

“Who is this for?”

A Historiographical Survey of Scholarship Surrounding
Digital Humanities, Spatial History, Walking Tours,
and Universal Design

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Introduction

While making my way through these readings, which widely vary on the subject matter and author background, one question resounded through each. “Who is this for?” The imperative across digital humanities papers, guides for designing walking tours, spatial history primers, and universal design articles kept coming back to the same question. To create the best product, content, or experience, you need to ask yourself each step of the way who your audience is. How will they interact with your website? Who will be taking your walking tour? How might you create content that is accessible, user-friendly, and invites interaction? Dark Tourism studies could learn a great deal from these disciplines.

Digital Humanities

Sheila Brennan’s article “Public, First” and Andrew Hurley’s “Chasing the Frontiers of Digital Technology: Public History Meets the Digital Divide” both advocate for the democratization of digital humanities and put public interest at the center of developing and implementing digital scholarship. Brennan declares that digital humanities have a far-reaching potential beyond academic audiences and goes further in advising that accessibility be a primary consideration in project development. Her listed methods include making accessible to people of all abilities can use and access it on the web, making it mobile friendly to have a wider audience, be easily understandable, and take marketing into account—what name you choose matters. Andrew Hurley builds on the idea of expanding digital history projects as a way to educate the public and encourage digital literacy in a community. He believes that we should go beyond considering the public as our key audience but instead view them as active

participants. He suggests crowdsourcing as a method of encouraging the public to act as shareholders. Hurley recognizes that rather than replacing traditional historical research and presentation methods, digital historical scholarship should reinforce and supplement those efforts. He mentions Historypin, which is a great idea that has been poorly executed. With proper marketing and crowdsourcing, this could be an excellent augmented reality mobile app that would allow users to view a location over time.

In line with Hurley's ideology is Mark Tebeau's "Listening to the City: Oral History and Place in the Digital Era," which explores historical interpretation through the web that can include images, stories, sound, text, and video. Cleveland Historical has included geolocation markers inspired by walking tours. He praises the project for maintaining historical integrity through a focus on interpretation—suggesting that while bringing the public in as shareholders and contributors, the relationship must be balanced with careful consideration by history professionals. He goes on to laud the legibility of history through voice and the necessity of a democratic approach. His overall argument is that there should be a focus on collaboration, but the end result should be guided. While these articles tackle the "who" question of creating history, others answer the "how."

In *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*, Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig point out the democratization of materials and access but don't speak to accessibility issues. They did, however, address problems of faithlessness in digitization. None of the efforts to preserve sources and images matters if the quality renders the sources useless. The training required to do these things at a basic level could be done in a day. Why is it not part of the education of historians and archivists? In the chapter, "Building an

Audience,” they advise on ways to promote a history website or project to the public as they say, “maintain a useful and used website.” According to the authors, you must define and understand your audience; market your site; understand how to navigate searchability issues; offer value to your audience once they’ve engaged with your project; and understand how to see how your visitors are interacting with your site. They refer back to chapter one and the advice to understand what “genre” your work falls into. To know how to reach your audience best, you will first need to understand who your audience is. The section on mass media covers the strategies one can use to find the broadest audience possible.

“Interchange: The Promise of Digital History” does an excellent job of exploring the subject of technical vs. tools and outlining the debates and challenges in academia concerning digital history. While the panel points out the flattening of the earth in the ability to use and see resources you may not be able to otherwise, in the same breath, they wax poetic of the awe of seeing something in person without consideration to the alternative for most of never seeing it at all. I heartily agree with the impulse to make as much open access and opens source resources available as is possible. Among those that looked down on making history as entertaining as informative, I would remind them that without the element of entertainment, the public is far more likely going to learn their history from the play *Hamilton* or the series *Drunk History*. Questions concerning the ethics of dark history in the digital arena were raised twice but never answered in the course of the discussion.

In “Digital Humanities Preservation: A Conversation for Developing Sustainable Digital Projects,” Miller and Taylor-Polesky champion the idea of project preservation planning. Rather than working to ensure a project is documented and safeguarded once the work is done, one

should set out in any new endeavor with the long-term preservation of a project as a foundation on which to build. They describe the all-too-frequent problems which follow a lack of planning, such as orphaned projects and broken links. A commonly overlooked area is the budgeting of labor and financial resources. A project proposal that only accounts for getting the initial work done, but doesn't plan for where it will be housed, who will take care of it, foot the bill to sustain and maintain the end product. They propose solutions in the form of agreements by all parties' upfront—including every member's role and responsibility—and practices to ensure the work is documented along the way. These are outlined in great detail in "Digital Project Preservation Plan: A Guide for Preserving Digital Humanities." Here, the authors also begin by demonstrating the importance of planning ahead rather than retroactively. While very detailed, the plan is written in a very accessible manner that allows an individual or group to tailor the documents to what works for their project and discard the rest.

Their preservation plan would be advisable for any digital project, including business endeavors and anyone beginning a repository of information. In photography and design, non-destructive working methods are taught, but file management is completely overlooked though just as important. Likewise, Appendix E: Universal Design should be read by anyone that does website design, marketing—most jobs. I would recommend anyone who intends to tackle a digital project consult these articles first. They not only take into consideration the end-user but also who will pick up a project beyond the initial team.

Other discussions in digital humanities focus on the area as a field of study. "A Call to Redefine Historical Scholarship in the Digital Turn" reads like a modern academic Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments. The coauthors and editors state the challenges facing historians who

engage with emerging media and digital humanities and navigate academia. “Is the Virtual Exhibition the Natural Successor to the Physical?” references issues with digital representations of archival holdings as well, though ultimately concludes that virtual exhibitions are the future of archival exhibitions. He suggests that the advantages of focusing on the content and advocacy through reaching greater audiences outweigh the benefit of interacting with the “real thing.”

Diedre Brown and Sarah Kenderdine explore the relationship between culture, heritage, and digital humanities. In *“Te Ahua Hiko: Digital Cultural Heritage and Indigenous Objects, People, and Environments,”* Maori art historian and architectural lecturer Diedre Brown examines the utilization of emerging technologies—primarily augmented and virtual reality—to engage with indigenous cultures and fourth-world inhabitants. She makes a particularly interesting point about Western society’s perception of authenticity when indigenous people use modern tools. She extends this to technologies. Maori hardware and software developers exist, so why wouldn’t their creations have as much cultural authenticity as their ancestors? She further questions why we do not view the bits of cultural exchange and appropriation done through colonization efforts for generations as muddying Western creations’ authenticity. She differentiates between absorbing the technologies and material culture usage and forfeiting your own culture. Brown suggests that the Maori should embrace these new technologies to create their cultural memory and for their purposes rather than allowing it to be “applied to them.” One application of digital humanities that I had not previously considered involves using 3D scans and virtual replications (that can create near-perfect replicas) to aid in the repatriation process by returning the original item while keeping the reproduction and digital information

for further study. Brown also discusses environmental spaces and social justice by using these technologies to create jobs in the Maori community.

Sarah Kenderdine explores the use of the panorama in virtual and augmented reality in cultural heritage research (or “virtual heritage” as she calls it) in “Speaking in Rama: Panoramic Vision in Cultural Heritage Visualization.” These virtual spaces can envelop a person in a digital recreation of a past place and time, or locations that are inaccessible or too far away to access. The foyer of Buckingham palace isn’t open to visitors, but one could “stand” in it with a simple omnidirectional scan and VR headset. She examines the past versions that panoramas were presented to the public and concluded that for maximum effectiveness, the technologies themselves have to be as hidden as possible to let the viewer have an immersive experience. Unlike the past, VR and AR require participation to navigate the field of vision. As the technologies improve, stereoscopic video and AR additions become indiscernible from one another. Kenderdine argues for panoramic scanning as a step toward preserving sites, structures, and artifacts in much the same way Brown suggests using 3D printing to create a replica that can be enjoyed without damaging the original and doesn’t require traveling.

English and Digital Humanities Professor Steven Jones takes these ideas even further and suggests that the digital humanities are inextricably tied up with our lives as social creatures and interaction with the world. In his book, *The Emergence of Digital Humanities*, he discusses the blending of the digital with our physical and social reality and humanities. Jones looks at the emergence of technologies like social media, QR codes, 3D printing, geolocation technology, electronic publishing, and others to identify ways they intermingle with the humanities. He coined the term “eversion of cyberspace” to describe how our usage of

technology has permeated our lives to the point that it has real results on our behavior and the material world. As someone with a background in English, Jones describes our experiences with technology in terms of metaphors. His definition of digital humanities is one of the most straightforward and most useful I've read yet, "I understand digital humanities as an umbrella term for a diverse set of practices and concerns, all of which combine computing and digital media with humanities research and teaching." In her book, *Digital Humanities in Practice*, Claire Ross discusses the utilization of social media in community engagement, "Because of [social media platforms'] ease of use, they offer an opportunity for powerful information sharing, collaboration, participation, and community engagement." Here she sums up nicely the necessity of using social media as a tool to reach the public. In contrast, few people might be accessing community forums, but finding members of your local community has never been as easy as it is through social media. Overall, each case study focuses on democratizing the conversations, creation, and knowledge while reaching a wider audience than they could have without utilizing these technologies.

The common thread found in these materials is the imperative to design with the user in mind. The authors that focus on universal design and accessibility are no exception. Ng, Battershill and Ross, and Williams all focus on usability in terms of accessibility and removing obstacles to engaging with a resource. Kee takes this one step further and delves into how to present information in such a way that invites engagement. The key takeaway for me is the principle that accessibility and design should focus on the user experience to encourage use rather than impedes the process.

Cynthia Ng's "A Practical Guide to Improving Web Accessibility" advocates for design goes beyond accessibility. She best sums up this impulse by saying, "Taking so many considerations into account can be difficult, but one potential solution is a holistic approach called universal design—also known as universal usability, or design for all—to enable the widest possible range of users to benefit.' Ensuring that users with disabilities can make use of digital content is vital, but most of the recommended guidelines make digital content accessible to a broad range of people, not just those with disabilities." This aligns with the digital humanities underlying principle of creating democratic and accessible materials available to the public that invites interaction. She offers specific technical advice on achieving those goals, presented step-by-step, and written simply for all English-speaking audiences. Ng urges content creators to go beyond what they are required to do and explore what they can do to focus on the user experience.

Kevin Kee takes a similar approach in his book *Pastplay*. His overarching idea is that information is best absorbed and explored through "play." By focusing on how users and students learn, and most enjoy learning, we can outpace "edutainment" and create engaging content. By "playing with new technologies" we are forced to think about the past in new ways. He refers to historical thinking as necessary to the human experience as art or literature and laments that it is seen as an onerous undertaking. By curating an environment that encourages "flow," we can increase student engagement. This means going past our comfort zones to explore new skills and ways of teaching and thinking—and focusing on the user or student as the case may be.

Spatial History and Walking Tours

Richard White is a historian, McArthur Fellow, Mellon Distinguished Professor Award winner, and Spatial History Project at Stanford University founder (along with Zephyr Frank). He answers the titular question, “What is Spatial History?” on the *Spatial History Project* site. He explains spatial history as having five hallmarks. It is collaborative in nature, heavily relies on both visualizations and, therefore, digital history practice, they are open-ended projects, and the conceptual focus is on space. While most historical scholarship focuses on chronology, and more specifically, change over time, spatial history focuses on movement, the interrelation of time and space. According to White, spatial history is largely ignored by mainstream historical work. He references and then expands on Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* three forms of space—spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space. Respectively, reductions include how humans move through space, how space is depicted in representational forms, and how we associate space with concepts and symbols. I am particularly intrigued by the topic of representational space as it relates to dark tourism.

White champions the digital space as the only appropriate way to depict the dynamics of spatial relations of time and movement. This is the same sentiment of keeping the user experience at the center of project creation. How can we best present history so that it is engaging and easily understood?

Likewise, spatial humanities and legal historian David J. Bodenhamer’s article, “Creating a Landscape of Memory: The Potential of Humanities GIS,” explores how data can sometimes be best interpreted through visualization. He references showing a community maps of their own area. They can immediately recognize issues with community resources and redlining or

how they open the door for the co-creation of community memory. One facet of spatial research inferred but not outright stated in these readings is how much of a genuinely interdisciplinary endeavor this work is. These projects include geographers, anthropologists (White does mention computer scientists), and many more beyond historians. Bodenhamer discusses the importance of place to memory and identity, along with how technology can be used to explore these experiences. He describes “deep-mapping,” the visual, layered, open, and chronologically ordered multimedia spaces. These types of projects can include both the professional and layperson as a co-creation of deeper historical understanding and tools.

Spatial history can be directly experienced through walking tours. While entirely separate endeavors, walking tour guidelines put an even greater emphasis on focusing project development on the audience for whom you create. In “Stepping into the Past with Historical Walking Tours,” Jay Young suggests that your audience should determine your topic’s generality or specificity. While an out of town group might be enthralled with the highlights of a city’s history, it wouldn’t likely engage a local who was already familiar with the general subjects. Many individuals that wouldn’t otherwise read a history book may be inclined to take a tour on the same topic. It will be easier to create a tour with an area you are already familiar with and keep logistics in mind. Young raises physical accessibility as an issue. The length, difficulty, and access to amenities will significantly influence how inclusive your tour can be. He suggests research methods that would be familiar to any historian—using primary and secondary sources to build a narrative. He recommends making your tour the same way you might draft a historical paper: provide an overview of themes and topics at the first stop,

treating it as you would an introduction; use the stops in the middle to further your argument; and finally, recap and drive home your main ideas in the final stop, i.e., your conclusion.

Young encourages his readers to make the experience an interactive one, saying that he has learned as much by talking to the participants you can collect stories or questions that will further your understanding of an area and enrich their experience. He suggests using a mobile website to allow participants to access historical images as they see the present places.

In his article, "Planning interpretive walking tours for communities and related historic districts," John Veverka urges walking tour creators to take into account available resources, objectives, audience, media to be utilized, how to implement your plan, and time/resources for testing the tour before making it available to the public. He begins with a map and plots each potential point of interest. Then he reviews the stops to see if a theme emerges.

He asks what one thing you want the visitor to remember at the end of the tour and build around that theme. From there, you should take into consideration the time, distance, number of stops (he recommends 1 hour and ten stops). He also advises developing materials that include information not on tour to satisfy different levels of interest. Next, Veverka reminds us of the logistics of a walking tour. The tour should usually form a loop and have places to rest, are there conflicts with property owners (he doesn't include it- but you often need a license). He offers general objectives but points out that you should design your tour with these objectives in mind. Like Young, Veverka drives home the point that a tour should be tailored to the audience.

In his technical leaflet, "A Different Path for Historical Walking Tours," Ron Thomson urges historians interested in designing walking tours to move beyond the facts and dates and

focus on the meaning, interpretation, and story. He recommends connecting the past to the present, explaining how the past and present are dissimilar, and including the social history to humanize places. Thomson recommends revising the script to use descriptive imagery that makes the past come alive. Just like the other recommenders, he suggests having a theme, capturing attention with provocative headlines, and branching out to embrace new media.

Dark Tourism

Debra Kamin's article, "The Rise of Dark Tourism," which appeared in *The Atlantic*, provides a general survey of early dark history tour inclinations that included battles like Waterloo and Gettysburg, but continue through today in the Gaza strip. This article does a serviceable job explaining some of the facets of dark tourism but stops short of looking for deeper meaning or understanding. She approaches the subject without judgment, which is refreshing. She ends the article with a quote from Philip Stone. "There's no such thing as a dark tourist, only people interested in the world around them," he says. "You and I are probably dark tourists when we visit Ground Zero. We're not dark tourists—we're just interested in what happens in our lives."

In her blog post, "Darkness on the Edge of Town," historian Kat McDonald argues against the broader meaning of dark tourism. She describes the growing trend of dark tourism in her town of Kingston, Ontario, Canada. She raises the question of ethics regarding giving "haunted tours" of an asylum or penitentiary that was in use until twenty-odd years ago. She presents a valid concern. It is one thing for tours of the Tower of London to describe the torture that was visited on prisoners there, but an entirely other to do so when the correctional officers and prisoners are still alive and living elsewhere. Perhaps for tourism, that is an issue, but when

I was researching the Tennessee State Prison, I know I felt it was important to outline the horrors of the past and into the present or recent past. It would be disrespectful to deny inmates' suffering in the 1990s but delineate the suffering of the past. Either way, she raises some thought-provoking points about ethics, privacy, and sensationalizing suffering.

In his article, "Dark Tourism: The Destinations We Don't Talk About," which appeared in *Travel Daily*, Christian Tolentino explores the topic of dark tourism. His introductory paragraph suggests a harsher and less nuanced understanding of what dark tourism includes. This is extremely common and an issue in the field that needs to be addressed more often. He does echo Stone's earlier quote that people engage in dark tourism to gain a deeper understanding of the world around them. He cites a dark tourism company founder who explains people often engage in exploring these types of destinations come away with a much deeper understanding of the reality. Beyond his initial introduction, he gives a survey of some of the world's most popular dark tourism destinations. The entries are concise- each comprised of one photograph and a short description of fewer than 100 words. The descriptions are very dry and matter of fact.

"The Ethics of Dark Tourism" doesn't appear to have a specific author attributed but is cited as from UKessays. Regardless of being uncredited, it is immediately apparent that this is someone who has done extensive research on the field judging by their citations and a more nuanced understanding of the subject. This article is a highly competent review of dark tourism's ethical discussion, but the author doesn't add any new perspective or arguments to the conversation.

“Celebrate Suffragettes; not serial killers” is an internet campaign created by Becky Warnock. According to the protesting group, a museum in London applied for a permit from the planning commission with the application stating, “The museum will recognise and celebrate the women of the East End who have shaped history, telling the story of how they have been instrumental in changing society. It will analyse the social, political, and domestic experience from the Victorian period to the present day.” However, when they opened their doors, the Jack the Ripper Museum did not live up to that promise. As a result, they have been protested and are facing lawsuits from a local women’s group. The museum founder responded with the comment, “It is not celebrating the crimes of Jack the Ripper but looking at why and how the women got in that situation in the first place.” The women’s group took issue with the statement’s wording, which can easily be construed as victim-blaming. As a response, the protesters opened their own short-lived museum that focused on women’s history of the area and took out a billboard across from the Jack the Ripper museum asking patrons to support their museum instead. The billboard now features panels from the women’s museum, which has since gone on tour. Their petition currently has 10,000 signatures. The Jack the Ripper museum has some very problematic language on their website, including referring to his murders as the “greatest unsolved crimes that ever took place.” Notably, they also offer a walking tour.

Conclusion

In one way or another, these works all recognize that the user experience should drive a project. Who are we creating history for, if not the public? The end product’s form doesn’t

matter as much as how well it functions and serves its intended audience's needs. Public historians have acknowledged that their work must center on the community to be useful. Digital humanities echo these same sentiments, as do scholarship around spatial history and walking tours. The field of dark history and dark tourism need to internalize these same ideals. What is best for the involved community? How should the end-user experience determine the site or experience creation? For my project creating a dark tourism walking tour with a digital companion site, I hope to synthesize all of these principles to create an accessible, user-focused experience.

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