Is Digital Archaeology Busted?

written by Jeremy Huggett | 24/10/2017

And you thought you had computer problems
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Timothy Brennan has just published an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* called 'The Digital-Humanities Bust' (behind a paywall but Google the article and on the first results page you'll currently find a short domain link direct to the full piece). It's a critical reflection on the state of Digital Humanities, in which he points to a decade's worth of resources being invested in Digital Humanities, and asks what exactly they have accomplished: "To ask about the field is really to ask how or what DH knows, and what it allows us to know. The answer, it turns out, is not much." Not surprisingly, the article has ruffled feathers amongst the Digital Humanities community, coming a year after an equally critical and hence controversial article by Allington, Brouilette and Golumbia (2016) in the *LA Review of Books*, 'Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities'.

Digital Archaeology is rather different in terms of its situation (and levels of investment!). However, are there any lessons for Digital Archaeology here? If Digital Humanities are indeed a bust, is Digital Archaeology too? As an exercise, we might look at some aspects of Brennan's diagnosis through a Digital Archaeology lens …

> "… the digital *in* the humanities is not the digital humanities".

The basic confusion in terms that Brennan points to is more than a little reminiscent of recent debates concerning Digital Archaeology on this blog and elsewhere: the idea that "we are all digital archaeologists now" as Colleen Morgan and Stu Eve famously declared in 2012, pointing to the extent to which a significant share of our work and life as archaeologists are delegated to digital devices. Andre Costopoulos followed this up with an argument essentially that digital archaeology was the not-so-new 'normal', and that we should stop talking about it and get on with doing it. But, to paraphrase Brennan, the digital *in* archaeology is not digital archaeology – or, as I've suggested elsewhere, there's a difference between digital archaeology and Digital Archaeology …

> “The term ‘DH’ … is not about introducing digital technologies where there were none before, but about an institutional reframing. What people mean by ‘DH’ is a program and, ultimately, an epistemology.”

I rather doubt that Digital Archaeology is a program – this seems to imply a deal more order or structure than is evident and is perhaps undesirable, a degree of disciplinarity that is not currently deserved. The idea of Digital Archaeology as an epistemology seems true only in the sense that the digital becomes part of the means of production of knowledge. Nor do I think that that Digital Archaeology is simply about introducing digital technologies, and although the introduction of new technology is classically understood to reframe practice and the structures that go along with it, to describe this as institutional reframing seems too rigidly defined. Of course, understanding the digital in relation to knowledge practices and archaeological practices more generally is key to appreciating the changes wrought by the introduction and use of the digital.

> “Digital humanities has a signature style: technophilia crossed with a love for its own neologisms. Data are ‘curated’ rather than assessed; information is ‘leveraged’; facts are ‘aggregated’ rather than interrogated. Significantly, those terms are never defined, but there is no question that they expect their readers’ diffidence.”

Although I’ve pointed to technological fetishism within archaeology, and there are doubtless the same (and more!) neologisms in use, I’m not so sure that there’s any expectation of diffidence on the part of non-/less digital archaeologists in the face of them. In some respects, it’s rather the contrary, given that critics often perceive digital archaeology as wrapping outdated processual approaches in twenty-first century technologies; that digital practice lacks an appropriate theoretical underpinning. Certainly there is evidence – much as Brennan observes in DH – for techno-boosterism in our publications, which inexorably focus on the positives, downplay (or omit) the negatives, and frequently lack a reflexive approach to their use of digital tools and technologies.

> “The digital humanities ignores a nagging theoretical dilemma: The interpretive problems that computers solve are not the ones that have long stumped critics. On the contrary, the technology demands that it be asked only what it can answer, changing the questions to conform to its own limitations. These turn out to be not very interesting.”

It is true that at least some of the interpretative problems in archaeology which we investigate are not ones which existed in a pre-digital archaeology; after all, introducing the digital does introduce a whole new range of analytical possibilities (the revolution brought about through structure-from-motion photogrammetry, for instance). But none of this is a bad thing! And we often are using the new technologies to address age-old questions, since not to do so would signally fail to take full advantages of the opportunities these digital devices offer. So, for example, wielding the digital means we can analyse more data, potentially across a wider range of datasets, than we could before and hence we can seek to address issues in more detail and at a broader scale than we would without. When we do so, we have to do so in a way that is computable, but that’s not quite the same thing as suggesting that the technology can only be asked what it can answer. What this

does is lose sight of the fact that the technology doesn't demand anything – it's human designers who define our interactions with the technologies we use, and how those interactions are governed by the limitations of interface, available options, data rules, and so on.

> "Computer circuits may be lightning-fast, but they preclude random redirections of inquiry. By design, digital "reading" obviates the natural intelligence of the brain making leaps, establishing forms of value, and rushing instinctively to where it means to go. Scour DH literature all you want, but you will find no head-on treatment of the theoretical problems that such methods entail. DH offers us powerful but dull tools, like a weightlifter doing a pirouette."

This perspective seems very focussed on automated approaches to textual analysis rather than more general applications. Certainly random connections, serendipity, redirections (and the corresponding rabbit holes we frequently chase down!) are very much a part of the digital experience; indeed, one could easily argue that the properties and facilities offered by digital resources increase rather than reduce the likelihood of these. We might be more concerned about limits on inquiry with the introduction of an archaeological Deep Mind at some point in the future, but even then, as long as the system can explain its reasoning and conceptual leaps in human terms, it might well turn out to be an interesting experience. It's perhaps the black-boxing of many digital tools that is being resisted by Brennan here, and that certainly presents challenges which should be highly susceptible to digital humanities approaches – or they ought to be.

> "For all its resources, the digital humanities makes a rookie mistake: It confuses more information for more knowledge. DH doesn't know why it thinks it knows what it does not know. And that is an odd place for a science to be."

Here archaeologists have to plead guilty to a degree. We're accustomed to living with our data mountains which accumulate faster than we can cope with them, and we've frequently seen the digital as a solution to our data problems. The whole open science approach within archaeology is predicated on the idea that we need to show how we know what we think we know, and the digital can actively contribute to this if we choose, and it certainly makes the process much more feasible than in a pre-digital environment.

> "DH is at least partly a revolt of the academically disenfranchised. With shrunken hopes for a tenure-track job, younger scholars set out to make necessity a virtue, and instead of protesting their disenfranchisement by attacking the neoliberal logic of the university, they join the corporate attack on a professoriate that has what they want."

This is an intriguing proposition. I'd suggest that in archaeology this might have been the case some thirty years ago (although I may be biased here!) in the UK and North America, at least, but it doesn't seem so true today (again, from my somewhat privileged perspective). Nor do I recognise the idea of digital archaeology as a vehicle for an attack on an established professoriate: the challenges for younger archaeological scholars are certainly there, but the solutions being adopted

are far more nuanced than simply leaping on some perceived digital bandwagon.

> "Once no more than a slogan, DH now has many anthologies detailing its program, and almost always proposing DH, somewhat threateningly, as the future of the humanities, not just a distinct school within it."

The somewhat ambitious claims that the digital is the future of the humanities have always felt it to be overblown rhetoric, and somewhat lacking in sensitivity. I've argued that Digital Archaeology ought to have a greater impact on the broader field of archaeology (e.g. Huggett 2015), rather than being essentially perceived as a service or set of tools, but that's a rather different matter. Of course, if we are all digital now, then this particular ship has sailed in any case as we are already living in that digital future.

So are Digital Humanities busted? No – there may be challenges, but that's a sign of health, and there are already a number of robust responses (and Brennan's intent was doubtless to stir things up in any case). See, for example, Ted Underwood's Twitter stream, Sarah Bond's practical response and, in particular, Bill Caraher's thoughtful response from the perspective of another archaeologist.

Digital Archaeology is certainly not busted – if anything, it is strengthening through a growing body of digital theory sitting alongside digital practice. But working through these diagnoses, right or wrong, underlines a number of fundamental differences between Digital Humanities and Digital Archaeology. Digital Archaeology has never set itself up as a discrete discipline, let alone as the saviour of archaeology; it has never sought to institutionalise itself as discrete departments or centres of study within the academy (with one or two exceptions); it has never sought to subsume a host of disciplines under a single (in)famously 'broad tent'. Indeed, as I've discussed elsewhere (Huggett 2012), over the years archaeology has been very much peripheral to Digital Humanities beyond collaborating on a number of large research projects and contributing to the staff of a number of Digital Humanities centres. Perhaps one reason why Digital Archaeology has dodged a number of Brennan's bullets is that it has remained quite tightly linked to a specific discipline, and it would be interesting to consider how the picture might have been different had the introduction of the digital into the humanities seen the creation of discrete forms of 'Digital English', 'Digital History', and 'Digital Classics', 'Digital Philosophy' etc. rather than the umbrella Digital Humanities that lays claim to these areas. Institutionalisation as a means of escaping from the perception of the field as a service sector has never been a solution for archaeology: the focus has been more on embedding digital archaeology into archaeological theory and practice.

A number of commenters below the line on Brennan's article unfortunately play the man, not the ball. But there are some thoughtful comments amongst them. For example, Commenter sj60640 writes:

> "We value the intellectual endeavor of applying computational tools to digital resources in an attempt to reveal unsuspected patterns and underlying truths that challenge previous assumptions. The analyses and syntheses that emerge from this process are at their core deeply critical, epistemological and humanistic."

We can perhaps all agree on that.

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