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Papers 2

Book Reviews 1

Conference Presentations 4

Posts 1

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MMLA 2013: Design and the Digital Humanities

by [Rachael Sullivan](#) and [Josh Honn](#)

We recently wrapped up chairing the inaugural panel of the Digital Humanities (formerly titled "Computer Research") permanent section of the Midwest Modern Language Association. This year's conference is in Milwaukee, WI, and the full schedule can be [found here](#).

With "Art & Artifice" being the theme of MMLA 2013, we settled on a panel titled "Design and the Digital Humanities" ([original CFP here](#)), looking to explore more deeply issues of design in everything from DH projects to artistic and literary creation. The presenters included Giorgio Caviglia and Nicole Coleman (Stanford University), Amy Papaelias (SUNY New Paltz), Jessica Barness (Kent State University), and Francesco Levato (Chicago School of Poetics).

[Giorgio Caviglia](#) presented on his work (completed collaboratively with Nicole Coleman, who was not able to attend the conference) with the [Humanities+Design Lab](#) and the [Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis](#) (CESTA), proposing a more central focus on design within digital humanities research projects, particularly visualization work. Indeed, Caviglia proposes we think of research as a design process, working in a state of constant reflection, or what Schön has called "reflection-in-action." Caviglia's presentation brought to the fore the question on how to properly complicate visualizations, allowing for multiple views and tools within a single interface, or applying humanities approaches to network visualization, not simply and passively accepting social science methods, but thinking of networks humanistically.

[Amy Papaelias](#) presented on her design-focused pedagogy, exploring what it means to actively work through issues of design inside and outside of the classroom. More specifically, Papaelias presented student-designed locative mobile applications that combine ethnographic field research, technological inquiry, humanist argumentation, and interface design. Working in teams, students use a variety of tools such as [Grow-A-Game](#) ("groups of people brainstorm novel game ideas which prioritize human values") and [ARIS](#) ("open-source platform for creating and playing mobile games, tours and interactive stories."). She also detailed how students from her interaction design course got involved in the community-based [Wassaic Project](#) (a casual space for making art).

[Jessica Barness](#) presented on her work designing the [Emigre Magazine Index](#). As described on her website, Barness, as a designer, was not simply responsible for the visual design of this digital project, but also "project conception, research, information architecture and website production." Indeed, her brilliant work on the Emigre Magazine Index, embodies a thoughtful and experimental approach to online archives and digital collections, that could apply fairly broadly to many digital humanities projects, moving beyond simple remediation and presentation to more fully explore argument and experience. Barness raised practical concerns related to digital design and archival research. In her presentation, she mentioned that what to include and how to include it became an issue. As she described the choices she made, related to typeface and organization and interface design and backend structure, it become apparent that that to be a developer is also to be a designer.

Combining critical commentary with a creative performance, [Francesco Levato's](#) presentation wrapped up the panel. Levato works in the genre of "cinépoetry," which he defines as a cinematic exploration of poetic texts. The genre is also known as video poetry or poem-films, and he locates its historical roots in 20th-century avant-garde poetics. His multimedia work entitled "My Sunset Gun" is simultaneously writing, film, and live

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enactment. To perform "My Sunset Gun," Levato used a software program designed for DJs to mix audio and live video. The audience was captivated as he read from his poem while a blurring of scrambled video images and a live recording of his face appeared on the screen. The effect was something like a television tuned between channels, fading in and out between Levato's image and the filmic footage. As he argued in his presentation, cinépoetry's aesthetic works against interpretation and narrative filmmaking – one experiences it without looking for a story. The theme of how to interpret (i.e. design) "data" was a thread running throughout the panel, and it was really refreshing to see a poet and artist explore and perform interpretation in digital media.

While the panel, a lunchtime affair, only drew an audience of eight, we were encouraged by the critical, thoughtful, humane, and experimental approaches of the panelists, who formed quick alliances and began making plans for future projects. We all agreed that digital humanities needs to confront issues of design, from digital literacy to issues of accessibility, and, when appropriate, to move beyond "user-friendly" and toward embedded visual arguments.

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