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Virtual Engagement, Vicarious Experience, and DH Engagement in the Age of COVID-19

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One defining feature of work in the humanities, among many strong and positive characteristics, is that the present and future are understood in the context of pertinent information gleaned from the past. Historians engage with the past through the critical lens of the present, to be sure, but they also typically understand the evolution of that lens. Linguists understand the present state and potential future evolution of language as an extension of what came before, rather than (at the core) a radical departure from it. So, too, with philosophy, classics, cultural studies, literature, and many more humanistic areas of inquiry that can be considered.

As we think about this collection, which gathers materials from both the 2019 and the 2020 Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI) Conference and Colloquium, we turn not only to our experience in the present but also to how it might connect to the thoughts and experiences of past humanists. Here, we might rightly focus on themes such as plague. But we can just as readily consider elements of our present more associated with underlying impulses and foundational beliefs over time, including those associated with educational enterprise and their mediation and facilitation by evolving technologies. The early humanist belief that self-betterment in the form of education and its potential for enlightenment was held in the context of at-distance engagement and experience, manifested in activities and objects experienced vicariously. Something written, for example, could stand, virtually, in place of a person and their utterance: a fiction in poetry, prose, or dramatic rendition could convey elements of factual reality *and* moral acuity. Concomitant with technologies that promoted vicarious experience and virtual engagement, particularly the printing press and the accessibility of printed media which it enabled, is an acceptance of the new vicarious mode that such technologies enabled. This in turn provided space for, as Philip Sidney mused in the 1580s, a *new* type of *nature*. The press created a new manner of virtual engagement and a new kind of vicarious experience. Of this Sidney says, in his *The Defense of Poesy*, that the natural “world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden” (18 [1752]).

Although deliberately stretched and bent for purpose, much of what we have seen over the recent months of working and learning at-distance is not wholly dissimilar: a *new* nature is the “new normal” many refer to. If printed material reflecting the thoughts and ideas of others is a staple of our work, we engage them as digital surrogates at one further step removed from their human origin. We have found ways of connecting over video conferencing tools, such as Zoom, which provided a type of

simulated presence. For many of us, Zoom, previously unknown and now ubiquitous, is emblematic of the vicarious post-humanist age into which COVID-19 drew us.

This collection of essays includes the presented work of our DHSI community both before and during the pandemic. June 2019 presentations were in-person, as were the connected discussions and Q&A sessions. These were augmented by some social media engagement, mostly under the DHSI 2019 hashtag. Publication of those wonderful 2019 papers in this volume reflects a single-step-remove from those engagements at DHSI 2019; these papers are a virtual, vicarious representative of the originals, a type of digital surrogate. The equally wonderful 2020 papers were, on the other hand, initially accepted for presentation in anticipation of an in-person gathering in June. The world changed; the academic workplace went online, and DHSI's organizing team prepared and implemented the first "digital edition" of the DHSI Conference and Colloquium. Pre-recorded videos replaced in-person presentations, and the audience viewed these videos in advance and participated in Q&A and discussion via Twitter. The 2020 papers are not one but, in some ways, two steps removed from their origins. The necessary shift in delivery mode drastically differentiates the papers in this issue. This shift also had a substantial impact on how we understand and carry out our roles within the DHSI community.

But what we see reflected in this collection of essays is that, whether presented in the (once) familiar context of in-person gatherings or the new normal of gathering online, the DHSI Conference & Colloquium continues to facilitate both those serendipitous connections and those productive collaborations that arise when we respect "multiple ways of knowing" (Goode 21). At its core, DHSI is a diverse network of learners. Our annual gatherings aim to cultivate what Goode terms "slow interdisciplinarity," a mindful approach to learning about each other's disciplines. This approach is driven by a genuine curiosity about alternative ways of knowing, doing, and being (20). The DHSI Conference & Colloquium participates in this slow interdisciplinarity by uniting seemingly disparate research endeavours within the "expanded field" of digital humanities and by making space for scholars and students at various stages and places in academia to converse (Klein and Gold). This is underscored in the intersections between the topics, approaches, and outcomes of the papers included here.

Several papers in this collection look at digital humanities approaches in the classroom. This is particularly relevant as we transition to new modes of teaching and learning, modes that force us to experiment and confront assumptions about education. **Aaron Ottinger** proposes online collaborative mapping as an avenue for

expanding our students' understanding of the social and environmental impacts of the digital divide—particularly in response to COVID-19. **Kristen Abbott Bennett** details the origin and metamorphosis of the *Kit Marlowe Project*, a collaborative, iterative project founded on a decentralized, student-led model of pedagogy. **Jon Heggstad** examines how the digital storytelling tool Twine and the interactive film *Bandersnatch* (2018) can be used in the classroom to teach database logic and narrative literacy. **Sean Smith and Jeffrey Lawler** also use Twine, showing how digital games can be used to create a learning environment that unites conventional history methods and texts with the skills and critical thinking practices desired by the digital economy. Rounding out pedagogical interventions, **Joshua Korenblat** and his collaborators **Anurati Srivastva, Julie Finton, and Sweta Pandyala** present a project called *Basho & Friends*, a computer game aimed at improving student literacy through in-game haiku creation.

Another cluster of papers considers how digital technologies mediate ideas of political power and national identity. **Melinda Cohoon's** essay focuses on how Western-made video games contribute to colonial and imperialist discourses about Iran. She describes how digital tools and social media platforms (including YouTube and the live streaming platform Twitch) allowed the digital humanities project *Digital Iran* to continue after in-person collaboration became impossible due to the pandemic. **Arun Jacob** reviews the history of electronic surveillance technologies used by the US military during the war with Vietnam. He argues that understanding the genealogy of the technologies we use—including, in the case of geographic information mapping systems (GIS), their military and political roots—is critical for digital humanists. Lastly, **Verónica Paula Gómez** examines the technopoetics of a collection of Latin American e-literature which interrogates ideas of Nation, specifically the “Latin American zone.”

Other papers explore how digital technologies can facilitate new ways of doing digital humanities research, new understandings of our objects of study, and new methodologies as models for future work. **Luis Meneses** describes how topic modelling can help identify shared ideologies across a corpus of political texts. He uses this method to explore themes in Cuban and Ecuadorian presidential speeches. Also using topic modelling techniques, **Nga Than, Maria Rodriguez, Diane Yoong, and Friederike Windel** explore the rhetoric used in the polarized political content pervasive on the far-right social networking service Gab. In their discussion of the Sumerian Network project, **Anna Kulikiov, Adam Anderson, and Niek Veldhuis** describe how the creation of workflows for classifying the ancient texts in

the Drehem Archive enabled them to generate reliable network graph models, emphasizing the importance of reproducibility and replicability for their project and for digital humanities as a whole. **Catherine Ryu, Benjamin Furhman, and Devin Higgins** discuss the collaborative development of a database of Mandarin Chinese sounds and its transformation into an open, web-based resource. **Caterina Agostini** discusses how digital technologies can be used to analyze medical narratives of syphilis in text and visual art by Benvenuto Cellini (1500–1571).

Finally, two essays focus on the methods and future directions of the field of digital humanities itself. **Ella Howard** discusses a new undergraduate major program called Computer Science + Society offered by the Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. The new program aims to provide students with a foundation in computer science as well as in the humanities and social sciences, as a model of the radical collaboration and interdisciplinarity that characterizes digital humanities. **John Maxwell** introduces an experimental new post-digital scholarly journal: *Pop! Public. Open. Participatory.* Through a discussion of the journal as a prototype of a small-scale, community-focused venue for scholarly publishing, Maxwell examines the idea of post-digital scholarship and suggests a place for print within it.

Taken together, these essays offer the reader a chance to vicariously experience (or re-experience) the 2019 and 2020 DHSI Conference and Colloquium events, which took such different forms in response to their particular moments in time. It is our hope as editors that the careful attention and collaborative approach displayed here will connect with the research and pedagogical pursuits of our readers.

Works Cited

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