

PREFACE

Origins, Agents, and Alternative Archaeologies

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Sparks. Heat. Conflict. This is what friction generates. Using friction as a catalyst, our event features work produced at the pressure point between theory and practice. It brings together artists and scholars from different realms, at different stages of their careers, working both individually and in collaboration to spark an array of transmedia frictions.

“PERFORMING INTERACTIVE FRICTIONS,” CONFERENCE PROGRAM, 1999

A familiar tale now circulates as an origin story for the emerging field of the digital humanities. In its Wikipedia entry, the story goes like this:

Digital humanities descends from the field of humanities computing . . . whose origins reach back to the late 1940s in the pioneering work of Roberto Busa.

The Text Encoding Initiative, born from the desire to create a standard encoding scheme for humanities electronic texts, is the outstanding achievement of early humanities computing. The project was launched in 1987 and published the first full version of the *TEI Guidelines* in May 1994.

In the nineties, major digital text and image archives emerged at centers of humanities computing in the U.S. (e.g. the *Women Writers Project*, the *Rossetti Archive*, and the *William Blake Archive*), which demonstrated the sophistication and robustness of text-encoding for literature.

The term “digital humanities” is widely attributed to the editors of the 2004 volume *A Companion to Digital Humanities* (Schreibman, Siemens, and Unsworth). That work, like the Wikipedia excerpt, frames the digital humanities in a direct lineage from the computational humanities and “half a century of textually focused computing.” (It also includes a preface by Father Busa which functions rather like a benediction for the field.) The book’s introduction goes on to note that “especially since the 1990s . . . advances in technology have made it . . . possible . . . to embrace the full range of multimedia,” and the

expansive volume includes entries on multimedia, film, music, and the performing arts. Nonetheless, across the various stories we tell and are told about the digital humanities, certain aspects of “textually focused computing” such as TEI remain quite central. In the *Companion*, the 1990s may add new media to the mix, but computationally processed text is still where it all began. *Transmedia Frictions* seeks to expand these familiar tales and offer up other, parallel histories for the origins of the digital humanities. These alternative archaeologies include film and digital media studies, narrative studies, the visual arts, design, and visual studies.

While work in the encoding and marking up of text is undoubtedly important for the digital humanities, broadening the precursors for the field opens up new possibilities for engaging the richly mediated and deeply visual culture in which computation came of age. During the same time frame in which the computational humanities were taking root, scholars, technologists, and artists were exploring the potential of computers for many modes of expression and narrative, in spaces ranging from the collaborative arts group E.A.T. to SIGGRAPH to early efforts in electronic literature.¹ These experiments, in turn, drew upon long traditions in film and media culture, linking the arts, the humanities, and the digital in powerful ways. A broadened understanding of the origins of the digital humanities will be necessary if we are to have any hope of mining the complexity of our contemporary moment. Text is certainly important to computation today, but so too are still and moving images and audio, as the seventy-two hours of video uploaded every minute to YouTube’s servers underscore. Imagining the digital humanities as descending from E.A.T. collaborator John Cage as much as from Father Busa also helps to route aesthetics and politics back into the origin stories.

Transmedia Frictions had its own origins in a three-day event in June 1999 on the campus of the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles. Sponsored by The Labyrinth Project, a research initiative at USC’s Annenberg Center for Communication, Interactive Frictions comprised plenary sessions, juried papers, a digital salon, and an art exhibition at the Fisher Gallery that explored interactive narrative at the pressure points between theory and practice. It brought cutting-edge artists and media practitioners together with cultural historians, traditional narrative theorists, and the then emergent voices of digital media theory. The energy generated across that weekend was palpable, and the discussions mapped the contours of this new field of digital media studies in ways that continue to resonate today in areas such as the digital humanities, software studies, database narrative, media archaeology, and new media arts.

This volume argues for the value of tracking earlier media and the discourse that helped define their functional differences from what is new, encompassing text but also other media forms. The emphasis, then as now, was on dialectics—on the frictions produced by productive juxtapositions between past and future, history and fiction, theory and practice, change and continuity, text and image, visuals and sounds, narrative and database. Another such friction is that between various origin stories for the digital humanities. We see these frictions as generative and positive.

This anthology serves at once as documentation and expansion of the original symposium, providing a record of the conversations begun in 1999 while also tracking their unfolding across a variety of disciplines for more than a decade. The intervening years have been a generative time for digital media, both as a set of cultural and industrial practices and as a subject of critical reflection and theory. From mobile phones to video games, from social networks to iPads, electronic platforms and proliferating devices are a ubiquitous aspect of daily life in industrialized society and, increasingly, in developing nations, transforming our concepts of political activism and revolution. In ways we couldn't have precisely predicted in 1999 (even as we somehow knew that they were coming), "interactive frictions" now seem thoroughly woven into the texture of everyday living. The very ubiquity of digital media forms only reinforces the need to develop critical vocabularies to evaluate and ideologically interrogate this world we now inhabit.

The original participants at our 1999 event were pioneering agents in honing these very vocabularies, and most are still leaders in the study of the digital. From N. Katherine Hayles to Lev Manovich and Wendy Chun, from Yuri Tsivian to Edward Branigan and Mark Hansen, from Margaret Morse to Anne-Marie Duguet and Pat Mellencamp, from Henry Jenkins to Justine Cassell and Yasmin Kafai, from John Caldwell to Cristina Venegas and Hamid Naficy, from Lisa Parks to Anna Everett and Alison Trope, from Vivian Sobchack to Janet Murray and George Landow, from Ellen Seiter to Randal Packer and Eric Freedman, from Ian Bogost to Steve Anderson and Holly Willis, from Steve Mamber to Peter Lunenfeld and Richard Weinberg, these scholars who joined us in 1999 continue to define and shape the study of the digital today. Collectively, they have published numerous books and articles, produced new models of digital publishing and interactive scholarship, launched innovative new graduate programs, revamped undergraduate curricula, influenced national policy debates, initiated various subfields, and shaped the agenda at national foundations. Other contributors to the symposium included international artists and industry leaders: Rebecca Allen, Mark Amerika, Cindy Bernard, Sawad Brooks, Nancy Buchanan, Rosemary Comella, Vilsoni Hereniko, Fran Ilich, Adriene Jenik, Isaac Julien, Glenn Kaino, Kristy Kang, Brenda Laurel, George Legrady, Erik Loyer, Laird Malamed, Pedro Meyer, Michael Nash, Pat O'Neill, Christine Panushka, Sara Roberts, Vibeke Sorensen, Beth Stryker, Bill Viola, Femke Wolting, Norman Yonemoto, Jody Zellen, and Eric Zimmerman, to name just a few. Most importantly, these groups—scholars, artists, entrepreneurs—interacted in fruitful and productive ways.

Across the weekend and as the conversation percolated and flowed, it was often hard to tell the artist from the scholar—particularly with figures like Michele Citron, Allison DeFren, Mary Flanagan, Norman Klein, Marcos Novak, Sandy Stone, James Tobias, and Fabian Wagmister. We were very much operating in the zone between theory and practice, honing a shared language at the interstices. The original participants as well as the authors and artists gathered together in this volume continue to mine this fertile terrain.

The move from the 1999 Interactive Frictions conference to this anthology published fifteen years later is marked by a significant change in title. We replaced "Interactive"

(a concept now taken for granted with digital media) with “Transmedia.” Introduced in 1991 in Marsha Kinder’s book *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games*, this term proved central to arguments about medium specificity, both then and now. To maintain the line of continuity between conference and anthology, we retained the word “Frictions,” which still evokes not only the vigorous debates being generated by the convergence of rival material forms rubbing up against each other but also (through rhyming consonance) a productive vacillation between fictions and histories, the virtual and the real.

Paradoxically, even within our current era of postmedia pronouncements, one of the most vibrant transmedia frictions is the debate over medium specificity—whether it’s still meaningful or now obsolete. Given the increasingly rapid emergence and convergence of new media forms, it is possible to argue that a discourse on medium specificity enables us to explore the social and aesthetic potential of each and thereby recuperate unique possibilities that otherwise might be lost. As N. Katherine Hayles puts it most succinctly, precisely because of the accelerating speed of these combinations, “clarity about the functionalities of different media is now more crucial than ever.” Or to state it another way, transmedia networks share similar dynamics with transnational studies; movement beyond the boundaries of any specific medium or nation does not render those entities or their borders meaningless, but rather requires us to look more closely at the cultural and historical specificity of the particular combination. Otherwise, “transmedia” and “transnational” would become meaningless buzzwords like “global.” As Alan Liu and others have argued, such debates are also deeply relevant to what fields like the digital humanities and digital media studies will become.²

This volume gave some of the symposium participants a chance to reflect on a decade of changes in the field—not only in their own creative and scholarly work, but also in the new breed of students they are mentoring and the new programs they helped generate, both in and outside of the academy. In the past fifteen years, many of the symposium participants moved from theory to hands-on production, if they were not already combining both at the time of the conference. So this volume also enables us to gauge the growing interplay between theory and practice that has been central to fields like the digital humanities, software studies, and digital media studies. More specifically, it gives us a chance to assess the practices that grew out of the conference, the various models of digital scholarship, interactive narrative, database documentary, born-digital dissertations, and social networks that have helped define the study of digital media across the university.

Across their range and scope, these projects and partnerships model new modes of collaborative practice, emergent forms of research and scholarship, and exciting models of community and connection. Such work also makes tangible our original call to experiment with narrative forms and immersive pleasures. Excerpts from many of these projects are included on the website (<http://scalar.usc.edu/works/transmediafrictions>) that accompanies this volume, allowing them to be experienced in a format that better respects their interactive, temporal, sensory, and affective dimensions.

This volume's essays are divided into two sections. The first focuses on medium specificity and transmedia precursors, which includes many of the key arguments from the conference between formalists and cultural historians and extends them to other, more recent cultural forms, including mobile phones. The second looks forward to digital possibilities and to the "rewiring" of politics, place, and the self, with an emphasis on the kinds of cultural debates and discursive frictions these changes, both real and imagined, have generated. Yet in both sections the essays interweave issues of form, cultural context, and ideology—the division is primarily a matter of emphasis.

Of particular value is the sense of historical scope the volume as a whole provides, serving as a robust document of the relations between digital theory and practice. Many of the essays represent work originally presented at the conference, some deliberately retaining the flavor of those earlier discursive frictions. Other essays have been added to supplement the original material. Although we gave all contributors an opportunity to revise their essays with historical hindsight and to add a brief "update" commenting on this process, not everyone thought it was necessary. Others built the update into their revisions. What has been added is a website with interactive notes, excerpts, and illustrations that help make the essays come alive. The website helps fulfill our original call for generating new productive frictions across a wide range of cultural forms, including database narrative and archival cultural history. Together, the book and website map alternate archaeologies for the study of the digital within the arts and humanities that push beyond the computational manipulation of text. Across this conversation, all narrative texts—including history, theory, and artistic practice—must remain open. Our origin stories should be broad, catalytic, and expansive. Or, as Grahame Weinbren puts it in this latest version of his essay, "When we enter the realm of the digital, change will always be an option."

NOTES

1. E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) was a nonprofit collaborative established to foster connections between artists and engineers. It was formally launched in 1967 by engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer and the artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman. The group was closely affiliated with Bell Labs and produced a broad array of work. Similar efforts were also underway on the U.S. West Coast, especially the Art and Technology Program at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, also begun in 1967. These endeavors, as well as early work in electronic literature, music, and animation, offer rich origin stories for today's digital humanities that push far beyond the domain of TEI.

2. Debates around the role of cultural theory and ideology within the digital humanities have recently been picking up steam. See, for instance, the collection *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, edited by Matthew K. Gold, as well as online discussion on the HASTAC Scholars' site, at <http://transformdh.org>, and at <http://dhpoco.org>. Forthcoming special issues of *Differences* and of *American Literature* also take up these debates.