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You Complete Me: On Building a Vertically Integrated Digital Humanities Program at the University of Georgia

Lisa Bayer

University of Georgia Press, lbayer@uga.edu

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The opportunities for collaboration between the University of Georgia Press and the UGA Libraries, to whom it has reported for over five years, have not been a question of why or how, but why not and how often. Ours is one of approximately 25 U.S. and Canadian university presses reporting to their campus libraries. Refreshingly, the relationship was not a result of financial distress, and we have found that our commonalities, for the most part, outweigh our differences. The Press and the Libraries are currently working together with campus partners on DiGA (Digital Georgia), an interconnected, vertically integrated program intended to support new forms of digital humanities (DH) scholarship through teaching, research, publication, and infrastructure.

Faculty-driven by historians Stephen Berry and Claudio Saunt (whose Center for Virtual History was recently profiled in the Chronicle of Higher Education), DiGA’s key achievements thus far include a DH-focused faculty hire, a planned “di gi” rubric for course designation, and a Digital Humanities Lab, located in the main library next to the press, opening in the coming year. With crucial support from the Willson Center for the Arts and Humanities at UGA, we are working with funders both internally and externally on start-up costs for infrastructure, staffing, planning, and other needs. Focusing on comparative advantages, Stephen Berry, Assistant Press Director and Editor-in-Chief Mick Gusinde-Duffy, and University Librarian and Associate Provost Toby Graham consider DiGA’s promise for generating and sustaining new forms of interpretive scholarship.

The project at Georgia involves a faculty-run digital humanities lab, the UGA Press, and the UGA Libraries. Why these partners? What sets this project apart from the many other DH projects that have preceded it? How are we different?

Steve: DH is an inherently collaborative discipline, but strangely few DH centers are set up to offer “end-to-end” support for large, born-digital, scholarly projects. We see any number of collaborations that involve multiple libraries, or multiple presses, or multiple faculty members, but this kind of “horizontal integration” has some limitations. For instance, it tends to reproduce and multiply the same culture — the culture of the Library, the Press, or the Faculty — and it does not result in true “end-to-end” support. We wanted something that would join these three cultures so we could all learn from each other.

Mick: A university press supports the overarching goals and mission of its parent institution. Those goals are typically built around three overlapping activities: teaching, research, and public service or outreach. As we think about the research aspect of our mission — helping develop scholarship and making ideas accessible to as many readers as possible — it makes sense to combine these three partners in the process. In fact, we are really only supplementing established areas of strength and responsibility: faculty do the research; presses review, refine, promote, disseminate (and monetize) the research; libraries collect, curate, and assure longevity and presentation standards for the scholarship. Those “responsibilities” overlap and interact in interesting ways in a mostly-digital environment, leading to shifting responsibilities and shared areas of expertise. This is a process we need to refine and learn more about, but the mission remains the same.

Toby: We know from the 2014 Ithaka S+R report on sustaining the digital humanities that even on campuses with DH centers, there is rarely a comprehensive solution in place to support faculty in all stages in the project’s life cycle. Programs most often lack sustainable sources of support. Also, there is a lack of clarity about how to establish the “value” of a project or output for the academy and society. We are advancing a vertical integration concept in which the institution will provide support for digital scholarship from origin through dissemination, including determining the scholarly merit of related outputs.

What are the possibilities of the Georgia project for bringing DH scholarship in line with more traditional monographic work in the humanities, e.g., implications for peer review, tenure and promotion, and channels of dissemination?

Steve: I think I am more sanguine about these hurdles than most. Technology makes peer review easier, not harder. Technology makes dissemination easier, not harder. Sure, evaluating a collaboratively-built, born-digital project is different than evaluating a single-author monograph, but we’re smart people, and really our standards don’t need to change: Does the project have scholarly value? Does it contribute to the scholarly conversation? What kind of contribution does it make? Those are the same questions we’d ask of a book or an article; we’re just asking them of a different scholarly form. Already the American Historical Association has drafted new guidelines to aid history departments in making exactly those kinds of evaluations. So I think we need to ready ourselves for a world in which these problems are actually solved, a world in which the ideas and arguments of scholars are free to live in the world in multiple forms simultaneously, some digital, some not.

Mick: I’m not sure it is a question of bringing DH scholarship in line with traditional monographic work. We are proposing the “deconstructed monograph” as part of our publishing program, after all. The Press certainly expects our DiGA program to be a rigorous, trusted resource for humanities scholars and their learned societies in general, and DH scholars in particular.

Toby: A viable future for DH publishing depends on the academy’s ability to evaluate the non-traditional manifestations of digital scholarship. Scholars must determine value for the most part, but there should be structure to the process. Publishers, and university presses in particular, have a long history of organizing, synthesizing, and adding value to the academic review of scholarship. We look to the University of Georgia Press to help us explore ways in which digital works might be vetted and credentialled through expert review.

What are the most significant challenges to the project? What are potential pitfalls that you wish to avoid?

Steve: Cost-recovery is a problem for anything that exists on the Web. But there are other (related) problems as well. The earliest DH projects were essentially primary source archives that, while lacking in analysis, effectively democratized the process of scholarship. Teaching faculty at a far remove from archives could now get to their sources while in their bathrobes. Next-generation DH projects, however, do not merely revolutionize how we store and access information but how we collect, sift, render, layer, visualize, and analyze it. (To be sure, there has been some backlash against digital humanists who con-
flate the coolness of their tools with the sophistication of their results. But we all know that we move toward an era in which DH will find its appropriate level — where the new tools will not replace traditional scholarship but extend and catalyze it.) This all sounds salutary, but also expensive, and therefore undemocratic. What we will be trying to do with this new project at Georgia is to come up with new, reproducible, extensible forms of DH scholarship where each iteration of the form is a little cheaper and easier to produce and where the aggregation of those iterations creates a resource that is more than the sum of its parts. This may sound a little vague, but it’s easier to think of in the case of the book. Each time we publish a book we don’t reinvent the book; the book as a form has rules and expectations — a table of contents, margins, an index — and it has a process and an infrastructure that once established makes it relatively easier to produce other books. But in the early days of DH a lot of the projects were expensive one-offs; they offered models for other projects, perhaps, but they didn’t create new forms. We think that is today’s challenge: to create the new forms and platforms that broad academic communities will agree to use.

Mick: Time, institutional commitment/support, and money, sadly. For an initiative of this scale to truly find its feet and become self-sustaining, we need the freedom to experiment (and the freedom to fail on some levels). We also need time to build momentum. A conventional publishing program typically needs five plus years to launch a new list, and this digital environment needs longer still. Take a look at some of the early instances of DH institutes and publishing collaborations related to those institutes, and you see the paradox of time in the hurry-up digital era. As for money, really the key challenge is financial sustainability. The DiGA collaboration will be trying a range of strategies to recover costs and fund future work: figuring out what we can, in good faith, sell (or license or rent); experimenting with “flipped” (producer pays) cost recovery models; focusing our home institution and external agency fundraising efforts. There are secondary challenges related to ever-changing technology and the desire to create a reproducible (open source, ideally) infrastructure.

Toby: As with most new efforts, sustainability is a key challenge. We want to generate excellent short-term results, but more importantly to create the longer-term organizational changes that will integrate digital scholarship support into the mainstream of our operations.

What benefits will the project bring to the institution, its faculty, its students, and other stakeholders? How will the project contribute to the scholarly record and to the missions of university presses and research libraries?

Steve: Well, I am perhaps most excited about the project’s potential to transform my teaching and the student experience here at Georgia. As professors, we are always talking about how our teaching and research should be integrated, and my whole career I worked hard to ensure they were — I was always teaching courses on whatever my next book project was, I always brought documents I had found at the archive into class — but the truth was I always felt like I was leading two lives. Since we have begun building our classes around our digital projects, however, I have that true sense of integration. Bringing students into the process of building digital projects — treating them as true collaborators — is enormously satisfying; you are finally modeling your passion not merely for a subject but for an investigative process, and you’re sharing the twists and turns and ups and downs of that process together. I think ultimately this will also help students better understand the value of the humanities because they will actually have participated in creating humanistic knowledge they cared about in a process that they loved.

Mick: The scholarship has already brought visibility to the institution, with the two directors of the DH initiative being named as ACLS digital fellows. As the DiGA project takes shape, the scholarship will be more broadly accessed and disseminated. There will be learning opportunities for faculty and students, working at various stages of the workflow from born-digital scholarship, through coding and technological skills, to opportunities further along the path from idea to fully-realized publication. Much of the research we want to cultivate and publish will have global impact, as it relates to Atlantic World Slavery, the Civil War Era, contemporary histories, and capitalism.
noted above, a project like this aligns very well with the missions of university presses and research libraries. By constructing a sustainable publishing platform and workflow, we expect to support the research, teaching, and outreach of our parent institution while providing an example and expertise to the broader academic publishing community.

Toby: I am particularly excited about the prospects for undergraduate and graduate research and creative activity at our university. Through teaching and research services, academic libraries contribute significantly to students’ success in finding, evaluating, and using recorded knowledge. Our support of digital scholarship as a teaching method, however, allows us to go beyond this by expanding the opportunities for our students to contribute to the creation of new knowledge rather than just to consume it.

Potential funders like Mellon are increasingly looking to sustainability in terms of both infrastructure and institutional or other support when evaluating fundable projects. What are your thoughts on sustainability for the Georgia project, both short- and long-term?

Steve: The whole point of our new project is to weave it into broad, established infrastructures — the Lab, the Press, the Library—and into every aspect of university life — research, teaching, and service. This helps ensure long-term sustainability because it means our constituencies and audiences are truly broad, including university administrators, an interdisciplinary faculty, librarians and Press personnel, and a diverse range of students from both the humanities and STEM disciplines. Once something is stitched into the fabric of university life and into the university’s mission, sustainability becomes a little easier.

Mick: Faculty, university presses, and research libraries all require institutional support (infrastructure and funding) to do their work, and this work supports the core activities and mission of the university while extending the reach and visibility of the university’s accomplishments. This project is no different. University presses, as the publishing component of this venture, are unique to the extent they can cover portions of their expenses through business expertise (selling content). But there is also high interest in new digital publishing and archiving workflow, we expect to support the research, teaching, and outreach of our parent institution while providing an example and expertise to the broader academic publishing community.

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