view once one appreciates the full breadth and intensity of cyberspace utopianism and considers it on its own terms, not through the lens of the 2020s (a historicized conclusion that may in time itself be historicized). At *this* moment in 2025, Warwick’s perspective has the salutary defamiliarizing effect of bringing the contingencies and incompleteness of contemporary screen-boundedness into sharp relief. If it could have been otherwise, then those who wish it had been otherwise now have more power to imagine alternatives.

Three-quarters of the way into *Digital Humanities and the Cyberspace Decade, 1990-2001*, the monograph’s discussions of academia and textuality largely recede, affording a return to the earlier chapters’ dominant focus on cyberspace’s promise of freedom and its endangerment by the realities of pervasive harassment and the increasingly heavy hand of governance and regulation. In Chapters 8 and 9, warriors for internet freedom — from hackers and the followers of *Wired* magazine to John Perry Barlow and Laurence Lessig — resist encroachment by government bodies, such as the European Union and U.S.A.’s Federal Communications Commission. These governing bodies paradoxically combined affirmations of the civilian benefits of deregulation with assertions of regulatory powers. Over and above the battles of individual freedoms won or lost in those struggles is the broader historical shift by which decades of government-led or -backed deregulatory practices have failed to protect citizens from the very real harms that can arrive by virtual means. Suitably pitched as a final act in cyberspace’s narrative arc of freedoms found and lost, Warwick’s conclusion takes the form of a serious warning about the vital need to counter deregulation to mitigate its catastrophic effect related to data privacy, artificial intelligence, user safety, and cyberwarfare.

The gravity of Warwick’s warning about deregulation is enough to warrant a strong recommendation for *Digital Humanities and the Cyberspace Decade, 1990-2001*, but for readers of *DHQ*, a second call to action lurks underneath

the explicit recommendation that ends the book. As Warwick remarks in the introduction chapter, “somewhat ironically, what I am attempting to do in this book, using humanities methods to critique a digital phenomenon, would probably not have been recognized as part of the field at the time” [Warwick 2024, 11]. Some scholars will continue to resist understanding Warwick’s book as part of the field, which continues to rate tool building over the humanistic analysis of digital phenomena. Such analysis is then frequently re-categorized as media studies or acknowledged only within intradisciplinary contexts (as digital history, digital rhetoric, digital philosophy, etc). Meanwhile, the most prominent scholars in the field engaged in theoretically sophisticated analysis are generally performing meta-scholarship of the field itself — the “yack” in the hack/yack binary or continuum — rather than the work of analyzing digital cultures with methods shared by all humanities disciplines. Certainly, Warwick’s account of how DH and humanities computing “were part of cyberspace as a phenomenon and shares its history” [Warwick 2024, 10] qualifies as meta-scholarship, but she is providing descriptive histories and close readings of 1990s humanities computing websites, rather than making prescriptive pronouncements. We will always need future-looking prescriptions (what we *should* do), but the field has a deep enough past that its forms and accomplishments (what *has* been done) are no longer self-evident. What humanists were doing on the web in the 1990s, and what lay citizens of cyberspace were doing with the humanities, is still a history largely unwritten. At the same time that 1990s crop tops, bucket hats, and boot-cut jeans have reentered the fashionable world, visible as a unique aesthetic, it is increasingly becoming possible to historicize the 1990s — to situate individual events and artifacts in larger cultural and historical frameworks with a critical eye — and, more to the point for *DHQ* readers, to historicize DH.

Works Cited

Warwick 2024 Warwick, C. (2024). *Digital humanities and the cyberspace decade, 1990-2001*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.

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