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Digital Humanities in the Cultural Environment

In this paper I want to share past experiences and build visions of the future in the area of digital humanities. My institutional context is the Department of Art and Culture Studies (DACS) at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.ⁱ Therefore issues of both higher education and research are taken into consideration.

The DACS was found in 2000 by combining existing departments and disciplines. Nowadays it gathers together the teaching and research of Art History, Art Education, Literature, Creative Writing, Museology, Contemporary Culture, Digital Culture and Hungarian Studies. Digital humanities or human technology has been an essential part of the everyday work in every discipline, although they have different histories and focuses. In Art History, information technology was already in use in the beginning of the 1980s when a special research project concerning the Finnish ecclesiastical art was launched and special databases were constructed. Literature, Contemporary Culture and Digital Culture have been active in investigating narratives and poetry in the digital context. Art History and Museology share a common interest in the digital revolution at the memory organizations such as museums and archives.

What have our experiences taught us? Firstly, the whole area of information technology doesn't seem to follow the normal rules of development. During the past decades we have seen business go up and down. We have learned that time doesn't follow the normal rules. For a historian, ten years is just a blink of an eye but in the digital world it is almost an eternity. In many cases our cultural institutions in the humanities were not the forerunners of the digital world, but rather suspicious and skeptical about the development. The result was that the first software and hardware solutions for humanities were created with limited understanding of cultural substances. System architecture was erected in the atmosphere of technological hype and the aggressive marketing of hollow "dreamware". The cultural institutions were soon economically drained and the firms vanished with the know-how. It is the task of education to prevent these kinds of negative effects. Nowadays information technology is a part of the education in the Humanities and the general impregnation of digital technology in everyday life has led to the meltdown of traditional attitudes. This doesn't mean that we have succeeded in solving the problem. No, we still lack a shared language with the developers of the technology. The point is not to turn humanists into engineers, but to get them both to share their knowledge.

Secondly, in our experience there is a lot of fashionable discourse around technology and the Humanities. Sometimes the alliance between them has even been seen as a solution to the financial crisis of the welfare state.ⁱⁱ The cultural content in a digital form may have high economic value. On the other hand, the legislation doesn't seem to support this development. Many copyright laws are dated and ill-fitting to the world of today, not to even mention that of the future. Characteristic to the discourse is that when human technology is concerned, "human" is often seen as something that can be measured. Most of the research in this area is based on psychology or pedagogics where empirical or statistical methods can be used. The cultural aspect of human behavior or experience is an emerging area in the research of human technology. The reason why it has not been considered important is the one already mentioned: Participation has been suffering from the lack of communication skills. The ivory tower of the Humanities has been too cozy, and the communication with other value systems has been regarded as inconvenient or uncomfortable.

Projects and activities

The DACS has been active in various projects concerning the digital aspects of art and culture. In 2003-2006 there was an education project called KUVITEK (Culture-Communication-Technology)

which joined the schooling of new media at the university, polytechnic and vocational school levels.ⁱⁱⁱ In 2005-2006 the 3D Bridge - Transferring of Cultural Heritage with New Technology gathered together 3D virtual modeling projects in three different countries.^{iv} As the results of the first project show, institutional boundaries in education are difficult to cross, but when it happens, the students learn to recognize their own skills in comparison with students with different backgrounds. This also improved the students' interaction skills, which are useful in the contemporary working life. The results of the 3D Bridge show that digitalization of cultural heritage has the potential to break up traditional standpoints of center and periphery. If the content is interesting and free, remote or modest targets can also be attractive. Digitalized cultural heritage then has untapped possibilities in education or civic cultivation.

Recent activities in the DACS are connected to the aim to enhance free access to the sources of cultural heritage. Active participation in the work of the ICOM (International Museum Council) based CIDOC (International Committee for Documentation) has brought museums and their collections into focus. Especially the development of common standards for digital information in museums, like the DICOC-CRM (Conceptual Reference Model), and enhancing the use of open-linked-data in the culture heritage information are a part of the DACS's societal mission.^v

One of the fundamental changes taking place at the moment is the shift from print to digital textuality, with all its implications to culture and cultural institutions. The DACS has had a focus on digital textuality and digital literature from the late 1990's onward. Three doctoral theses regarding digital literature have been defended at the DACS, and the most recent major research effort in the field, *Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice (ELMCIP)*, was organized together with seven European partners and funded by HERA (2009-2012). In this project the DACS concentrated on the publication and presentation of digital literature. The report *Electronic Literature Publishing and Presentation in Europe* by Markku Eskelinen and Giovanna Di Rosario is available via the University of Jyväskylä open publication platform JYX.^{vi}

Digital games and the ludification of society are increasingly shaping the culture we live in. It is also relevant for the digital humanities to pay attention to the emerging game cultures. The DACS has a lively group of mainly PhD candidates conducting research in this field. The *Creation of Game Cultures: The Case of Finland* was an Academy of Finland funded consortium project (jointly with the Universities of Tampere and Turku; 2009-2012), in which the DACS researchers looked at issues such as what 'realism' means in the context of games, how do games fit in the long tradition of realistic presentation, and how meaning is constructed in the 'real time hermeneutics' of the fast paced game-play activity. A new project focusing on the institutionalization of games and the ludification of society is in the planning phase with the same consortium. An important partner in these research activities is the University of Jyväskylä multidisciplinary Agora Center with its Game Lab.

Cultural Environment

Nowadays the universities have various social responsibilities as research and educational institutions. It has become increasingly more important that young experts find proper jobs after graduation and that research results are also applicable outside the academia. As is generally known, the public sector is in an economic crisis all over the Europe. As a matter of fact, it is not only a crisis, but a societal new deal where the old models of the welfare state are opened up for negotiation. Traditionally the cultural institutions are a part of the public sector which means that the DACS will have to expand its expertise into new areas. As a reaction to these new demands a new Master's Program in the area of cultural environment studies has been developed. The

traditional areas of expertise at the department have been museums and the built environment. Therefore it would be only logical to focus on the theme of cultural heritage. Even though the concept of cultural heritage has a positive image on a general level, it also refers to negative aspects in the everyday life. Especially when developing built environment, the preservation and conservation, i.e. the “heritage”, is perceived as an extra and an unnecessary cost. Thus, in choosing the concept of “cultural environment” the level of abstraction is higher and the negative attitudes are fewer. The concept of cultural environment also gives more freedom to apply the expertise of cultural heritage in new areas and put it in a dialogue with new things, e.g. nature.



The starting point of the Master’s Program in Cultural Environment Studies is to understand the formation of cultural environment as a result of interaction between the human factor and the nature. The traditional approach in which the untouched nature (wilderness) and the ancient cultural objects (age) are at the top of the value system is not considered relevant. The cultural environment includes both the traditional high values and the environment of everyday life with different layers of time and space.^{vii} Only a part of our cultural environment is protected by the law or some other methods. This doesn’t mean that the rest is worthless or should be left without care.

The Master’s Program responds to two topical challenges. Firstly, the organization of cultural environment at local, regional and national levels has become more complicated in the Finnish society. The changes are significant especially in the environmental legislation. This applies both to the European Union and the Finnish domestic laws. Secondly, the regional operational changes, the new legislation in accordance with the interactivity and impact assessment, have brought new requirements of transparency and interaction into decision-making processes in planning and construction as well as in the protection of the built heritage or the environment.

Building protection or conservation has been a part of the conventional expertise in the field of art and culture. The new Program expands this expertise into the questions regarding how our environment is constructed through communal interplay and institutional building processes. It also understands human environment in terms of qualitative processes. Teaching and research in the Program extends to the concrete interpretation of the built and natural environment issues, as well as to the problems of long term maintenance and open sharing of the cultural environment information resources, which in most cases are in digital form. In addition, the Program focuses on human consciousness: the individual consciousness of being, emotions, thoughts and the environment.

Digital Humanities are an essential content of the Cultural Environment. The data produced by authorities and the information provided by memory organizations are often in digital form. The whole process of how cultural environment is constructed is digitally penetrated. In this context it is important to acknowledge that the digital world is also part of the individual value production. To share experiences through social media plays an important role, even though the experienced emotions of the environment itself can be free from technology.

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ⁱ <https://www.jyu.fi/hum/laitokset/taiku/en>.

ⁱⁱ Himanen Pekka (2012) Sininen kirja, Suomen kestävän kasvun malli, Luonnos kansalliseksi tulevaisuushankkeeksi. <http://valtioneuvosto.fi/tiedostot/julkinen/pdf/2012/sininen-kirja/fi.pdf>, 28, 31-44, 50.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://mediakeittio.jyu.fi/syksy2006/index.html>.

^{iv} <http://www.arthis.jyu.fi/bridge/>.

^v Mika Nyman works as a chair in CICOC co-reference work group

(<http://network.icom.museum/cidoc/organisation/board/>); Ari Häyrinen has researched open source issues in museums (<https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/handle/123456789/40157>); Magdalena Laine-Zamojska developed virtual tools for small museums

(http://www.museumsandtheweb.com/mw2012/papers/vimuseofi_project_towards_digital_inclusion__0)

^{vi} <https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/handle/123456789/40316>.

^{vii} von Bonsdorff, Pauline (2002) Ympäristöestetiikka, in 1900-luvun suomalainen estetiikka. Oiva Kuisma, Helsinki: Suomalainen kirjallisuuden Seura s. 262-336.