

Historia blog

Do you need digital history?

Adam Crymble*

No. Of course not. It's not water, or oxygen, or the trees. It's not even crucial to good scholarship. For thousands of years we've been making meaningful discoveries about the world without going digital. Do you *need* the digital history is the wrong question. Even digital history itself is the wrong phrase, because at its core, digital history is symbolic of something else: interdisciplinarity.

That's what we really mean when we talk about digital history. Many will disagree with me, but when someone tells you about their digital history project, they want to tell you about how they used the core skills of linguistics, or geography, or network analysis, or game studies, or information studies, or social scientific methods to understand the types of history questions that were formerly the preserve of close-reading humanities scholars.

We've mistakenly called this "digital" because this interdisciplinary activity became popular through the creation of digital tools that lowered the barrier to entry and allowed historians to try out new methods and approaches. But it's no more "digital" than using a calculator to do your sums makes you a "digital mathematician". So if you aren't much good with computers, that doesn't matter. What matters most is whether or not an interdisciplinary approach to your research could make you a better researcher.

These new approaches give us new lenses through which to explore history. Sometimes they lead us in unexpected directions. A data-driven big data project can tell us where interesting patterns in a collection of historical texts appear, which might otherwise evade detection through traditional methods. A geographic approach including digital maps used on sources with a spatial element can let us *see* with our eyes what can look so muddled when viewed as row after row in a table.

If you want to be inspired by what digital history can do, you'll find no one better than Ben Schmidt at Northeastern University in the United States. Ben has posted blog posts (<http://sappingattention.blogspot.co.uk/>) of his research on

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How to cite this article: A. Crymble, "Historia Blog. Do you need digital history?" *Historia* 61, 2, November 2016, pp 121-123.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-8392/2016/v61n2a6>

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everything from time-lapsed moving maps that highlight the historical Pacific whaling industry in the nineteenth century (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tn7fQ5mYHPA>) to analyses of the scripts of British TV drama *Downton Abbey* that highlight anachronisms that would not have been spoken by people who lived in the 1920s (<http://www.prochronism.com/2014/02/downton-abbey-season-4.html>), to interactive tools that help us understand the use of language in the American President's *State of the Union* addresses over time (<http://benschmidt.org/poli/2015-SOTU>). His data-driven approach to history has inspired many other scholars to do exciting new work that transcends disciplines.

The digital realm also provides tremendous potential to engage new audiences in new ways. As a guest at the 2016 HASA conference in Vanderbijlpark, I shared my research on the use of video games to help classify 1 million historical images (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoCgHo2rwN4>). We *could* do that manually, but even at one classification every six seconds without pause, we're looking at 70 days of work. With video games, we can play our way to the same outcome while sharing the workload. These new approaches just make sense for any society looking to push the boundaries of what we can know or do.

How do you get started?

I'd love to tell you that it's easy. But it's not. If it was easy it wouldn't be scholarship.

It's frustrating, just like it was frustrating when you tried to learn to walk, or learn another language, or read the handwriting on that letter in the archives.

But it's only difficult because it's different. You have to problem-solve in ways that take you out of your comfort zone. In many respects you have to learn to *think* like a computer, which by design acts in very particular ways and has very distinct limits that seem foreign to we humans. Despite the challenge, I know you can do it, because you've overcome intellectual challenges before.

One challenge many of my colleagues and I have been working to help overcome is the cost barrier. Digital history can be free, and that's important for all of us.

For self-learners, a project I have helped to found, *The Programming Historian* (<http://programminghistorian.org/>), provides more than 50 free tutorials on introductory skills ranging from digital mapping to an introduction to historical linguistics.

If you want to learn computer programming, you'll not find anything as easy and intuitive as *Code Academy* (<https://www.codecademy.com/>).

If you need to ask for help, try *Digital Humanities Questions and Answers* (<http://digitalhumanities.org/answers/>), where friendly people are standing by to offer free advice.

Many digital humanities scholars turn to Twitter (<https://twitter.com/>) (you can find me at @adam_crymble), or to the daily email digest *Humanist Discussion Group* (<http://dhhumanist.org/>) run by Professor Willard McCarty from King's College London, which includes everything from details of upcoming publications and events, to job postings and calls for collaboration.

How you *should* get started

Collaboration is key to a good digital history project. In fact, I'd suggest it is the best way in for someone new to the field. It took you *years* to become a historian. What makes you think you can master linguistics in a few weeks?

Far better to start asking around and looking for a colleague to work with on a new project than to struggle with (or worse, completely misunderstand important principles of) a different field. Collaboration is not just a matter of finding someone to do your project for you. A good partnership is mutually beneficial. So the key is finding someone whose research agenda meshes with your own. Often, if we sit down and have a chat, we can find interesting intellectual challenges for both partners.

Computer scientists are often drawn to the need to find out ways of organising messy data – a common problem we historians also face with our fragmented archives. Linguists are increasingly interested in finding out if historical patterns of language use adhere to the same types of patterns as modern language. Geographers too want to know if their theories of twentieth and twenty-first century human society apply to the past. There *are* collaborators out there for you, you just need to start looking. Not sure where to start? Try a cold call to a colleague in the relevant field, for example:

Hello, my name is Adam Crymble and I'm a historian working on the history of migration. I have looked at your research and it looks to me like we might have some overlapping areas of interest. I'd be interested in discussing this at a time convenient to you. Please let me know if that's something you'd like to pursue and we can arrange a call.

It doesn't always work, but neither does research. When it does work, we get those beautiful new ideas that can only come from bringing together disciplines. Some call that digital history. I don't care what we call it, but I suggest you give it a try.