Digital Humanities: Interview with Todd Presner
MUSES: Dr. Presner, how would you describe digital humanities to people who have never heard of it?

Todd Presner: Digital humanities is a relatively new field in the humanities that looks at the social and cultural implications of new technology, the ways that the learning environment has changed, but also the scholarly research environment. It looks at how new technologies, many of which are web-based, can be used to analyze the cultural record.

That might mean large-scale databases to cultural analytics in which we are using quantitative means to investigate qualitative phenomena. It also means rich multimedia explorations of community, social situations, and culture, as well as exploration with the kinds of humanities-interpretive methods that you expect in traditional humanities, particularly:

- historical context
- linguistics
- translinguistic communities
- an awareness of comparative perspectives, and
- the insight that the humanities has about human values and ideals.

All these things kind of come together in digital humanities to undertake research in a very different universe, one that is multi-mediated, dynamic and ever-changing.

Digital humanities tries to investigate what it means to conceptualize and produce knowledge in the 21st century. That’s the fundamental premise of the field.

MUSES: How long have you been involved with digital humanities?

Todd Presner: Probably since I started using computers when I was in my teens. I started programming in the early ’80s. I started making “choose your own adventure” games in Basic which are hyper-textual, nonlinear storytelling narratives, modeled after the famous Zork gaming series.

I went to grad school during the dot com boom, pulled by the aura of Silicon Valley as a grad student. I tried to understand what the web meant for studying literature and history in grad school, and realized that print media were very quickly becoming transformed with the creation of the worldwide web in the early ’90s.

Ever since, I’ve been very aware of the changes, and they’re exciting in the sense that you now have a proliferation of different knowledge forms, of possibilities of reaching new audiences, and really thinking in a networked community. It’s always been with me, but it’s intensified in the last decade as we’ve created programs in the digital humanities across the nation and also internationally.

MUSES: What do you see as the importance of students being out there and thinking, and seeking new knowledge?

Todd Presner: I think that one of the things that the digital humanities and digital technologies enables is a kind of cultural creation, experimentation, making and sharing. And all this really changes how students learn and how we interact with each other.
It’s not one-directional, like if you wrote a paper for one person and they read it and give you feedback. You’re really creating for a broader public, and that public could be all the students in your class; it could be students in another university; it could be the general public—and maybe you’re working for a museum or a university—and the responsibility is even further increased. It also means you have the opportunity to work with others in terms of collaborative making, and I really think that it is fundamental to a culture of experimentation because you’re trying things out. Not everything is going to work; not everything is going to be great. When you tinker with technologies, you are thinking in a mode that is really design-oriented and experimental in that you are testing hypotheses and possibilities. In some ways, you are bringing some of the thinking that has been often demanded of the sciences into the humanities. Not because you have a particular hypothesis to prove or disprove, but because you’re bringing together a team of researchers, you’re designing prototypes and frameworks for research—in essence, you’re launching a project. What this means is you’re going to go through this process of figuring out what works and what doesn’t.

In our digital humanities book, we call it a kind of generative humanities, or humanities focused on making where making takes on many forms. A text could be something that’s made, but it may very well be an iPhone app or a multi-authored blog or an ongoing site for commentary and annotation. It could be a virtual museum exhibition connected to a physical exhibition. All these things are examples of projects students have been initiating in the digital humanities in our undergraduate programs. And I think that they’re exciting ways to bring the broader concepts to the public. It’s bringing the methods, the content, and the value of the humanities into dialogue with very contemporary issues.

**MUSES:** Seeing the recent decline of newspapers, magazines and print journalism and the rise of digital media—contrasted with the digitizing of very old things, such as the Samaritan scrolls here at MSU—isn’t this a bit ironic? How do you reconcile them?

**Todd Presner:** It raises the question about what the digital humanities mean for the wealth and traditions of human knowledge. So, you have certain forums that have been established through the decades and centuries, and those forums are really struggling, something we see with university presses, with certain newspapers, with print magazines. You could take the hard line that you need to change with the times, but there’s a recognition too that all these things have always been flexible. That is to say, technologies have always been agile and changing, and the bigger stakes here are changes in the public sphere, authorship, dissemination of knowledge, how knowledge reaches different communities, and so forth. And you could look at what the affordances are of new technologies; they make possible certain things but they also render certain things impossible.

I would say new technologies always have an underbelly. They do great things in terms of reaching a new public but they can cause some problems, whether economic or political or social. And I think the humanities help us to see this complexity. I’m not sure it’s ironic that media forms that are struggling are being digitized today. I think the digitization makes available—adds value in some ways how people are able to use these documents, mainly because you have full-text searching within digital newspapers. You can compare across potentially 100 years of ways of representing different issues. There are many such digitization projects out there, making the history of print forms, such as newspapers, available online. Taking the 19th-century American newspapers project as one example, imagine what that means for the study of the transformation of American identity, or questions around race or nationality. One can look over a period of 100 years to investigate how those topics were treated and represented in popular and media culture. The kinds of questions you can ask become very big, and also it means you can work with the entire collected resources in a way you really couldn’t if you were relying on what a single researcher or even a group of researchers could read.

No one could possibly read 500,000 newspapers, but through natural language processing, computational reading, data mining, and visualization you can. One can obviously find what’s relevant, do statistical analyses, and do topic modeling and other kinds of text-based research. One can do social network analysis, for example, or one can do semantic correlation. One can follow trends, patterns and structures, all of which will reveal certain things that really couldn’t be possible when you have a non-digitized artifact. While it may be
Ironic that they’re being digitized, there is a tremendous value being added to how one studies cultural resources. The very fact of the matter is, when you don’t have stacks of newspapers sitting in your house, and you have the whole thing digital, you can go back and look at things. There’s an aspect of materiality that doesn’t matter in quite the same way. Clearly, I think these are questions about research issues, especially when you’re talking about 19th-century culture.

I’d like to think a lot of these processes are translatable. There is a kind of translational research that’s not research just for research’s sake but it informs our knowledge of the past that is very much present and relevant today. But if we don’t have the means to understand that past and all its complexity, we would go down the road of drawing conclusions or making decisions that are not based on full knowledge.

**MUSES:** What do you see next in the development of digital humanities, and how do you see it being used in the future?

**Todd Presner:** There are a number of ways I can see it going. One is in regard to research; one is probably in regard to teaching; and the other is in regard to both of those things, research and teaching in connection with the broader public; a university where the walls have been transformed into a network.

I think we’ve already seen very fundamental transformations in the way we interact with students and in the ways they interact with each other; in the ways they work together; in the kind of products and processes the students put together; in the way they work with faculty for periods of time — perhaps even for the whole four years they are in college. We can imagine working on a long-term research project with faculty that could not only enable gaining the skill set in terms of technology, but also as real contributors, authors and even principal investigators on research projects.

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As participants in vertically integrated research teams—that is to say, undergraduates working side-by-side with grad students, faculty, librarians, and technical staff—it’s much more dialogical and experimental than in the past. I think this is one of the changes we are seeing in the way we teach and how we do research. The more I embed students in research teams, the more I’m finding they’re influencing how I look at the issues at hand, whether it’s design issues or the writing of an algorithm. How do we want to run a query on this database of materials; what do we want to show and what questions do we have? I think this is a major next step for the digital humanities, where research, teaching and, potentially, public scholarship begin to come together.

So much so that things that are being created are things that are of interest to the broader public. Whether it’s the digitalization of Samaritan scrolls or working with museums that are doing exhibitions that are both virtual and real, where you’re utilizing resources and libraries that maybe haven’t been used in 50 years. But now that they’re digitized, marked up and annotated — now that they’re curated by a group of students working in a class—suddenly someone halfway across the world can also look at this exhibition, and it soon becomes an environment where they give tours that are entirely virtual. Their responsibility then takes on a very exciting, public dimension that’s far beyond the limits of the digital classroom.

So, for me, one of the major next steps is the blending of all three, learning, research and public, in ways that really are not one-directional. Multidirectional research where you’re working with teams of students potentially over four years and, as the students are learning, the core curriculum becomes how to think, how to design, how to curate, how to interact with one another, how to collaborate. Those are the skills that are really learned; all skills that are very transferable and necessary, I think, to working in corporations, nonprofits, law, and more. Of course, there are still traditional things: learning how to write, learning how to critically understand, how to analyze. But, all within a context that is very different.

**MUSES:** Are you finding acceptance or resistance to digital humanities today, or are you finding neither?

**Todd Presner:** What I’m finding is there is significantly less resistance than there was even five years ago, and it’s largely because there’s a very broad recognition by the general public that these changes are here to stay. We’re living in an intensely networked world, in an agile and mobile world. It has a lot of
affordances that I think make possible the sharing of information and ways of engaging and doing research that are quite exciting, and I think even the least tech-savvy faculty member recognizes and utilizes these technologies. We compose texts online now. This is already very different and there’s a recognition that digital dissemination is just as important as print. I’m actually facing very little resistance.

There’s sometimes concern that some of the value of a liberal arts education might be going by the wayside. But, I really don’t think that’s the case. I think those values are reasserting themselves in a different context. The ability to critically think, interpret, analyze, to evaluate sources, utilize sources, work across different media, to author, do research, all these things are important to education. These things apply all the more so in our digital world. It’s not like any of these things are gone. In fact, they are arguably stronger than ever before.

So, these educational values that have been so important (and I think you can go back to fundamental traditions and talk about rhetoric or the arts), all of these things are still relevant. It’s not as if they’ve fallen by the wayside. It’s just that they’re in a context that is mediated, highly networked, and one that is not as stable as it used to be. When you have a proliferation of different media forms and they seem to be coming very quickly – when you have new media forms evolving over a period of years or even months – there is anxiety because the ground is shifting. But, there is also opportunity, too, and with those opportunities I think you have the chance to do very exciting things.

MUSES: Where do you think social media fits in all of this?

Todd Presner: I think what we’re seeing, especially with broader penetration of web-enabled mobile devices, is a highly expanded public sphere. You have people who are using social media to communicate with one another, to network, and to organize. But you also have the other side that is focusing social media to do surveillance, to monitor, and to undermine.

So, social media is an interesting phenomenon because it’s not one-directional. Take the so-called Arab Spring. You have the possibility of thinking: Here is what we know is going on among the youth using cell phones to record video, upload photos and use Facebook and Twitter to record what’s happening. This is an example of a huge number of people documenting an event and also, in many ways, transforming the way it ended up being told because social media influences how we understand real world events and not just the documents.

At the same time, you have governments, particularly in the case with Syria and Libya, where you have crackdowns, surveillance, monitoring, and even the introduction of false security certificates that are used to track computer keystrokes and thereby compromise communication.

The larger issue here is the space of contestation going on. Technologies are enabling a lot of new ways for organizing and communicating, and they also are enabling ways for authoritarian regimes to track dissidents and squelch democracy. This is in play ever more intensely because information is always in the service of who wants to do what, and there are many competing interests. I think social media is where we’re going to see many of these competing interests play out in the next few years.

MUSES: What advice would you give students today with respect to digital humanities and social media?

Todd Presner: They need to nurture a willingness to play, to hack, to experiment, and to understand how things work. Just using Facebook, Twitter, and social technologies, these things allow for one level of engagement, but I think it’s important to have that critical understanding of things such as: How do these technologies work? What do they enable? Can one understand their affordances? Their problems? What does it mean to harvest someone else’s data against their knowledge or to use it in a way they maybe didn’t know about? What does it mean that corporations are harvesting tremendous loads of personal data that are being sold to other companies? What does it mean to have ever-closer profiling of our every move?

An awareness of these things is useful. Let’s say that it’s great to use the technologies. But, it’s also important to take the next step to understand how they work. The third step might be how to engineer and make technology with a different user in mind.

I think the biggest thing is the ability to play, to hack, to experiment; that’s where the creativity, the imagination, the great new ideas come in. That’s why it is a tremendously exciting time to be a student, because the world of possibilities is truly wide open.