 Directed Readings in Digital History

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Class Room: TBD

“...history may be better suited to digital technology than any other humanistic discipline. Changes in our field far removed from anything to do with computers have helped create a situation in history where the advantages of computers can seem appealing, and perhaps even necessary. At the same time, changes in information technology, far removed from any consideration of its possible uses for our discipline, have made it possible for us to think of new ways to approach the past. The new technologies seem tailor-made for history, a match for the growing bulk and complexity of our ever more self-conscious practice, efficient vehicles to connect with larger and more diverse audiences.”


Welcome to a new semester at the University of Nebraska at Omaha! Below is a general outline of what we’ll be trying to achieve over the course of our semester together. If you have questions that you don’t see answered, feel free to email me or stop by my office. You can also chat about anything that comes up in this course.

What is digital history and what does it offer the discipline? We will investigate how digital history can enrich the study of historical topics by looking at activities, tools, platforms, and projects. We also will explore the historical underpinnings behind knowledge production on which digital practice depend. We will focus on resources enabling new forms of scholarship, looking at tools for visualization and text analysis for generating historical interpretations, and explore alternative forms of publishing, design, and research. The course covers a range of readings along with a critical engagement with tools and resources that enable new methods for print scholarship and the possibilities of new forms of scholarship.

In this directed readings course, you will study the relationship between the discipline of history and computing tools through a combination of theoretical and hands-on activities. You will read and respond weekly to a number of print and digital materials. There are two objectives for this directed readings: to explore the methods of digital history and to develop your analytic skills as a student of the liberal arts. The readings and activities reflect these objectives.
Assignments

Throughout the class you’ll be creating a number of small digital projects. Each of these projects will demonstrate a specific skill you learned in class. At the end of the class, you’ll combine these into a portfolio of material. All blog posts are due Tuesday by 5pm – this gives all of us time to read each other’s responses to the readings to prepare for Wednesday’s discussion. All tool exercise reflections are due by Saturday at 12pm.

Blogging (30%): For each reading and assignment, you will write a well-argued blog post of around five hundred words using full sentences, paragraphs, and topic sentences on a given prompt. Do not simply enumerate the answers. These are graded in the following way:

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<td>✓+</td>
<td>Meets all guidelines, and includes specific examples.</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>Meets all guidelines, but lacks specificity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓-</td>
<td>Completes assignment but content is lacking or incomplete; or does not complete all guidelines.</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
<td>Incomplete or missing assignment; inaccurate or inappropriate material.</td>
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Skills assignments (9 @ 5% each = 45%): You will be creating nine small digital history projects over the course of the semester. You will be selecting a single topic to study and, to the extent that the sources are available, you will focus your assignments on that topic. Except for the Omeka assignment, you will embed these in a page on your website. Due dates and further instructions are listed in the schedule. The assignments break down by: 1. manipulating historical data; 2. metadata; 3. network analysis; 4. database of records; 5. georeferencing a historical map; 6. mapping data; 7. text mining data; 8. visualizing data; 9. programming.

Final portfolio (25%): The final product for our time together is a portfolio of work you completed for the course. Details of this portfolio can be found on the schedule.

While there’s no official participation grade, you are expected to attend each class meeting and actively participate. Bring a laptop and power cord so you can follow along with in class instruction and work on assignments. Bring a copy (digital or otherwise) of any other readings on any day for which they are assigned.
Course requirements

Because this is a 4000-level course, it will require reading, writing, and active participation in discussion. This course requires a high degree of self-motivation and self-discipline in order to successfully complete the semester. Plan to spend 9-12 hours per week preparing for and participating in class, but try to avoid doing so all in one sitting. Be consistent and try not to get behind on the readings. Late assignments will be marked down one letter grade per day they’re late unless there is a legitimate and documented excuse. Be aware of due dates as noted in the schedule and allow yourself the time to complete them and meet deadlines.

Etiquette

Please respect the time commitments made by the instructor and your fellow classmates by not being a distraction: talking to friends, eating, sleeping, reading the newspaper, or text messaging during class. I will turn off my cell phone during class and expect you to do the same.

In order for everyone to have the opportunity to learn we must strive to create an open, inclusive, positive, and non-threatening classroom atmosphere. Curiosity, honesty, and above all, respect, are characteristics inherent in healthy discourse. We may occasionally address some divisive topics and it will be perfectly appropriate for us to end discussions in disagreement. I believe that our greatest strength in this class will be the variety of experiences and perspectives each of us brings to the subject. No personal attacks or disrespect will be tolerated and proper sanctions will be imposed.
Schedule

January 10, 2018: Introductions

Please fill out the following form before 5:00pm Saturday, January 13: Survey of Digital Skills

January 17, 2018: Short introduction to computing and the internet

- Ted Friedman, *Electric Dreams*, Introduction & chapters 1-6
- Vannevar Bush, “As We May Think”
- “How the World Came to be Run by Computer Code,” BBC.
- “How the Internet Works in 5 Minutes.”
- “History of the Internet.”

January 24, 2018: Defining digital history I

- Dan Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History*, Introduction, Chapter 1
- Stephen Robertson, “The Differences Between Digital History and Digital Humanities”

January 31, 2018: Defining digital history II

- Michael O’Malley and Roy Rosenzweig, “Brave New World or Blind Alley?” *Journal of American History* 84:1 (June 1997)
- Daniel J. Cohen, “History and the Second Decade of the Web”

**Assignment:** Write a blog post reviewing one of the following digital history projects. What topic, period, and place of history does it cover? What argument or interpretation do they make? What is the audience? What sources is the project based on? Who created them, and who did what work? Who funded them? What technologies did they use? Include screenshots of important parts of the website. **The review is due by Monday 2/5 by 5pm.**

- Digital Harlem
- Geography of the Post
- Her Hat Was in the Ring
- HistoryPin
- Histories of the National Mall
- Language of the State of the Union
- Locating London’s Past
- Lost Museum
- Cleveland Historical
- Old Bailey Online
- Orbis
- Papers of the War Department
- Railroads and the Making of Modern America
• Redlining Richmond
• Voting America
• Women Writer’s Project
• Viral Texts
• Six Degrees of Francis Bacon
• Follow the Money

February 7, 2018: Open source, open standards, markdown, reproducible research


Assignment: We will work in-class to introduce you to Github and Markdown, a platform and a syntax that we will be using for posting to the course blog. Ahead of class, please sign up for an account on Github. During the week after class, please complete Github’s interactive tutorial for git and look at Scott Chacon’s Pro Git, in particular chapters 1-3 and 5. You will not need to write an additional tool exercise reflection this week.

February 14, 2018: Data

• Roy Rosenzweig, “Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era,” Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media.
• Daniel Rosenberg, “Data Before the Fact”

Assignment: We’ll work with Open Refine together at our meeting. Afterwards, continue working with Open Refine, following this tutorial on how to use the software for manipulating and cleaning data. Write a blog post reflecting on Open Refine and data preparation for the humanities. What is challenging about the software? About working with humanities data?

February 21, 2018: Metadata and Omeka

• Explore Dublin Core, “Metadata Basics.”
• Dan Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, “Owning the Past,” in Digital History.
• Daniel V. Pitti, “Designing Sustainable Projects and Publications”
• Jefferson Bailey, “Disrespect des Fonds: Rethinking Arrangement and Description in Born-Digital Archives”

Assignment: Using primary sources that you have found, create an Omeka collection with at least five Omeka items. Each item must be fully described in the metadata, but you don’t necessarily need every Dublin Core field. Be sure to include a reference to the place you found the source and a copyright statement as appropriate.
February 28, 2018: Databases

Before class: Sign up for Airtable.
- “Spreadsheet Thinking vs Database Thinking.”
- Mark Merry, Designing Databases for Historical Research.

In class: Working as a group, create a database that digitizes elements from the William F. Cody Archive. Decide on the schema of the database, i.e., which tables will hold which comments. Enter a few items each to make sure that your database model actually fits the data. Have the structure of your database complete by the end of the week and write a short reflection discussing the decisions you made.

March 7, 2018: Georeferencing and spatial history

Before class: Pick a map from the David Rumsey Map Collection and create an account at Map-Warper.
- Richard White, “What is Spatial History?”
- Georectification from “Spatial Humanities Workshop”

Assignment: Georectify your historical map. Embed it in a blog post explaining what you learned from the map and how georeferencing maps might be useful in understanding environmental history. Be sure to include a citation to the map and acknowledge permissions that have been granted.

March 13, 2018: Network analysis

Note the date change
- Shin-Kap Han, “The Other Ride of Paul Revere”

Assignment: Working with Palladio, create a network visualization of historical data using the data provided (or creating your own). Reflect on how network visualizations might help historical research. What can networks show us that we would otherwise have trouble seeing? How can networks accurately capture the complexity of the past?

March 21, 2018: Spring break

March 28, 2018: Mapping

Before class: Sign up for an account at CARTO.
- Stephen Robertson, “Putting Harlem on the Map”
• Jo Guldi, “What is the Spatial Turn?” and “The Spatial Turn in History.”

Assignment: Using the sample datasets provided, create a map in CARTO. The map should communicate its subject clearly, using annotations and labels as necessary. Embed the map in a blog post and write about what you learned from making the map and the map itself.

April 4, 2018: Visualization

Before class: Sign up for a free account with Plotly.

• John Theibault, “Visualizations and Historical Arguments,” in Writing History in the Digital Age (University of Michigan Press, 2013)
• Johanna Drucker, “Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display”

Assignment: Using the datasets provided, create at least three visualizations with Plotly. Be sure to use titles and captions, and cite the data you use. What does the visualization show you that you didn’t see before? Embed the visualizations in a blog post.

April 11, 2018: Text mining and distant reading

• Ted Underwood, “Seven ways humanists are using computers to understand text”
• Cameron Blevins, “Topic Modeling Martha Ballard’s Diary”
• Look through Mining the Dispatch
• Dan Cohen, “Searching for the Victorians,” October 4, 2010

Assignment: Using Voyant, create visualizations of the Earth First! journals (text provided by the instructor). Embed these visualizations in a blog post. What did you learn through distant reading? What does this approach reveal that other historical methods cannot or do not?

April 18, 2018: Programming


Assignment: Write a blog post about the programming we did in class. Have you programmed before? Why or why not? Can you see a use for programming in the humanities? For your major? Include images of your output if they aid your argument.

April 25, 2018: Wrapping up

No class. There is no final exam.

Your final portfolio is due April 27 by 5:00pm. Create a page on your website which links to all of the assignments and blog posts you have created for this course. Include images of assignments as a link when appropriate. Make it attractive. You should write prose describing what each assignment contributed to understanding the field of digital history. The total text on this page should run to 250-500 words.

Good luck with finals!
Fine Print

A note on communication

You are always welcome to stop by my office hours or arrange for an appointment—just email me with at least three possible meeting times. All other communication for this course will happen in the Slack group. If you registered for the course but did not receive an invitation, please add yourself to the group using your UNO email address. You are responsible for all announcements posted to the #general channel. Here is how to get started with Slack.

If you’re writing me an email, bear in mind your tone and audience: emails to your professors shouldn’t be like emails to your friends. For help, see this guide to emailing your professors. I can promise to respond to emails within 48 hours; often I will respond more quickly, but you should not send me an urgent email the night before an assignment is due, for example. I only check email during business hours.

Attendance and participation

Participation is essential to this course, requiring active and engaged participation in our activities and discussions. There will be few lectures and we are not building towards a final exam. Instead, we’re working to think critically about digital history and analyzing relevant data. Come to class having completed the readings for the day and be prepared to discuss them. We will assess your reading through course engagement and writing assignments.

This means you must be present not just physically but mentally. I allow you to have one missed class without penalty over the course of the semester. But note that I make no distinction between excused and unexcused absences, so use this allotment wisely. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed and make up any assignments. Once beyond your allotted absences, you will receive zero credit for any in-class work or activities missed.

Digital devices

All phones should be silenced and stowed for the duration of the class. If your phone rings once during class in the semester, we will all laugh at you. If your phone rings again during the semester, I will ask you to leave and count you absent. You’re not as sneaky texting under a table or desk as you think you are.

This course will rely on access to laptops for almost every session, but laptops also present a temptation to disengage from the class. You cannot use a laptop to follow a game, text, check on your friends latest social media posts, and so forth. These are distractions not only to you, but to those around you as well. If you choose to virtually exit my class, I will ask you to physically leave and mark you as absent. If you seem frequently distracted by what’s on your screen, I will ask you to put your laptop away—even for the duration of the semester. I may periodically ask everyone to put their “lids down”—this includes me!—in order to focus our attention on another aspect of the class.

At some point in the semester, you will undoubtedly have a problem with technology: a laptop will crash, a file will be corrupted, a server will go down, software will not work as expected, and so on. But these aren’t emergencies, they’re part of living life in the 21st century. Now is as good a time as any to start working on habits to prevent such snafus from halting your work: safe often and early; always keep a backup of your work (ideally, in at least two places). However, virus infections, lost flash drives, lost passwords, corrupted files, and so on is not an emergency. It is your responsibility to take steps to ensure your work will not be lost; or if a device isn’t working, to find one that does. I will not be granting extensions based on problems you may have with a device or internet services you use. If a problem arises with software we are all using for the course, we will work through them together.

Academic dishonesty

Don’t cheat or plagiarize. It’s horrible for everyone. If I catch you cheating, you will be reported to the University and receive an immediate F for the course. This is non-negotiable.

Disabilities

Reasonable accommodations are provided for students who are registered with Accessibility Services Center and make their requests sufficiently in advance. For more information, contact Accessibility Services Center (MBSCMBSC, Phone: 554-2872)

Acknowledgments and license

This syllabus borrows ideas from other digital history classes taught by Sharon Leon, Trevor Owens, Mills Kelly, Jeff McClurken, Caleb McDaniel, Douglas Seefeldt, Zephyr Frank, Ben Schmidt, Ryan Cordell, and Lincoln Mullen.
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