DIGITAL HUMANITIES: NEW PERSPECTIVES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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Abstract

ICT is one of the keywords of higher education today. And like other disciplines, the study of literature has not remained unaffected by technology in the methods of teaching-learning. My paper explores the resources of the digital age influencing how we variously read, watch, research, and teach Shakespeare. It does so from a digital humanities perspective, with the aim of building on trends within Shakespeare studies towards the interrelation between Shakespeare's works and contemporary technologies. The focus on Shakespeare serves two purposes – it demonstrates how even the most time-honoured areas of literary studies may engage with new technology, let alone more avant-garde fields; and it illustrates how performance studies in any literature may benefit from such methods.

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Digital humanities (DH) is a term which has become familiar to us in the last few decades. Today, it finds constant currency within the many departments of scholarship in the subjects subsumed under the aegis of the term 'humanities'. It might be defined as the interface between digital technology and scholarship in the humanities. Gone are the days when students were asked to write essays about the mutual exclusivity of science and the arts – 'as science advances, the arts decline: discuss.' Today the narrative has changed to one of proportional progress.

As we move into a digital destiny, humanities scholarship transforms its parameters in order to benefit from, and contribute to, this onward march of scientific enquiry. This intersection of computing and the humanities includes the systematic production and use of digital resources as

well as the assessment and critique of their application. It marks a new direction of scholarship that involves collaborative multidisciplinary approaches towards digitally enhanced consumption of cultural texts, innovative teaching methodology, research into newer avenues, with an unprecedentedly wide range of circulation of the results. It brings digital tools and techniques to the study of the humanities with the understanding that the printed word is no longer the main medium for the production and distribution of knowledge. Digital Humanities is thus the exploration of the two-way relationship between the humanities and the digital platform; it harnesses technology in the pursuit of humanities research and simultaneously subjects technology to humanistic interrogation.

But this attempt to define digital humanities must be qualified by the caveat that this definition is continually being formulated by its practitioners. The field is constantly expanding and changing, making specific definitions outdated with dizzying speed. The second volume of *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (2016) acknowledges this difficulty:

> Along with the digital archives, quantitative analyses, and tool-building projects that once characterized the field, DH now encompasses a wide range of methods and practices: visualizations of large image sets, 3D modelling of historical artefacts, 'born digital' dissertations, hashtag activism and the analysis thereof, alternate reality games, mobile makerspaces, and more. In what has been called 'big tent' DH, it can at times be difficult to determine with any specificity what, precisely, digital humanities work entails (Klein).

In its practical application, digital humanities embraces a variety of topics, from amassing online collections of primary sources to the analysis of voluminous cultural data sets to topic modelling (locating recurrent abstract ideas within data sets). It works with both, originally digital and subsequently digitized materials. It amalgamates the methodologies from traditional humanities disciplines (such as literature, linguistics, history, philosophy, art, archaeology, music, and cultural studies) and social sciences, with tools provided by computing (such as hypertext, hypermedia, data visualisation, information retrieval, data mining, text mining, digital mapping and statistical analysis), and digital publishing. Related subfields of digital humanities have emerged like software studies, platform studies, and critical code studies. Fields that parallel the digital humanities include new media studies and information science as well as media theory of composition, game studies, particularly in areas related to digital humanities project design and production, and cultural analytics (Cambridge).

In the context of this emergent and exciting discipline, my paper explores the resources of the digital age that influence how we variously read, watch, research, and teach Shakespeare. It does so from a digital humanities perspective, with the aim of building on trends within Shakespeare studies towards the interrelation between Shakespeare's works and contemporary technologies. The focus on Shakespeare serves two purposes – it demonstrates how even the most time-honoured areas of literary studies may engage with new technology, let alone more avant-garde fields; and it illustrates how performance studies in any literature may benefit from such methods.

As part of the 'Shakespeare Lives' celebrations in 2016 marking 400 years of the death of the Bard of Avon, British Council developed a project called *Mix the Play* in India. This was a digital interface where users could 'direct' a scene from *Romeo and Juliet Dream* by determining parameters like actors, accents, costumes, music and sets. It was part of a larger digital endeavour - Globe Theatre's 'Complete Walk' where all 37 plays of Shakespeare were presented as 10-minute films shot in their original locations from Egypt to Elsinore, from Venice to Verona.

For the purpose of this paper, I interviewed the director of this project, Emmanuel Witzthum, over email. Discussing how the idea originated, he said that as part of his work at the British Council, he created the interactive music platform *mixthecity.com* in which users could make musical video 'mixes' of cities and share them online. The idea behind the platform was both to connect people musically and also to afford them a way to learn about a different culture through its music. It entailed choosing a musician from the various snatches provided, choosing a backdrop of the city, choosing a tempo for the rhythm, the instruments and vocals to be included, and then merging them into a customised clip.

During the 'Shakespeare Lives' initiative, the British Council organised a massive programme which commissioned Witzthum to look into how the *Mix the City* experience could be employed for this new project. He recalls how he, along with his team, looked at a number of possibilities connecting Shakespeare and music. But they felt that was too restrictive, and decided to explore more options. Analysing the different elements offered by the previous digital platform, they

came up with the present idea. They wanted the technological framework to help users connect closely with every aspect of theatre.

The next question was the amount of agency to be given to the users. In *Mix the City* it is being a disc jockey making your mix video. In *Mix the Play* it was decided to enable the users to achieve the experience of being a theatre director, to get a first-hand feel of what it means to stage a scene from a Shakespeare play. This entailed a recognition of the varied elements that make up theatrical preparation, ranging from the casting for parts to the costumes of the characters, the lines they speak and the accents they speak them in, to the backdrop for the particular scene, the lighting, the music, and the special effects. After all these choices were made, the user could finally merge them to produce a customised scene from the play which she then had the option of sharing on several digital platforms.

When asked whether other such projects have been undertaken by the Council earlier, Witzthum asserts that *mixthecity.com* was the precursor of *mixtheplay.com*. They have also released a third mix platform - *mixthebody.britishcouncil.org*. This focuses on contemporary dance with partners Company Wayne McGregor and the Attakalari Dance centre in Bangalore. The idea behind it is to allow users to learn or discover what it means to be a choreographer, to translate an idea into movement. Witzthum says they had to explore a lot of different options on how to translate this idea from the imagination to a mobile phone. They created a library of gestures which users can draw on their phone screens to see how the dancers interpret these gestures to create a dance enhanced by music and rhythm.

The concept behind all three platforms was to allow users an interactive experience to explore their creativity in the different art forms. They aimed at a mobile-first orientation for ease of usage, keeping simplicity in mind for new digital users, and aiming for a final output that users could easily share with their friends.

The target participants were individuals between 18 and 30 years. The projects have been accessed by over 2 million users all over the world with users spending an average of 7 minutes on the site. The platforms were accessible at all British Council libraries. Additionally, they were

showcased at various landmark cultural festivals over the globe. For example, *Mix the Play* formed an important installation element at two prominent Durga Puja venues in Kolkata in 2016 and 2017. Thus the visibility of the programmes may be said to be much higher than the official numbers recorded, as these festivals are witness to massive footfalls. *Flying Object* was commissioned for digital production. It also provided creative inputs. *Roll Studio* created the interaction design and managed the web development. Though there are no immediate plans of more such digital platforms as of now, the success of these three warrant similar endeavours in the near future (Witzthum).

While all three digital platforms were exciting hands-on interfaces providing their users with the unique opportunity to experience the creativity of a composer/director/choreographer, *Mix the Play* is particularly promising from the perspective of digital humanities studies. It has the potential to be a valuable teaching tool for students restricted to Shakespeare only on the printed page. For students studying Shakespeare in cities as well as less urbanised contexts, it allowed them for the first time to experience the actual performance of a classic play that was till then only text on page. One of the challenges of teachers of literature is that in teaching a play text, they are acutely aware of the fact that it is meant to be experienced as performance. Unlike the poems, novels and essays that they teach, a simple critical analysis of a play text is not enough for the students to engage with it fully. A play text must be experienced as performance in order to do justice to it. And that entails all the different elements that go to make a performance: the text is just one of them.

Thus, *Mix the Play* is a landmark initiative that serves as a cornerstone in recent Shakespeare studies. It helps us to critically examine how digital technologies have enhanced, transformed, or challenged the appreciation and study of Shakespeare in order to consider what future directions scholarship and practices might take as our educational modes and means become increasingly digital.

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