Exploring the Past in the Digital Present

A course of the LUDCH Digital Humanities Minor, taught by Angus A.A. Mol
Computer-based Time Machines

• The Science of Discworld (Pratchett, Stewart and Cohen)
• Discworld wizards have to save Roundworld’s humanity from an excess of as well as a lack of extelligence.
• Rewriting history, powered by Hex, a highly intelligent computer
• Without extelligence, humanity is lost:
  • “The wizards are now beginning to understand, while you can eliminate evil by eliminating extelligence, the result can be about as interesting as watching daytime television.”
• Discworld is powered by Narrativium, Roundworld is powered by (hi)stories.
• How can we create extelligent (communicatable) histories?
  • Find structure in digital frameworks and tools
  • Computers require very formal language
The Exploring the Past course is designed to…

…not be (Digital) History 101...

…tap into your (hidden) passion for the potential of the past to make a positive impact on the present...

… teach you how computational frameworks and tools can benefit and structure your understanding and communication of history (and vice versa)….

… be fun and let you explore things you are interested in (guided by me).
Exploring what past?

• For the purposes of this course the past starts at \( t - 1 \) or ‘yesterday’
• (For me,) The past is not about discipline, source material, or time period, but about perspective.
  • Contextual
  • Diachronic
  • Human-focused
  • Transitive knowledge and skills
  • Curiosity and outreach
  • Actionable and scalable
  • Tools to think with
  • Theories to play with
  • Data-driven Stories
    • Clear
    • Engaging
    • Impactful

Findable

Accessible

Interoperable

Reusable

Histories!
Successful Digital Exploration is based on Clear and Persuasive Communication

What is the metaphysics of presence in St. Thomas Aquinas?: praeentia, praesens + proposition

“I knew, the day I was to meet Thomas J. Watson, Sr., that he had on his desk a report which said IBM machines could never do what I wanted. I had seen in the waiting room a small poster imprinted with the words: ‘The difficult we do right away; the impossible takes a little longer.’ ”
- Roberto Busa, 1980

"The use of the latest data-processing tools developed primarily for science and commerce may prove a significant factor in facilitating future literary and scholarly studies."
Pan-Caribbean Interaction Patterns in the Late Ceramic Age (AD600/800-1492)

Courtesy of Prof Dr. Hofman
The Epistemological Core of the Digital Humanities

- Humanities: “Fuzzy”, deep, multi-stranded, complex
- Content
- Computers: Formal, systemic, focused, complex
- Structure
- Perfection
Next week: Assignment 1.1 *Pitch the Past*

• **Who:** a single sentence about what keeps you busy in life and how that has led you to think about…

• **Hook:** …a problem or opportunity that is of wider relevance. This can be audience specific or of general societal relevance, in this case the audience will be your peers: (humanity) students. This problem or opportunity can be explored in…

• **When:** … a historical period, event, or figure. Describe and give context of this period, event, or figure(s) in at most a few sentences (when was it, where, what was it). Next connect the hook via the when to…

• **How:** …specific aspect(s) of this period, event, or figure(s) and how *specifically* they speak to the problem you have introduced in the beginning of your pitch, which is…

• **Why:** … you want to explore this during this course.
Example Pitch

“I am Angus Mol, I used to be hardcore into Caribbean Archaeology, but now I am more focused on using digital tools to help tell better histories. That could help, for instance, when it comes to our current problems with intercultural communication. I learned a lot about how this can go right and wrong from studying the first encounters between the new and old world. This started in 1492 when Columbus set foot ashore in Guanahani and ended more or less with the colonization of what is now the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

Really what we saw there is two cultures that partially understood or at least seem to understand each other, but actually worked too much from within their own framework, leading one to dominate and horrible treat the other.

I think that learning more about this period of history through online timelines, clear conceptual frameworks, games, and simulations can really help more people to recognize and avoid similar problems today.”
10 PRINT CHR$(205.5+RND(1));: GOTO 10

• Computer Sciences do humanities research too!
  • Platform Studies
  • Retrogame Archaeology
• A book about a one-line Commodore 64 BASIC code
• Creative computing
• Randomness
• Context
• History

• See me and Aris do some retro-game archaeology of Hamurabi.
Reading for next week:

• **Before the start of next class, read:**
  • Zaagsma 2013, *On Digital History*
  • Barber 2016, *Digital Storytelling*

• **Optional:**
  • The *Introduction* chapter (or more) of Montfort et al. 2014, *10 PRINT CHR$(205.5+RND(1));: GOTO 10*
  • Watch *Adam Cryamble*’s “Big Data + Old History”, via *PhD Comics*
You may want to **apply for a job**?

See you next week!