

A Lone Wolf in Winter: Lessons from a Fifty Year-Old Postdoc

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I wasn't supposed to be here.

I'm a first-generation university graduate. Guys in the neighbourhood where I grew up didn't go to college; they attended vocational schools or, in all too many cases, they went to prison. I lucked out, thanks to a combination of scholarships, good mentors, curiosity, and such a deplorable lack of motor skills that, by the time I turned twelve, it was obvious to everyone that I would starve if I pursued a career that didn't require a desk at all times.

But even the luckiest and nerdiest of working class kids don't get to study the humanities. The pressure to achieve financial security — a good deal of said pressure coming from within — is just too strong. Therefore, at the age of seventeen, I set aside my love for history and for the theatre, enrolled in a computer science program, and took a twenty-seven year detour before finally enrolling in the History PhD program at the Université de Montréal in my mid-forties. And what a detour it was. I designed and produced video games. I wrote for stand-up comedians. I picked up two and a half Master's degrees (don't ask). I published four books for general audiences, one of which has garnered a hundred times more Google Scholar citations than all of my academic papers combined. I wrote some 6,000 blog posts about everything from hard science to lolcatz. I joined a notorious Canadian telecom giant's artificial intelligence research team, and a year later I ran away shortly before the company collapsed in a *spectacular* scandal. I even played the role of a depressed rabbit on television — and that is by no means the weirdest character that I played, but rather one of the few that can be explained in less than a full paragraph.

In other words: if there is such a thing as a typical digital humanities PhD, I am not it. What I am, however, is someone who brought a couple of decades of freelance experience into grad school and went on to complete the program in four and a half years, with an enviable publishing record, in a department that had no built-in DH expertise, and in spite of a growing disability. Along the way, I also committed stupid mistakes that I should have been able to avoid and that you *definitely* don't want to repeat.

So, while you should take any advice about life choices that comes out of the mouth of a fifty year-old postdoc with a grain of salt, especially when said postdoc has chosen to work in a field that already wasn't hiring *before* the entire world went to Hell, here are a few lessons that I have learned the hard way. I hope that my sharing them with you today will help smooth your own paths forward.

Lesson #1: Don't Walk In Without an Endgame

Why are you doing a PhD, anyway?

I started mine without a clear idea of what I wanted to get out of it. I had finished an eight-season run on a television show a year earlier and knew that I didn't want to look for another media job. I had no desire to return to the video game industry. My freelance writing business was thriving but hardly exciting. A PhD seemed like a good way to spend a few years on an interesting project (and earning a modest but relatively secure income through a combination

of teaching and some freelance work) while I figured out the next step. There would be plenty of time for that, right?

However, without a clear endgame in mind, I had nothing to guide me as I designed my research project. Would I be entering the tenure-track job market? Would I aim for a data journalism job? Would I seek to influence public policy? Or would I simply go back to freelancing with a few more skills to sell to a different client base? I had no idea, which was a problem because each of these outcomes requires a different kind of preparation — and a very different kind of PhD.

I ended up following the path of least resistance for a humanities PhD: I assumed that I'd be looking for an academic job at some point, and therefore I hit the conference circuit hard and published like a maniac. As strategies go, this one turned out to be a lot of fun but extremely time-consuming. Travelling to all of these conferences and writing all of these papers and articles ended up extending my program by about six to eight months, compared to what I would have needed to simply "get the dissertation done". If I had known ahead of time that I would not be pursuing the tenure track for long (more on that in a minute), I would have moderated my publishing ambitions, spent more time mastering the kinds of machine learning and data visualization techniques used in government and in industry, finished earlier, and saved quite a bit of money.

Lesson #2: Make Plans Early...

However, I didn't know that the tenure-track job market was a dead end for me at the time, I wouldn't figure it out for several more years, and in the meantime I enjoyed the work of a scholarly historian enough to at least *try* to make a career out of it. I wasn't completely naive, though: I knew that the academic job market was harsh and that it wasn't likely to get any better for a while. I also knew that my field, History, was already oversaturated with middle-aged white men. If I wanted to be taken seriously as a candidate, an average CV would not cut it. I would have to shine.

So, I went online and did some research. I learned that the typical History PhD graduates with a single peer-reviewed publication, sometimes two, often none at all. I decided to aim for *five*. This would be achievable (barely) as long as I made sure that everything that I wrote in grad school would be transformable into a peer-reviewed publication at some later date. Luckily, as a long-time freelancer, I was used to this sort of "do once, sell twice" approach to work: what freelancers sell, in the end, is *time*, which makes time too precious to spend it on tasks that don't bring some sort of ongoing return. This is how I applied it to my PhD:

- The 12,000-word report on my secondary field of Atlantic History, that I had to submit as part of my comprehensive examinations? I distilled it into a historiographical essay, submitted it to the journal of record for francophone Canadian history, the *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, and got it published after minor revisions.
- My methods chapter, usually the first piece of writing that gets tossed away when converting the dissertation into a book? I wrote it early, refined it into a conference paper, then an hour-long invited talk, and finally into an article for *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique*.
- I even went back to the toy problem on the stylometry of the *Federalist Papers* that I had designed for a first year seminar's mid-term assignment and rewrote it into a tutorial for *The Programming Historian*. (Of everything that I have ever written as an academic, this tutorial has been my greatest hit. Nothing else comes close.)

None of this material was ever intended to get out of my home Department. Yet, with careful planning, I was able to mine it for three peer-reviewed publications. I only needed to draw two more from my core research to reach my goal of five; a very advantageous situation if I wanted to maintain the possibility of converting my thesis into a book in the future, since Canada's Awards to Scholarly Publications Program requires that previously published materials make up no more than 30% of a book's manuscript¹.

Lesson #3: ... And Get Started Early, Too

My early inquiries into the academic publishing ecosystem also taught me that getting an article into a journal takes a *long time*. Therefore, if I wanted to assemble a publications-rich CV by the time I was ready to enter the tenure-track job market, which I planned to do a year before defending my thesis, I could not afford to wait until I had finished my research before I started submitting to journals. In fact, I estimated (correctly, as it turned out) that anything that wasn't at least making the rounds by the end of my fourth year would be worthless, both for my first job-hunting season and for my postdoc applications if I decided to go that route.

To make sure that my five publications would be in circulation by the end of my fourth year, I adopted a three-pronged approach:

- First, I divided my PhD into a set of independent case studies, each answering a specific question through examination of a specific corpus. I then completed the research required by the first (and smallest) of these case studies within a few months of my comprehensive examination, presented the results during my third year and submitted the resulting article the following summer. The second-smallest case study followed shortly thereafter: research during the third year, presentations during the summer of Year 3 and the fall of Year 4, and submission shortly thereafter. By the middle of my fourth year, I had one "core research" article accepted and another one in review.
- Second, I pursued targets of opportunity ruthlessly. I looked for special issues because they always need material and they tend to stick to (relatively) predictable publication schedules, whereas articles submitted to a journal's general queue may remain there for years. I especially sought out colloquia and workshops where I could present work that would then be included in special issues — and often proposed papers based on research that I had not done yet and that I even designed specifically for the workshop/special issue pipeline. A risky tactic, to be sure, but one that paid off handsomely: three of my articles, including both of my core research pieces, were published this way.
- Finally, I took advantage of periods when I did not have anything thesis-related to write to convert my non-thesis materials into publishable pieces. For example, I wrote my historiographical article and my *Programming Historian* tutorial during months when I was otherwise occupied with research. For me at least, this was far more efficient than trying to complete multiple long-form writing projects at the same time.

As a result, not only were all five of my published pieces *submitted* by the end of my fourth year, all but one had also been *accepted*. And not a moment too soon, as it turned out, because some of the delays between acceptance and publication were considerably longer than expected. The special issue in which I published my first core research article was delayed by eight months when the publishing company experienced financial trouble. My second core research article finally came out several months after my thesis defence, almost *two years* after submission, because of an unusually convoluted process. Indeed, only the *Programming Historian* tutorial and the historiography article were published within a year of

¹ <http://www.ideas-idees.ca/aspp>

submission. If I had waited until my fifth and final year to start sending my scholarship out for review, I would have had nothing on my CV by the time I defended my thesis — assuming that I would even have had the energy required to write a thesis and journal articles at the same time. Speaking of which...

Lesson #4: Your Last Year Will Hurt

Even though I pursued a publishing strategy designed to make me competitive on the academic job market, I was never entirely convinced that I was suited for the tenure track. I ignored the issue for as long as possible, figuring that I would test the waters and that I had plenty of time to think of a plan B if I didn't like the temperature, so to speak. I even let all of my regular freelance clients but one fall by the wayside, during the PhD, without doing much to find new ones. I thought that there would be plenty of time for that later, too.

What I failed to take into consideration is that the fifth year of my doctoral program would eat my brain.

I thought that I was ready for the final stretch of thesis writing. After all, I had been through the book publishing cycle several times before. But this was far, far worse. The thesis consumed every last bit of my mental bandwidth. I had no energy left for anything else, much less to come up with an entire alternative career plan and to build the relationships I needed to make it happen.

This is my biggest regret. I should have started making plans for an exit from academia during Year 4. At the very least, I should not have committed to submitting my thesis in April of 2019 instead of the following August (nor agreed to forfeit a third of my writing fellowship if I didn't deliver on time) just to be able to defend in June, in case I landed a tenure-track job for the following academic year.

Because it did not turn out that way *at all*.

Lesson #5: The PhD Could Be the End of the Line

There are two kinds of bad academic job markets. Some candidates have to apply for dozens or even hundreds of jobs in order to get two Skype interviews that never lead anywhere. I fell into the second kind: the one where there is *nothing whatsoever to apply for*.

Back in 2014, when I enrolled, Digital History seemed not only like a probable growth area within the academy, but also one where my unusual skill set as both a historian and a computer scientist would give me an edge over the competition. Sadly, during the two years that I spent on the academic job market, exactly zero jobs, tenure-track or otherwise, were advertised in my area of expertise within a five-hour train or bus ride from my house². Digital History turned out to be a dud. Even if I twisted my research into knots to make it fit within other subject areas, nobody was hiring historians of the Early Modern Atlantic world, of Enlightenment France, of the book, or even of New France and early Canada, either. The smart bet hadn't paid off.

² I insist on seeing my wife every week, preferably every day, and there was never any question of asking her to uproot her own successful career to go chasing academic dreams abroad. The five-hour rule meant that I would be looking at 30+ post-secondary campuses between Toronto and Sherbrooke and between Quebec City and the U.S. border.

It happens. Historians are no better than anyone else at guessing market conditions four to seven years down the road, even though that is exactly what all new PhD students must do when they choose their dissertation topics. My own powers of prediction, however, turned out to be uniquely terrible, since the only subject area with a healthy market for historians in 2018-2020 was Indigenous history — in which I had received my master's degree. Oops.

But wait! It gets worse. I did not get a postdoctoral fellowship from SSHRC and its provincial counterpart, either. One of them denied me within days of my thesis submission, two months after giving me an excellence award. The other judged my publishing record disqualifying, which... Yeah. That one stung.

So there I was, at the end of April 2019, with a finished thesis but no job, no postdoc and no prospects of any kind. Instead of relaxing for a couple of weeks before preparing my defence, I had to scramble to find a new career or to rebuild a dormant freelance practice.

I ended up finding a postdoc in the history of medicine, funded by private grant money, a few weeks after my defence. I had no expertise (or even basic competence) in the field, but the professor who was hiring had an interest in the digital and remembered me from a seminar we had both attended four years earlier. In other words: it was a freaking miracle.

Don't bank on miracles. Even if the tenure track is your Plan A, make sure that you have a Plan B in place a year ahead of time. Please.

Lesson #6: The Tenure-Track Jobs May Not Come Back Anytime Soon

I have decided not to pursue a tenure-track position any longer. Early this year, a kind and savvy dean explained to me that the market was likely to remain terrible for several more years since Canadian Universities, faced with recurring cuts in government funding, have come to rely on the high tuition fees paid by international students to an ever-increasing extent — and international students come to Canada to learn high-paying STEM skills, not the humanities. Furthermore, enrolments by Canadian students in humanities departments have never recovered from the collapse of the early 2010s. Thus, despite a number of recent retirements³, many of our departments are still considered *overstaffed*, in terms of professor/student ratios, compared to high-demand STEM fields. When universities have money to spend on new tenure-track lines, they will not be looking in our direction very often.

And of course, that was before the pandemic and the ensuing economic collapse. Karen Kelsky, who has been counselling PhDs looking for work for a decade, has called COVID-19 an “extinction event⁴” for the academic job market.

Get that Plan B ready now.

³ The news section of a recent Canadian Historical Association bulletin contained a depressingly high number of statements such as: “There are fewer historians employed in our department compared to last year.”

⁴ Karen Kelsky, “The Professor Is In: Stranded on the Academic Job Market This Year?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2020-04-17, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Professor-Is-In-Stranded/248551>.

Lesson #7: Have No Regrets

Would I do it all over again? Yes, I would. The first three years of the PhD were among the best of my life, the fourth was also pretty good, and the chaos that marred the fifth was largely self-inflicted.

That being said, at the risk of offending some of the professors who may be reading this and of contradicting some of the advice I just gave you, I believe that I would be much less of a model student the second time around:

- I would publish less, travel to fewer conferences and deliver fewer papers (although I would still start early on all counts);
- I would choose projects based on how much fun they are rather than on their contribution to a hypothetical tenure-track candidacy (and no, I won't tell you which of the lines on my current CV I would have ditched);
- I would not worry one bit about journal rankings, since my least scholarly writing has generally attracted the most attention, both within the academy and elsewhere;
- I would set aside one day a week for freelance work and for professional networking outside of the academy, while taking on fewer low-paying teaching/research assistantships "just to help out";
- I would experiment more, especially with tools and techniques that had nothing to do with my dissertation;
- I would even have blown a deadline or three, if it meant more time to attend a public conference on campus or to bake complicated desserts at home.

In other words, if you are willing to listen to one last piece of advice from this increasingly decrepit postdoc, let it be this: be a little bad. You'll have more fun this way. And these days, what else matters?