

Digital History – 2011 Syllabus

History in the Digital Age: 377/677/ Public History Program, American University

- Wednesday: 5:30-8:00, Spring 2011
- Instructor: Trevor Owens, contact: trevor (dot) johnowens (at) gmail (dot) com
- Office hours by appointment

Course Description

This course will explore the current and potential impact of digital media on the theory and practice of history. We will focus on how digital tools and resources are enabling new methods for analysis in traditional print scholarship and the possibilities for new forms of scholarship. For the former, we will explore tools for text analysis and visualization as well as work on interpreting new media forms as primary sources. For the latter, we will explore a range of production of new media history resources, including both practical work on project management and design. As part of this process we will read a range of works on designing, interpreting and understanding digital media. Beyond course readings we will also critically engage a range of digital tools and resources.

Course Goals

After the course students will be able to:

1. Discover, evaluate, and implement digital tools and resources to support emerging and traditional forms of historical scholarship, public projects, and teaching.
2. Develop proposals for digital history resources with detailed plans for project management, design, outreach, and evaluation.
3. Thoughtfully and purposefully engage in dialog about history on the public web with a range of stakeholders in digital history: historians, archivists, museum professionals, educators, and amateurs, etc.

Overview of Assignments

Blogging (30% of grade)

- Reading response post: **1 post, sign up on day one**
- Tool/ resource response post: **1 post, sign up on day one**
- Project blog posts: **2 proposal posts (one for each proposal) 1 project launch post**
- Commenting: **At least 6 substantive comments on other student's posts**

In Class Participation (30% of grade)

- Tool/resource demonstration: **10-15 min demonstration**
- Lead discussion on a reading: **What is the argument? Come prepared with 3 questions to keep discussion going.**
- Class attendance:

Project (40% of grade)

- Proposal for print project: **2-3 pages**
- Proposal for digital project: **2-3 pages**
- Preliminary project presentation: **5-10 min**
- Final project presentation: **10-15 min**
- Final paper (**2,500-5,000 words**) **OR** final digital resource (**digital resource and 2-4 page project statement**)
- Expectations for undergrad final projects are half that of graduate students:

Assignment Details

The course blog: Engaging in online public discourse about digital history

We are not simply going to learn about digital history in this course, we are also going to do digital history. That means we need to engage with the public web. To this end, part of our course communication is going to happen in a public course blog.

On the first day of class I will show you how to use the blog. **You are expected to post a minimum of three times, once about one of the readings, once about one of the digital tools or resources, once**

about your project. We will sign up for who writes about what on the first day of class. These are blog posts, and as such they should not be written like term papers. Part of the goal of this assignment is to become familiar with the genre and format of discourse on thoughtful blogs. You need to get in, say something interesting, and get out. Ideally telling us what the thing is, why it is, what is particularly interesting here, and ending with an invitation to discussion. You should think of your posts as mixing the features of a well composed academic book review and the well conceived blog post (Read the preceding links, they offer critical information for completing these assignments). Posts for a given week must be on the web the Sunday before class (yes, if you want you can post it at 11:59 PM on Sunday).

Do not assume your reader has detailed knowledge of the thing you are writing about. One of the goals of the blog is to invite interested third parties into a conversation with our course. If we are doing this right you can expect comments and dialog with historians, humanists, librarians, archivists, curators, and bloggers who are not participating in the course as students but who are participating in the public conversation we initiate through the blog.

First decision: Your identity and the blog

This is public so one of our first considerations is going to be personal identity. While this is a practical matter it is also, very directly, part of the subject matter of the course. I would encourage you to blog with your real name, it is a good idea for you to start building a web presence for yourself. It has even been suggested that in the emerging field of digital humanities you can either “be online or be irrelevant.” With that said, if there is any reason that you are uncomfortable with sharing your name publicly, you should feel free to use a pseudonym. If there is a reason that you do not want to share your work on the web please send me an email or meet with me after class. I feel that this public dialog is an important course goal, but I will of course understand and accommodate anyone that needs a different arrangement. If at the end of the course you would like to continue blogging I will be happy to show you how we can pull all your posts out and into a new blog of your own. We will talk about this identity decision on the first class day.

Keep the conversation going

Posting is not the end of the assignment. After posting you need to foster the discussion you are initiating. When people comment you need to give substantive responses. Try to engage everyone who comments in some fashion and try to use the comments to sustain a conversation you began at the end of your post.

Commenting is also an assignment

Beyond posting you are expected to contribute substantive comments to a minimum of six of your peers posts. Your comments should extend and contribute to the conversation. Good comments are an important format unto themselves. Read [profhacker's guidelines](#) for comments for a sense of the kind of comment ecosystem we are trying to produce here and then read [how to write a great blog comment](#) for some suggestions on the format for comments. Comment early so that others have a chance to read them (your comments need to be up before midnight on Monday).

The course blog is the required reading we write ourselves

Beyond posting and commenting **everyone needs to read everything on the blog** before class each week. This is the part of the course readings that we write ourselves and in all honesty this is the most important springboard for our in-class discussions.

Major Project

Everyone is going to write two 2-4 page proposals for projects, a proposal for a print project and a digital project. You only need to actually do one of them. In the case of the print project the final result should be a 4,000-7,000 word Chicago style journal article ([For an example see this article](#) we will read later in the semester.) In the case of the digital project it should be the digital resource you devise and a short 500-1000 word project statement which articulates the goals of the project, connects it to other projects we discussed in class, and briefly offers personal reflections on what you learned from the project.

Print Project, study something digital:

Write something about the digital. This could include using software we discuss to engage with a set of primary sources or exploring born digital material associated with a field you are already familiar. For example, if you are interested in the Civil War you could plan and execute a research project on how a particular Civil War memorial is presented and discussed on Flickr, or compare how it is reviewed on Yelp, or analyze how it is represented in some set of video games, or explore how a particular Civil War site uses Twitter, or use something like Mike Davies' online corpus of time magazine to explore trends in discussions of the Civil War or a particular historical figure. Whatever you do you need to ground the study in both historiography for whatever topic you work on and incorporate material from our readings on digital history. In short, all of the readings offer potential models for this project. If you decide to work on a print project I strongly encourage you to set up weekly appointments with a writing consultant in the writing center. Simply put, good writing is re-writing. If you work with them starting at the proposal stage, through your first full draft, and on through your final paper you will end up with something you can really be proud of.

Digital Project, build something scholarly:

Take one of your interests and develop a digital resource around it. This should explicitly NOT be putting an essay on a webpage. Whatever you propose there should be clear reasons that this should be digital, it should probably draw on something we worked on in class. I would suggest staying away from difficult technical projects. While I would be thrilled if you taught yourself the ins-and-outs of PHP and wrote your own content management system to build a blog it would be a much better idea for you to simplify the technical decisions in your project and just use something like wordpress.com or omeka.net which does not require you to devote your time to primarily technical issues. To restate this, the goal of this project is not to demonstrate technical competence. Please simplify technology decisions and focus your time on using something that already exists in a novel way. Proposals should include major features from the Brown (2006) book, a) description of audience, comparison to existing projects, detailed description of the thing to be created, plan for outreach and publicity, plan for how you will evaluate the project. Examples could include

starting and curating a Flickr pool focused on collecting and interrupting representations of the American west, in consultation with the DC historical society you might build an Omeka exhibit to complement one of their physical exhibits, you might create an annotated Google my map or a set of quests for a mobile app like Gowalla that gives an interpretive tour of the history of the design of the national mall.

Books:

1. Brown, Dan. 2006. *Communicating Design: Developing Web Site Documentation for Design and Planning*. New Riders Press.
2. Gee, James Paul. 2003. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
3. Kirschenbaum, Matthew G. 2008. *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
4. Moretti, Franco. 2007. *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*. Verso.

Week By Week

First week (Jan 12):

- Review syllabus
- Watch CommonCraft [RSS in plain english](#) video in class
- Practicum: Using the [Course Blog](#)
- Homework: Based on our discussion of the syllabus think of 5 quick ideas for projects you might work on. In each case connect a period or area interest with one of the subjects/approaches that we are going to cover.

Defining Digital History (Jan 19):

- Cohen & Rosenzweig, *Digital History*, [Introduction](#), [Ch. 1](#) (post and discussion lead by Kelsey)
- Borgman, [The Digital Future is Now: A Call to Action for the Humanities](#) (post and discussion lead by Dennis)
- Roundtable discussion on [The Promise of Digital History](#) (post and discussion lead by Tracie)

- Witmore & Hope, Shakespeare by the Numbers: On the Linguistic Texture of the Late Plays (post and discussion lead by Jason)
- Practicum: PhilaPlace : Demo the site, how it works, what it accomplishes.(post and demo from Tom)

The Collaborative Web (Jan 26):

- Rosenzweig, Can History be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past (post and discussion lead by Bonnie)
- Mimi Ito, et all. Living and Learning with New Media (post and discussion lead by Peter)
- In class video: Heavy Metal Umlaut
- Practicum: Wikipedia: how it works. Analyze three related wikipedia pages and talk pages what their history is. Teach the class how to do this. (post and demo from Rick)
- Practicum: Tell us how Flickr works, walk us through how the platform works, how search works, how commenting works, try to find some examples that have a historical bent. (Ex, this course photo pool) (post and demo from Mark)
- Practicum: Flickr commons: Tell us about the history of the project, what different groups are supposed to get from it, show us around the site. Is it accomplishing it's goal? Tracie
- Practicum: PB Wiki: Show us how to set up a wiki: Show us how these are being used in the digital humanities (ex, digital tools wiki) (post and demo from Dennis)

Text Analysis and Visualization (Feb, 2):

- Staley, Sequential Art and Historical Narrative: A Visual History of Germany (post and discussion lead by Meris)
- Jessop, Digital Visualization as a Scholarly Activity (post and discussion lead by Victoria)
- Practicum: Wordle: Show us how it works, try to find a few interesting examples of how folks have used it, speculate on what its implications are for digital history. Jared

- Practicum: Voyer : Show us a bit of how it works, suggest ideas for what we could use it for (post and demo by Kelsey)
- Practicum: HistoryWired : Show us a bit of how it works. Does this change how you think about their collections?. (post and discussion lead by Caitlin)
- Practicum: Many Eyes : Show us a bit of how it works, suggest ideas for what we could use it for.(post and discussion demo from ethan)
- HOMEWORK: Print project proposal due next week! 2-4 pages

Designs have arguments (Feb 09):

- Watching Helvetica in class (80:00)
- Read half of Brown, Communicating Design (post and discussion lead by Kelsey)

Designing Digital Projects (Feb 16):

- Brown, Communicating Design (post and discussion lead by Brittany)
- NEH Start-up guidelines, Section IV, Part 4. Just focus on the narrative section. Jordan
- Example proposal from KSU Jordan
- Practicum: Omeka.net: Show us how to set up a site, add items, chose themes.(post and demo lead by Dino)
- Practicum:WordPress.com: Show us how to set up a site, chose themes.(OPEN SLOT)
- HOMEWORK: Digital project proposal due next week! 2-3 pages

Proposal Week (Feb 23):

- Short proposal pitches: Plan to spend five minutes telling the group about your proposals. Tell us which one you plan on finishing.

Digitization, Digital Collections, Digital Preservation (Mar 2):

- NINCH Guide, Chs. V-VIII, XIV (Meris)
- Rosenzweig, "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era" Caitlin

- Practicum: Born Digital Archive September 11 Digital Archive : Give an overview, show a few items, tell us what is novel here. Robert

Spring Break (March 9)

- Get some work done on that project!

So what's new about new media? Databases! (Mar 16)

- Manovich, Database as a Genre of New Media Tom
- Leary, Googling the Victorians Ethan
- Michel, et. al. Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books (post and discussion lead by Rick)
- Davies, The Corpus of Historical American English and Google Books / Culturomics (post and discussion lead by Mark)
- Video In Class: The Machine is Using Us
- Practicum: Google Custom Search Engine : Tell us how to make our own search engine, show some examples. (post and demo from Jonathan)
- Practicum: Time Magazine Corpus of American English :Think about how this interface enables different kinds of questions. Show us some examples. (post and demo from Sarah)
- Practicum: Google n-gram :Think about how this interface enables different kinds of questions. Show us some examples. (post and demo from)

What's Old about New Media?: Mechanisms and Materiality (Mar 23):

- Kirshenbalm, *Mechanisms* (post and discussion lead by Sarah)
- Project Drafts Due: For people writing papers this means a full draft of the paper, not a rough draft, a full well thought out draft of your paper. For people working on digital projects you should have at least a functional proof of concept, a roadmap for how and when you will finish the work on the project, and a revision of your proposal that moves from language about what it will do to what it is doing.

Maps, Graphs and Distant Reading (Mar 30):

- Morritti, *Graphs Maps and Trees* (OPEN SLOT)
- Burke, response to *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (OPEN SLOT)
- Meloni, Location-Based Gaming for Education: Try Gowalla Jonathan
- Practicum: Hypercities : Give us a sense of the big picture goals of the project and get into a example or two. (OPEN SLOT)
- Practicum: Euclid Corridor History Project Demo the site, how it works, what it accomplishes. Jordan
- Practicum: Google My Maps : Show us how to build our own Google custom map, show a few ways educators are using this tool. (post and discussion lead by Meris)
- Practicum: Gowalla : Give a demo, connect this with Meloni's review. (OPEN SLOT)

Reading Video Games: Interactivity and Action (April 6):

- Gee, *What Videogames Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* Jared
- Owens, Modding the History of Science Dino
- Practicum: Playing and reading Argument Wars : Play the game, review it, what does it tell us about the game as a genre for history? (post and demo by Peter)
- Practicum: Playing and reading 1066 : Play the game, review it, what does it tell us about the game as a genre for history?(post and demo by Brittany)
- Practicum: Playing and reading Jamestown Adventure : Play the game, review it, what does it tell us about the game as a genre for history?(post and demo by Bonnie)
- Practicum: Playing and reading Cotton Millionaire: Play the game, review it, what does it tell us about the game as a genre for history? (post and demo by John)

Project Presentations: Conference (April 13):

- (Other half present responses to the others)

Finish your project: No Class Meeting (April 20):

- Email final project, or link to final project, by Friday.

Examples of print project ideas

- **Text analysis:** Find a set of digital or digitized documents related to your topic and use some of the text analysis tools we have talked about to dig through them. For example, the Time magazine corpus touches on all kinds of topics in 20th century American history. The key factor here is to go beyond search as a means to find texts and start thinking about using the results of searches and relationships as content for analysis in their own right.
- **Your topic on network x:** Many social websites offer a multitude of examples for how people are reacting to different kinds of topics. What do yelp and tripadvisor reviews, or Flickr photos and comments tell us about a historical site or museum?
- **Analyse and evaluate a museum or archive's use of social media around your topic:** What kind of discussions are going on in Flickr commons on images related to your topic?
- **Analyse a video game or games related to your topic:** Find a game or games related to your topic and interpret how that game makes use of or interprets history.

Examples of Digital Project ideas:

- **Create a web exhibit:** Use Omeka or Flickr to put together a curated collection of materials related to your topic. Consider digitizing a small set of objects.
- **Launch a blog or podcast:** Use Blogger or WordPress to create a blog or podcast. Create a plan for frequency and content of posts, and identify your audience and how you will reach them. Then run your blog for a month.
- **Start a thematic wiki or ning group:** Is there a need to better connect people in your field, or at your school? Develop a plan for how a wiki could provide a space to better connect these folks. It is technically simple but coming up with something that will actually be useful and used is very tricky.

- **Build a Google Custom Map:** Find a something in your field that would be much better understood or interpreted through a digital map interface and put it together with Google my maps.