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SHAPING THE DIGITAL DISSERTATION

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES

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2. Publication Models and Open Access

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I have been participating in informal academic discussions of digital dissertations since first hearing about them while I was an undergraduate student at Virginia Tech in the early-1990s. Tech has been a pioneer in electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs), initiating the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD) to showcase ETDs that primarily used the Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) to deliver digital versions of print-like dissertations.[1] A few years later, in 2000, I deposited what would be the first digital thesis for my Master's institution, Virginia Commonwealth University—a hypertextual and media-rich collection of creative writing to satisfy the requirements of my Master of Fine Arts in poetry. The steps to convince the university to allow what would be considered a 'nontraditional' model of publication were not difficult, and I was grateful for that. A book of poetry was already nontraditional in many senses of research in the academy (although not to creative writers), but I didn't face too many obstacles—or, perhaps, the length of time that has passed has lessened the memories of those obstacles.

Before I even began writing my thesis and with the acknowledgement of my thesis advisor, who approached my ETD ambitions with a modicum of rigor combined with a healthy dose of 'Good luck with that', I started at the top of my list: I wrote to the university president (so precocious!) to ask for permission to do this work, since our peer schools in Virginia had already taken up the ETD mantle. He agreed and put me on a

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1   See http://www.ndltd.org/about

university-wide ETD Task Force. The members of that task force—the graduate dean and several faculty from across the disciplines—didn't quite know what to make of a poet who wanted to create an interactive, multimedia thesis when they were focused on making their students' scientific research accessible online in PDF format, but they were willing to listen, and I made good use of their time in showing them multiple examples of electronic poetry and fiction as well as identifying scientific PDFs from the NDLTD that showcased interactive 3D and other media elements embedded within the print-like dissertations.

Next, I went to the preservation librarian, who would ultimately be responsible for putting my ETD on a literal shelf in the library stacks, and asked her what the archival possibilities might be for a thesis that could only be read from a CD-ROM. She was very accommodating, showing me examples from the performance arts that included CD-ROMs of orchestrations along with the sheet music of composing students. She also required that the abstract and table of contents for the ETD be printed for metadata purposes (a word, to be sure, that I had never heard of and would not start actively using for more than a decade). Writing an abstract for a poetry collection was weird, but a required part of the deposit template needed so the work could be included in ProQuest's Thesis and Dissertation Abstracts index. The table of contents I played with a bit, since the collection was nonlinear and built to have multiple reading paths. I used the then-named Macromedia Director, a multimedia design software for creating interactive CDs, to build the collection and Storyspace, a literary hypertext authoring program, to create the table of contents, because the latter could show the multiple reading paths that were available between the twelve sets of poems I included in the poetry cycle. There were exponential reading paths possible, so I chose to show the visual map (see Fig. 1) of those paths that Storyspace created as well as a list of three possible paths in multiple-choice form for the final, bound thesis. That form of the thesis contained twelve printed pages, including the signature page, and a foam core to house the CD case.

That was a long time ago. But some students are still having to navigate this process on their own and are also under the impression that this work is relatively new and they are not aware of the many, many precedents that have been set and resources that have become available over the last three decades of ETD work. This work is not new, even as it may be new to students and advisors and graduate deans. It is also not new to librarians, as my preservation librarian demonstrated in 2000. There are two points in that previous sentence that I want to discuss before returning to the idea of nontraditional models of ETDs. The first is that librarians are at the forefront of work with ETDs. The second is that significant work on ETDs began years before open access became a recognized term in scholarly circles.

Open Access and Why You Should Love Librarians

Librarians and archivists have had to figure out how to handle unusual scholarly texts and other materials at the point of collection and dissemination since long before any digital revolution hit our scholarly production workflows. Their jobs as information professionals have put them quietly (to most scholars) and squarely at the forefront of digital circulation and preservation issues in academia. That work is concomitant with open access as a default ethical value that librarians espouse—that is, open access, at its most fundamental level, is about making scholarship freely accessible to readers via the internet, and academic librarians promote access to knowledge at every turn. That is literally their jobs.

The term open access (OA) began widely circulating in 2001 after the December 2000 Budapest meeting of stakeholders interested in expanding the access of research beyond those who could most afford it. Research libraries have moved from solely being caretakers of scholars' print-like research at the end of its scholarly production lifecycle to being publishers and co-producers of OA research that takes advantage of the multiple technological platforms and genres available with Web-based circulation and preservation methods. OA scholarship has proliferated over the last twenty years thanks, in part, to the following technologies and genres that are possible with their use:

- institutional repositories (IRs), in which ETDs published by a university are typically archived, and faculty research from journals and other scholarly venues is re-posted, if copyright allows;

- open-access scholarly journals, including faculty and student-produced peer-reviewed venues that use either a university's IR or another academy-owned[2] open-source software platform to publish PDFs;

- digital humanities (DH) projects, as coordinated media- or data-intensive research projects created by librarians, between librarians and faculty members, or with librarians assisting faculty members who have digital projects that need sustainability (preservation and/or revision) plans the library can support;

- open educational resources (OER), which are collections of teaching materials put together in a coherent fashion, similar to a textbook, by an instructor to distribute for free to students.

By default, all of these project types facilitate open access publishing, which has been a mainstay in the sciences and in libraries since the advent of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s.[3] This is not to say that the arts and humanities have not participated in this digital scholarly revolution—they have: From the first known, peer-reviewed journal that used email as a delivery platform (*Postmodern Culture*, c. 1990); to some of the earliest peer-reviewed literary arts criticism journals (*electronic book review*, c. 1995), electronic literature journals (*New River*, c. 1996), and digital rhetoric and pedagogy (*Kairos*, c. 1996); to some of the most recent advances in peer-reviewed publishing for the performing

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2　**Academy-owned software** refers to (usually) open-source platforms that are developed by universities or other higher education institutions for use, usually for free but sometimes can incur customer service charges.

3　The humanities is not without its early innovators: the first known digital dissertation in the humanities is Christine Boese's 'The Ballad of The Internet Nutball: Chaining Rhetorical Visions from the Margins of the Margins to the Mainstream in the Xenaverse', which she defended in 1998 and wrote entirely in HTML with embedded images and exploratory navigational paths. There are several other early humanities examples, including Virginia Kuhn's 2005 highly visual dissertation, 'Ways of Composing: Visual Literacy in the Digital Age', authored in Sophie.

arts, including *The Journal for Artistic Research* (c. 2010) and the related multimedia repository, the *Research Catalogue*. Each of these venues has a different open-access business model (with the exception of *Postmodern Culture*, which is no longer open access). Yes, there are multiple business models for open access—the details of which are outside the scope of this essay—but all types of OA require that scholarly output be free to read, which exponentially expands a scholar's potential audience and engagement with publics (as Kathleen Fitzpatrick discusses in her essay in this collection). Yes, there are pitfalls and myths about OA that include a small percentage of predatory publishers who take advantage of the fear academics have in gaining and keeping employment—and shame on those publishers!—but detailing how to keep away from predatory vendors is also outside the scope of this essay as it's not immediately relevant to digital dissertations as the focus genre here.[4]

My point in detailing all the OA publication possibilities that are viable in a university setting is to strongly suggest that (1) digital dissertations have been published as OA texts longer than OA's existence and serve to bring a wider audience to one's research; so OA is not a thing to be feared, but to be embraced. And, (2) librarians are important collaborators for dissertators and their committees and can explain the OA environment in minute detail. A large research library might have an ETD librarian, a digital humanities librarian, an OER librarian, a 'scholcomm' (short for scholarly communications) librarian and maybe even a digital publishing librarian! The names may be different at every university, and a smaller PhD-granting university might have one person who fills all these roles (so be kind to them—they are definitely overworked!), but there will be someone in the library whose job it is to, at the very least, file your institution's dissertations with ProQuest (which is usually a requirement in the United States), so connect with that person early to ask for advice on creating a digital dissertation. Especially if that dissertation is expected to take a nontraditional form.

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4   For a quick primer on avoiding predatory OA journals, use the Council of Editors of Learned Journals' 'Best Practices for Online Journal Editors' (2008), which provides a checklist for maintaining a reputable online journal, located at http://celj.org/resources/Documents/celj_best-practices-for-online-journals-REV.pdf

Publication Models for Digital Dissertations, or How Not to Pin People into Specific Genres

I started my academic career by publishing a collection of hypertextual poetry in an OA peer-reviewed journal that exclusively publishes scholarly multimedia texts. That poetry collection later became part of my digital thesis. I now edit that OA journal—*Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, and have held that position for almost twenty years. (Yikes! And check us out at http://kairos.technorhetoric. net.) In that time, I have seen and participated in a lot of conversations about the shape of digital dissertations, and digital scholarship more generally in the humanities. As an extension of the research I did to prep for my MFA thesis and the webtexts I was editing for the journal, I wrote early on in my career a possible taxonomy for what we were then calling 'born-digital scholarship'—a name that some academics quickly realized was not that useful given how digitally embedded our scholarly practices had become, in our use of mundane and ubiquitous platforms like Microsoft Word. I was not then, nor am I now, excited to study scholarship that can primarily be represented by printing sheets of paper out and read via alphabetic text in a single, linear order. Instead, I have always been interested in how we might move away from 'digital scholarship' that is represented by print-like PDFs into more innovative, nonlinear and interactive media-driven forms.

Over nearly a decade, starting in the mid-2000s, the Modern Language Association's Committee on Information Technology slowly adopted and adapted Geoffrey Rockwell's wiki on digital scholarly genres for humanists, which included genres such as archives/ collections, TEI-based mark-ups of scholarly editions, and other projects that took advantage of hypertextual linking capabilities of the early Web.[5] I always took umbrage, however, that his list labeled hypermedia texts (what we might now call scholarly multimedia) as a 'nightmare' that were impossible to evaluate since they were never published in peer-reviewed venues (a patent falsity, even at the time he wrote the

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5   Rockwell's wiki and the MLA's version of the revised guidelines are now both offline, but can be found in the 2011 print version of MLA's *Profession* in an article by Geoffrey Rockwell ('On the Evaluation of Digital Media as Scholarship', *Profession*, 1 (2011), 152–68, https://doi.org/10.1632/prof.2011.2011.1.152) in a special section on that topic.

list in the early to mid-2000s). While it is easy to take shots at a digital text that is no longer available, it is ironic that one of the main forms of digital scholarly production in the humanities has become those exact hypermedia genres, with many of the digital humanities projects being produced these days falling into the old-school category of hypermedia—that is, using the affordances of the Web (HTML with its capabilities of linking) to embed multimedia assets to create a holistic, multimodal meaning for a text.

Indeed since that time, I have witnessed many varieties of digital humanities genres that could fall into the category of hypermedia, in addition to the more stable genres of digitized collections, archives, and digital variorums. But that old classification of 'hypermedia models' vary in their generic representations as far and wide as there are authors to produce them and platforms with which to build them. That does not mean it is impossible to evaluate them in terms of quality as dissertators create their projects or post-PhD scholars produce similar projects as part of their research agendas. I have written several books and articles and held multiple week-long workshops on how to read, write and evaluate nontraditional, digital humanities projects including digital dissertations like the kinds represented in this book, and I can promise you—based on research that sampled over 1,000 webtexts produced over fifteen years—that the genres we encounter in digital, interactive, media-rich projects have not solidified.[6] And that is fine—and good, even! It just means that—like any text of any communicative mode we encounter as readers—we have to approach it on its own terms, figure out what genres it is using or remixing, hypothesize its narrative or rhetorical directions, follow our knowledge of gestalt to create meaning, and find closure on the text in the ways we know how to interpret. These are rhetorical acts of meaning-making that are necessary with any text we 'read'. For instance, in working with undergraduate and graduate students over a number of years to teach them how to author and evaluate scholarly multimedia texts, I asked them to create a list of key concepts they found useful to discuss sample digital media texts across a range of genres. We used some existing evaluative frameworks

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6   See Cheryl E. Ball, 'The Shifting Genres of Scholarly Multimedia: Webtexts as Innovation', *The Journal of Media Innovations*, 3.2 (2016), 52–71, https://doi.org/10.5617/jmi.v3i2.2548

to start—including those that Virginia Kuhn has touched on in this book and written about extensively elsewhere as part of her work with the Institute for Multimedia Literacy. I then asked students to expand those frameworks to suit their own goals for authoring within the context of a specific assignment, which was to create an article-heft piece of scholarly multimedia, whereas dissertators might do the same with monograph-heft scholarly multimedia and similar digital humanities projects.[7] Some of the basic criteria touched on the relationship of a project's form to its content, and the innovative, creative or genre-defining or -bending work it does; the scholarly relevance, timeliness and appropriateness of a project given its suggested audience; and, of course, for scholarly genres, the validity and credibility of the research presented. Those are some broad rhetorical categories that can be added to with each piece of digital media, including digital dissertations, since they need to be evaluated within their own historical, technological, cultural and social framework, on their own terms, in relation to that moment and to the media and genres they use in that time. This is the same approach *Kairos* has taken in reviewing thousands of submissions for the last twenty-five years—a peer-review process, it should be noted, that is quite recursive with authors in the same way that advisors will be working with their advisees on dissertation projects.

Yes, there will always be texts that are difficult to parse because we have not encountered their like before. And, yes, there are ways to educate and mentor graduate students new to this composing process into understanding the rhetorical choices and genre conventions available to them so they're not just making shit up, or 'adding bells and whistles', as my thesis advisor and, later, a dean warned me not to do—a specious complaint to someone well enmeshed in this work, by the way, and hurtful to those just beginning their learning process. Dismissing the integral work of design and aesthetics, which are powerful meaning-making choices in their own right, in favor of some made-up notion of a purely rhetorical text is ridiculous and much derided in both art-based and non-art-based academic research areas including the fine

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7   For an idea of how that framework plays out with some examples, see my article on 'Assessing Scholarly Multimedia: A Rhetorical Genre Studies Approach', *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 21.1 (2012), 61–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.201 2.626390

and performing arts, design, rhetoric, cultural studies and linguistics. Form *and* content both matter, and often simultaneously and with equal weight. So give students a chance before dismissing the kinds of radical scholarship their digital dissertations, in the form and content of digital humanities-type projects, might produce. This book showcases a wealth of contemporary examples and narratives for successful (and probably some not-so-successful) digital dissertations that can serve as additional models for those courageous enough to innovate in their digital research forms.

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