

# Digital History Theory & Method

HIST 677, Wednesdays, 05:30PM-08:00PM, Spring 2026

Battelle-Tompkins Building, Room T48

Instructor: Dr. Trevor Owens, [trevor.johnowens@gmail.com](mailto:trevor.johnowens@gmail.com), @tjowens, trevorowens.org

## Course Description

Welcome to Digital History Methods (History and New Media HIST 677). This course explores the current and potential impact of digital media on the theory and practice of history. It also counts as a tool of research course, which means that it will provide you with knowledge of “standard tools of research/analysis.” In this course we are going to explore the impact digital technologies on the historian’s craft. The notion of the historian’s craft here is intentionally expansive. Digital tools are affecting nearly every aspect of historical work, including but not limited to; collecting, organizing, presenting and sources; analyzing and interpreting sources; modes of scholarly and broader public communications; techniques for teaching.

As a methods course, our focus is entirely about the *how* of history not the *what* of history. We will focus on how digital tools and digital sources are affecting historical research and the emerging possibilities for new forms of scholarship, public projects and programs. For the former, we will explore new analytic methods (tools for text analysis and data visualization) along with work on issues related to interpreting born digital and digitized primary sources. For the latter, we will explore a range of digital media history resources, including practical work on project management and design. We will read a range of works on designing, interpreting and understanding digital media. Beyond course readings we will also critically engage a range of digital tools and resources.

## Course Goals

After the course students will be able to:

1. Discover, evaluate, and implement digital tools and digital sources to support emerging and proven forms of historical scholarship, public projects, and teaching.
2. Develop proposals for digital history resources with detailed plans for project management, design, outreach, and evaluation.
3. Understand and articulate the key issues in collecting, preserving and interpreting digital and digitized primary sources from the perspective of a historian.

## Overview of Assignments

**Posting** (40% of grade) You must post at least seven times to the course site. Each of your posts should be between 500-1200 words. These six posts must include;

- Intro post (Due on or before **Jan 21**) Give a bit of background on yourself, what you are hoping to get out of the grad program you are in and what you are most interested in getting out of this course.
- Reading response post (due Saturday by midnight the week before you lead discussion)
- Digital tool or resource review post (due Saturday by midnight the week before you lead discussion).
- Proposal for print project blog post (Due on or before **Feb 4**)
- Proposal for digital project blog post (Due on or before **Feb 11**)
- Draft project post (due **April 8**)
- Project reflection blog post (including poster due on or before **April 22**)
- Commenting: 12 substantive comments on your fellow student's posts.

### **In Class Participation** (30% of grade)

- Tools/resources demonstration: Present a 10-15 min demonstrations of tools or resources which you reviewed for the blog to the class
- Lead discussion on a set of readings: What are the arguments of the readings you posted about? How do they hang together or where are they in conflict? Come prepared with questions to keep discussion going.
- Class attendance and active participation in class discussions. Notify me in advance if you are going to miss class, missing more than two class sessions will significantly impact your class participation grade.

### **Project** (30% of grade)

- Preliminary project pitches: a 3-5 minute "elevator pitch" for your research project or digital project. (In class, **Feb 11**)
- Research paper (5,000-7,000 words) OR digital resource (digital resource and 300-700 word project statement). (Due **April 8**)
- Final project poster presentation: Create a conference poster and hand out to present your work in a mini-conference held on the last day of class (Due, **April 22**)
- Revision of research paper or digital resource. Posted online, either on the class blog or linked to from a post on the class blog. (Due, **April 22**)

## Guidance for Assignments

What follows below is guidance on aspects of all the required assignments for the course. All the due dates for assignments are listed in the Overview of Assignments and also in the Week-by-Week section of the syllabus.

### Read Strategically

Throughout all of our readings here you are going to need to read strategically. You need to get what you need out of the book or article; this often does not require reading every word in an article or a book. On how to read for graduate seminars see [Miriam Sweeney's](#) or [Larry Cebula's](#) blog posts. The same is true for digital projects you are going to show and tell, you need to figure out enough of it to talk about it and think about its implications but there is no expectation for you to master the given tool or digital resource.

### Course Discussion Posts

You are expected to post seven times to the course site, once about the readings you lead discussion on, once about the digital tools or resources you demonstrate, once for each of your project proposals, once with a link to the draft of your proposal, and lastly with a reflection on your project. We will sign up for who writes about what on the first day of class.

Write your discussion posts like blog posts. So these should not be written like five-page essays. Part of the goal of this assignment is to become familiar with the genre and format of thoughtful blogging. You need to get in, say something interesting, synthesize some thoughts and get out. Ideally briefly summarizing/explaining/showing what the readings or tools say or do, commenting on them or otherwise offering some new insights you think you can add, and then ending with an invitation to discussion. You should think of your posts as mixing the features of a well-composed academic book review and the well conceived blog post. [Read this for a sense of the features of an academic book review](#). For notes on [how to write blog posts see this post](#). Posts for a given week must be on the web the Saturday before class so that your fellow students can read them in advance of class. (yes, if you want you can post it at 11:59 PM on Saturday).

### Keep the conversation going

Posting is not the end of the assignment. After posting you need to foster the discussion you are initiating. When people comment you need to give substantive responses. Try to engage everyone who comments in some fashion and try to use the comments to sustain a conversation you began at the end of your post. Do not hesitate to ask if you would like help with this process or want any advice about how to keep the conversation going.

### Commenting is also an assignment

Beyond posting you are expected to contribute substantive comments on discussion posts to a minimum of 12 of your peers' posts. Your comments should extend and contribute to the conversation. Good comments are an important genre unto themselves. [Profhacker's guidelines for comments](#) for a sense of the kind of comment ecosystem we are trying to produce. Along with that, see [this piece on how to write a great blog comment](#) for some suggestions on the format for comments. Comment early so that others have a chance to read them.

### **The discussion posts are the required reading we write ourselves**

Beyond posting and commenting everyone needs to read everything in the course discussion section before class each week. This is the part of the course readings that we write ourselves and in all honesty, this is the most important springboard for our in-class discussions. The discussion posts extend the function of classroom, and it is essential that everyone follow and participate in it.

## **Course Project**

Everyone will write **two proposals**: a proposal for a print project and a digital project. You only need to **follow through on one of those two proposals**. In the case of the print project the final result should be a 5,000-7,000 word Chicago style journal article. ([For an example see this article](#) we will read later in the semester.) In the case of the digital project, it should be the digital resource you devise and a short 500-1000 word project statement that articulates the goals of the project, connects it to other projects we discussed in class, and briefly offers personal reflections on what you learned from the project.

### **Print Project, study something digital:**

The objective here is to approach digital media and content as historians. To that end, you are going to think about how to write something about digital that has to do with history. This could include using software we discuss to engage with a set of primary sources or exploring born digital material associated with a field you are already familiar. For example, if you are interested in the Civil War you could plan and execute a research project on how a particular Civil War memorial is presented and discussed on Flickr, or compare how it is reviewed on Yelp, or analyze how it is represented in some set of video games, or explore how a particular Civil War site uses Twitter, or use something like [Mike Davies' online corpus of Time magazine](#) to explore trends in discussions of the Civil War or a particular historical figure.

Whatever you do you need to ground the study in both historiography for whatever topic you work on and incorporate material from our readings on digital history. In short, all of the readings offer potential models for this project. If you decide to work on a print project I strongly encourage you to [set up regular appointments with a writing consultant in the writing center](#). (As an aside, you have no idea how invaluable the sustained attention of someone from a writing center is, outside of a university environment this kind of attention to your writing

costs a fortune and it is there waiting for you to use it for free.) Simply put, good writing is re-writing. If you work with them starting at the proposal stage, through your first full draft, and on through your final paper you will end up with something you can really be proud of. Along with that, you will likely end up with something you could publish in an academic journal.

### **Digital Project, build something scholarly:**

In terms of a digital project, you should take one of your interests and develop a digital resource around it. This should explicitly NOT be putting an essay on a webpage. Whatever you propose there should be clear reasons that this should be digital, it should probably draw on something we worked on in class. I would suggest staying away from difficult technical projects. While I would be thrilled if you taught yourself the ins-and-outs of a programming language and wrote your own content management system to build a blog it would be a much better idea for you to simplify the technical decisions in your project and just use something like wordpress.com or omeka.net which does not require you to devote your time to primarily technical issues.

To restate this, the goal of this project *is not* to demonstrate technical competence. Please simplify technology decisions and focus your time on using something that already exists in a novel way. Proposals should include major features from the Brown (2006) book;

- a) A description of audience
- b) A comparison to existing projects
- c) A detailed description of the thing to be created
- d) A plan for outreach and publicity
- e) A plan for how you will evaluate the project.

Examples could include starting and curating a Flickr pool focused on collecting and interrupting representations of the American west, in consultation with the DC historical society you might build an Omeka exhibit to complement one of their physical exhibits, you might create an annotated Google my map or a set of tours using a mobile app like HistoryPin that gives an interpretive tour of the history of the design of the national mall.

In the real world, basically all digital projects in this field are the result of the work of teams. To that end, if you want to work with a partner on a project please feel free to. However, I would like to see you break the work up between the partners and have each of you still do each of the individual parts of the writing and reflection bits.

If you decide to finish your digital project as your final project the expectation is that you have something that is at least a working proof of concept. In some cases, it will be possible to scope something tightly enough that you can make the whole thing during our course. That is, however, not necessary. The essential part of this assignment is to show that you can conceive of this kind of project and that you can make the large moving parts come together. However grand the

thing you would like to see in the world is, [there is some version of it that you can sketch out and put out there for everyone to see that you can get together during our time together in this class.](#)

### **Project Poster:**

One analog genre of scholarly communication that shows no sign of disappearing is the conference poster. The culmination of our class is going to be our own version of a conference poster session. Half the class will present their posters for the first half of class while the rest of the class visits the posters. Then we will swap roles for the second half of class.

This should be a relatively painless process. The easiest way to do this is to make your poster as a single powerpoint slide. You shouldn't need a lot of text (300-500 words) will likely do. I realize it can be difficult to source a big printer (which you will need if/when you participate in a poster session). So, feel free to print them out on regular printer paper and just bring a stack of them as handouts so that people can read them as they visit you presenting your poster. For further guidance on conference posters see these [guidelines from the AHA](#), these [guidelines from NYU](#).

### **Virtual class days**

Several days on the course syllabus are marked as virtual class. For these days we will not meet face to face. Instead, please use the time we would have spent in class to further engage in course discussions and work via canvas. Virtual class will be asynchronous, so you don't need to use exactly the time set aside for face-to-face class to do this work. For people who sign up to cover readings and or practicums during these virtual class days go into further depth on your posts on Canvas and spend more time responding to comments from classmates. If we end up with inclement weather, we will not cancel class but will instead shift to asynchronous virtual class for the week.

### **Books**

You will need to get access to these eight books. I've given links to them on Amazon where you can likely find relatively inexpensive copies of all of them. With that noted, you should also be able to get free online access to all of them through the library.

1. Brown. (2006). [Communicating Design: Developing Web Site Documentation for Design and Planning](#). Note: **Be sure you read the 2006 edition.** (Available as eBook through AU)
2. D'Ignazio & Klein (2020). [Data Feminism](#). (Open Access)
3. Farman. (2012 or 2021). [Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media](#). (Available as eBook through AU)

4. Fitzpatrick. (2011) [Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy](#) (Open Access)
5. Flanagan. (2013). [Critical Play: Radical Game Design](#) (Available as eBook through AU)
6. IDEO. (2015) [The Field Guide to Human Centered Design](#). Free eBook.
7. Owens. (2018). [Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation](#). (Available as eBook through AU, also [OA preprint online](#))
8. Rinehart & Ippolito. (2014). [Re-collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory](#). (Available as eBook through AU)

## Week By Week Course Schedule

### Becoming digital public historians (Week of Jan 14)

This is our first class; we will introduce ourselves to each other and spend a lot of time reviewing the syllabus. I will make sure everyone leaves with an understanding of how to post to the course site. By the end of class everyone will have signed up for the weeks they are posting/presenting on.

### Defining digital history (Week of Jan 21)

This week is largely about developing a perspective on what people mean when they say “digital history” and more broadly “digital humanities.” It’s also about what the stakes in all this are. Across all of the readings consider both the arguments and the genre of writing they are being presented in. Format and genre are critical components of our work this semester and the differences between blogging, books and articles are as much on the table for discussion as the points in these pieces. We will look at a few tools that

#### *Assignment Due: Intro Blog Posts*

#### Readings

1. Entry on [Digital History](#) from the Inclusive Historian’s Handbook
2. Rosenzweig, [Can History be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past](#)
3. Leon, [Complicating a “Great Man” Narrative of Digital History in the United States](#)
4. Robertson, et. al. [Digital History and Argument](#)
5. Ekelund, [Finding and sorting in hybrid memory practices: ‘doing memories’ in connection with the logic of Facebook](#)
6. Edson, [Dark Matter: The dark matter of the Internet is open, social, peer-to-peer and read/write—and it’s the future of museums](#)

#### Practicums:

- a) [Word Cloud](#) generator, show how it works with text documents, [like inauguration speeches](#)
- b) [HistoryPin](#): Show us how the site works, how to add pins, how to create tours, how small organizations are using it.
- c) [Crowd.loc.gov](#) show how it works, explain some of the back story on it.
- d) [Wikipedia](#): how it works. Analyze three related Wikipedia pages and talk pages what their history is. Teach the class how to do this.

### Data analysis: Distant reading, text analysis, visualization (Jan 28)

One of the most active strands of digital history and the digital humanities more broadly focuses on computational analysis of texts and the interpretations of abstractions of those texts. For the most part, “texts” has meant words, but we starting to get into computational modes of engaging with images and audio too. This week is about all of that, in particular, under the heading of distant reading. Throughout this week’s readings think both about the subject (visualization) and about the formats of the readings (blog posts, books, open review publications, etc.)

### Readings:

1. D'Ignazio and Klein, Data Feminism
2. Guldi, [The Revolution in Text Mining for Historical Analysis is Here](#)
3. Bevins, [Space, Nation, and the Triumph of Region: A View of the World from Houston](#)
4. Underwood, [Can language models predict the next twist in a story?](#)
5. Blevins, [Topic Modeling Martha Ballard's Diary](#)

### Practicums:

- a) [Voyant Tools](#): Show us a bit of how it works, show us an example of how you might use it for historical research
- b) [Time Magazine Corpus of American English](#): Think about how this interface enables different kinds of questions. Show us some examples.
- c) [Google n-gram](#): Think about how this interface enables different kinds of questions. Show us some examples.

## “Project” as scholarly genre: Designing digital projects (Feb 4)

It’s likely that many of you don’t have experience with planning and developing projects, in particular digital projects. So, this week is about planning projects and drafting the documents involved in making a digital project, in particular a web project, happen. Brown’s book is our main text, providing a roadmap for what decisions get made when. The NEH guidelines contextualize the format for a project proposal in a humanities context. The section from *Digital Humanities* offers consideration of “project” as a unit of scholarship. Kirshenbaum’s piece get’s at the vexing issue of sustainability. Scheinfeldt’s explores differences between common digital collection platforms.

**Assignment Due: Print Project Proposals (400-800 Words posted to the Blog)**

### Readings:

1. Brown, *Communicating Design*
2. IDEO, (2015) [The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design](#).

3. Burdick, Drucker, Luenfeld, Presner, Schnapp. Short Guide to the Digital\_Humanities Fundamentals p. 122-135 of [Digital Humanities](#)
4. Kirschenbaum, "[Done: Finishing Projects in the Digital Humanities](#)"
5. [NEH Digital Humanities Advancement Grants](#) Focus on the narrative section and talk through one of the example proposal narratives.
6. Scheinfeldt, "[Omeka and Its Peers](#)"

## Practicums

- a) Practicum: [Omeka.net](#) (See Posner, [Up and Running with Omeka](#) )
- b) Practicum: [WordPress.com](#):

## Proposal pitch week (Feb 11)

### *Assignment Due: Digital Project Proposals (400-800 Words Posted to the Blog)*

Everyone in class is going to give the elevator pitch for the project that they intend to finish. No slides or anything. Just stand up, and in three minutes present the elevator pitch. Answer what you are going to do? Why it's worth doing? You'll explain how it is like things before, but also how it's different. It's important to be able to give the "[MTV Cops](#)" level explanation of your work. So work on that. After discussing the proposals, we will use remaining time in this session to check in on how the course is going. Think of it as a formative evaluation of the content and process of the course. It is great to get this kind of information in the middle so that it is still possible to tweak parts of the course going forward.

## Digital archives: What are & aren't they? (Feb 18)

Public historians and other humanists have been exuberant about the possibility of providing broad public access to primary source documents and the contents of archives. In this context, the use of the term "digital archive" has become a bit fraught. With that said, there is some valuable productive friction in that fraughtness. Something useful is emerging in the blending of sources, analysis, and interpretations. This week we figure out what different folks mean by the term in different situations and explore some exemplars of different notions of digital archives and their potential as modes of scholarly output.

### Readings:

1. Bailey, [Disrespect des Fonds: Rethinking Arrangement and Description in Born-Digital Archives](#)
2. Carbajal & Caswell, [Critical Digital Archives: A Review from Archival Studies](#)
3. Christen, K. [Archival challenges and digital solutions in aboriginal Australia.](#)

4. Drake, J. M. [#ArchivesForBlackLives: Building a Community Archives of Police Violence in Cleveland.](#)
5. McGann, [The Rationale of HyperText](#)
6. Owens, [Digital Sources & Digital Archives: The Evidentiary Basis of Digital History](#)

**Practicum:**

- a) [September 11th Digital Archive](#),
- b) [Bracero Archive](#)
- c) [The Shelley-Godwin Archive](#)
- d) [Rossetti Archive](#)

**No Class Week of Feb 25****Understanding Digital Content: Media, materiality & format (Virtual Asynchronous Class March 4th)**

To really do digital history, we need a very solid understanding of what exactly digital stuff is. This week we try to figure out more about what digital things are. We likely all have a sense of what things like documents, spreadsheets and digital photos and videos are, but it is essential that we go beyond their appearance on the screen to understand a bit about what bits, bytes, files, and file formats are.

**Readings:**

1. Owens, Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation (Read all of it, but focus on chapters 1-4)
2. Sterne, [Analog](#) in Digital Keywords
3. Arms & Fleischhauer, [Digital Formats: Factors for Sustainability, Functionality, and Quality](#)
4. Bailey, [TAGOKOR: Biography of an Electronic Record](#)

**Practicum:**

- a) [Demo Mystery House](#): (Be able to explain what Owens described about what Kirshenbaum did with it with the Hex-editor as explained in the digital preservation book)
- b) [Glitch some audio and image files](#) -> Show us how to do this and tell us what it means.

**No Class Spring Break (March 11)**

## Digital exhibition & hypermedia narrative (Virtual Asynchronous Class March 18<sup>th</sup>)

What does it mean to collect and exhibit/present/interpret digital objects? This week we explore this issue across new media art, source code and digitized materials. Along with thinking through issues of presenting digital objects we also explore the potential of turning our interpretations and exhibitions over to the machines themselves.

### Readings

1. Ippolito & Reinheart. *Re-collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory* (focus on the chapter on social memory and on their suggestions at the end.)
2. Brennan, [“Getting to the Stuff: Digital Cultural Heritage Collections, Absence, and Memory,”](#)
3. Owens, [Curating in the Open: Martians, Old News, and the Value of Sharing as you go](#)
4. Chan & Cope [Collecting the present: digital code and collections](#)
5. Espenschied, [Big Data, Little Narration](#)

### Practicums:

1. [The Thresa Duncan CD-ROMs Exhibition](#)
2. [Finding our place in the Cosmos](#)
3. [Searchable Museum](#)

## No Class March 25th

## Mobile media, place & mapping (April 1)

Increasingly, the screens people are turning their attention to are in their hands and their pockets. In this vein, there is tremendous potential for mobile media and mobile media has a direct and clear connection to place and location. There are projects like the [Museum from Mainstreet app](#) and the [Will to Adorn app](#) that try to enable participatory collecting, projects like [Histories of the National Mall](#) that work to situate events in historic sites. This week we look at these, and related projects, and read [Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media](#) to add a theoretical layer/framework for thinking about this work. We haven't talked much about maps and place in general yet either, so we will also consider the “spatial turn” as one of the ongoing developments and areas of interest in digital history scholarship.

### Readings:

1. Farman, *Mobile Interface Theory*
2. Guldi, [“What is the Spatial Turn?”](#) and the [Spatial Turn in History](#)

3. Russick, [A Place For Everything Museum Collections, Technology, and the Power of Place](#)
4. Tebeau, [Listening to the City: Oral History and Place in the Digital Era](#)

**Practicums:**

- a) [Mall History](#)
- b) [Museum from Mainstreet Site and App](#)
- c) [Will to Adorn App](#)

**Playing the Past: Videogames, Interactivity & Action (April 8):**

Videogames have rapidly become potent media for communicating ideas about the past. Historians, librarians and archivists have begun creating games and a range of interactive transmedia modes of communicating about the past. At the same time, many very successful commercial games, like Sid Mier's *Civilization*, *SimCity* or *Assassin's Creed* have invited a generation of players to enact or replay models of the past. In this session we will spend half of the class discussing Gee's book, which will help us unpack a range of ways to think about games and learning and how to read games and the other half discussing how ideas are represented and enacted in games that are specifically about the past.

**Project Drafts Due:** For people writing papers this means a full draft of the paper, not a rough draft, a full well thought out draft of your paper. For people working on digital projects you should have at least a functional proof of concept, a roadmap for how and when you will finish the work on the project, and a revision of your proposal that moves from language about what it will do to what it is doing.

**Readings:**

1. Flanagan, *Critical Play*
2. Mir & Owens, [Modeling Indigenous Peoples: Unpacking Ideology in Sid Meier's Civilization](#)
3. Nakamura, "[Gender and Race Online](#)," *Society and the Internet: How Networks of Information and Communication are Changing Our Lives*, Mark Graham and William H. Dutton, Oxford University Press, 2014.
4. WNET, [Mission America Online Games about American History](#) (this is a grant proposal, you should also read the [NEH Digital Programs for the Public](#) grant guidelines for context)

**Practicums:**

- a) Playing and reading [Argument Wars](#)
- b) Playing and reading [Jo Wilder and the Capitol Case](#)
- c) Playing and reading [Prisoner in my Homeland: Mission US](#)
- d) Playing and reading [A Cheyenne Odyssey: Mission US](#)

## Opening & Expanding Forms of Scholarly Communication (April 15)

Digital technology has changed the possibilities for scholarly communication in the history profession. Historians have long produced scholarly works in a range of media. However, monographs and to a lesser extent journal articles and conference papers have largely persisted as the primary forms of scholarship that “count.” This week we will learn a bit about the development and history of scholarly presses and explore a range of novel approaches and technologies for scholarly communications.

1. Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence*
2. Cohen, [The Ivory tower and open web](#)
3. Scholarly Communications in the History Discipline  
<http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/scholarly-communications-in-the-history-discipline/>
4. Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Historians  
<http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/supporting-the-changing-research-practices-of-historians/>

### Practicums:

- a) Scalar <https://scalar.usc.edu/scalar/>
- b) DH + Lib <http://acrl.ala.org/dh/>
- c) The Programing Historian <https://programminghistorian.org/>
- d) Humanities Commons <https://hcommons.org/>

## Class Conference Poster Presentations (April 22)

- Bring a poster reporting on the results of either your research project or your digital project. We are going to run the classroom as a conference and I will invite a few outside experts to join us and talk with all of you about your work.
- Also, come prepared to share one take-away from the course. What have you learned here that will be most useful to your career going forward?

**Final Project Due (April 23):** Submit the final version of your project. You should link to it (either as an attached file or a link to where it lives online) as part of your reflection that can count for submitting it.