

Humanity's Place in Laboratory Space: An Interview with Kyle Bickoff

*In this piece, **Jillian Gilmer**, MA Candidate at the University of Colorado at Boulder, interviews **Kyle Bickoff**, PhD Student at the University of Maryland. The interview investigates the relationship between digital humanities, media archaeology, and laboratory space, exploring the role of the human in technological studies. The interview was conducted via Skype, recorded, and transcribed at a later date.*

J: Thank you again for agreeing to chat with me, Kyle. My first question pertains to the general conception of Digital Humanities as a field of study. In an article titled “What is Digital Humanities and What’s it Doing in English Departments?” Matt Kirschenbaum suggests that the “digital humanities” label functions as “a term of tactical convenience” to garner funding (Kirschenbaum 3). How do you feel about the term “Digital Humanities” in relation to your own scholarship? Do you agree with Kirschenbaum’s assessment?

K: Yes, I can agree with Matt’s definition, but “Digital Humanities” encompasses a little bit more than simple terminology. I’m a little bit biased because I’m taking a class with Matt now; and he’s also one of my advisors. But I actually read through that essay recently, and I think that reading that piece in conjunction with some newer, differing opinions works to expand my definition. It’s a term that defines a *field* in many ways. I think it also defines a community. “Digital Humanities” refers in some ways to a group of people that work together on similar projects, that maybe use similar approaches, and in that way, DH brings together folks from all over. Jason Farman, Assistant Professor of Digital Media Studies at Maryland, (<http://amst.umd.edu/people/faculty/jason-farman/>) works at the Digital Cultures and Creativity Program (DCC) (<http://dcc.umd.edu/>), which is more connected to the undergraduate side of the academe. He’s also involved with work at the Human-Computer Interaction Lab (<http://www.cs.umd.edu/hcil/>). But essentially, Farman works in digital cultures, information science, and cultural studies, encompassing a myriad of disciplines under one roof. That was a long answer to a short question, but to sum up: I agree with Matt’s definition, but I think it’s many other things too—not just a “term.”

J: To bring it back to Kirschenbaum, our class struggled with his computer forensic methodology. I think one of the biggest issues was the idea that coding is essential to DH work—which gave rise to conversations about elitism in the humanities. At the end of the day, I think where we ended up was, “This is so cool! ... But I can’t participate.”

K: That’s funny to me. I don’t think digital forensics needs to be a “who’s in, who’s out” game. There are critical code studies that work with code, and you’d probably need to know how to code to participate in scholarship on that level—that’s what the Big Data side of DH does. But then there’s people who are involved in other areas, for example gender studies, or other

subfields within the discipline, and may not always require coding knowledge. There was just a conference here called *Transform DH* (<http://transformdh.org/2015-conference-thatcamp/schedule/>) that focused on gender and women's studies in relation to technologies, attempting to understand how human culture can be critiqued in a digital atmosphere.

J: That's another interesting point, because our class's understanding of basic digital literacy was all across the board. This leads me to another question related to the pedagogical side of DH. As opposed to traditional print humanities, DH seems to have a learning multiplier attached—digital literacy is a baseline of those classes. How essential is digital literacy to understanding how digital humanities works? How many people do we exclude when we hike up the pedagogical bar?

K: I think about it as just the opposite of that. DH scholars do not start off as DH scholars. Neil, my advisor here, is a Romanticist. Matt [Kirschenbaum] is trained in book history. Lori [Emerson] is trained in poetics, I believe, and creative writing. I mean, I consider myself somebody who studies digital media scholarship first and foremost, but that's fairly new. The scholars in this field are almost always trained in something else. Alan Liu is a Romanticist. Wendy Chun is a critical race theorist. People come from all over. And so nobody's best at this thing! Everyone's still learning, even now. Nobody's going to say, "Oh, this is terrible. You're doing this all wrong. This is going against centuries upon centuries of technology studies!"

J: That's true! (laughs) DH is so new that we're still struggling to designate an appropriate umbrella term for digital work in the academe. I'm currently working for the CU English Department on the administrative side, and recently there was a faculty disagreement over utilizing the term "Digital Humanities" or "Media Studies" when titling our courses. How do you think the "Media Studies" label would change what DH does? Or does it?

K: I'm a little bit biased here as well. My degrees are in English, but my undergraduate focus was really on media studies rather than literature. I studied film and experimental cinema, so I have always been trained to utilize media studies methodologies in my scholarship. And now I think of myself as somebody who engages in *digital media scholarship*, which is both digital humanities and media studies. When you look at conferences in the digital world, people begin to intersect. I've gone to ACLA, the American Comparative Literature Association's conference (<http://www.acla.org/annual-meeting>), and run into the same people again and again. Similarly repeat attendees of conferences like SCMS, the Society of Cinema and Media Studies conference (<http://www.cmstudies.org/?page=conference>), the ELO, the Electronic Literature Organization's conference (<http://conference.eliterature.org/>), really start to know each other and know each other's work. These functions start to incorporate people who work all across fields and represent various parts of the DH community. So I don't really like employing those terminological barriers. Perhaps the current angst over terminology is related to something like

department funding, who pays for what—but I don't think digital scholarship should be about building barriers. I think it should be about breaking them down.

J: That's a great answer. I'll totally agree with you there—since you and I are trained in both literary and media scholarship, it becomes difficult to draw a differentiating line between them. I noticed you mentioned the aspect of community in your definition of “Digital Humanities,” expanding the term from describing an academic “field” to encompassing the public and community at large. How important is community in your own work?

K: Extremely important. And I think that's one of the best things about being in DH. In my experience, I've found people to be incredibly supportive and willing to collaborate. At the University of Colorado, there's a lot of communication across departments. I have support from Dr. Lori Emerson at the Media Archaeology Lab, and Dr. Mark Amerika, with whom I took an Art History course—and you get great interdisciplinary work out of these interactions. The community here at Maryland also really comes together around DH. We have weekly “Digital Dialogues” (<http://mith.umd.edu/digitaldialogues/>), which function similarly to a conference by bringing in speakers and outside scholarship. There's a strong community here focused on interdisciplinary scholarship, bringing faculty and students from different departments and into conversation with one another. In my opinion, establishing communities is one of the most important things we do in DH.

J: Absolutely. And in terms of community, I'm thinking about public dissemination. I'm curious about the interaction of digital scholarship and digital *tools*, which make much of our work possible. You emphasize the importance of free, open-source software and community building in your work. As a tool-builder (or an overseer of tools and their functions), how does this kind of tool-building qualify as literature scholarship?

K: The usefulness of these tools, for me, is clear. I've used Gephi (<http://gephi.github.io/>), which is an open-source tool for mac and content, with nodes: it's sort of like a graph visualization tool. There are also open-source tools like Omeka (<http://omeka.org/>) and Drupal (<https://www.drupal.org/>) that are used for hosting, which are content-management systems. Romantic Circles (<https://www.rc.umd.edu/>) is the project I work on at Maryland--originally started at MITH, although it's not completely a MITH project now. And I want to emphasize that there's no big budget for Romantic Circles. We don't get to spend money on Amazon or other fancy web hosting platforms. That's not to say that funding for DH projects does not exist: the BitCurator, for example, is a grant-funded by the Mellon Foundation. But the Romantic Circles website gets server space through the university and uses free, open-source content-management systems that other people build and share. It's these open-sourced tools that make it possible to do so much in DH scholarship, and without which Romantic Circles would never have been

created. So I'd say that open-source server software is not just a perk, but foundational to what we do.

J: Along those lines, our attempts as a class to define "what we do" have failed pretty miserably. I think one of the reasons behind that ambiguity is something you've already mentioned—that DH is not focused on erecting traditional field boundaries. But our understandings of DH work have drifted further away from the traditional printed article and have begun to encompass interaction and collaboration. I'm wondering if a printed journal article still qualifies as DH work: does a journal publication reach out to the community in the same way as, perhaps, BitCurator does? What can Digital Humanities do to prevent itself from becoming co-opted by traditional print avenues, where work isn't traditionally available for public dissemination?

K: There's a few questions in there. First off, I think we're starting to have the ability to push back against traditional work. Here at Maryland, we just had a completely digital dissertation defense: Amanda Visconsi's *Infinite Ulysses* (<http://www.infiniteulysses.com/>). Amanda essentially built up a website that focuses on the act of reading and annotating *Ulysses*. The project is about being able to annotate in an online version of the text, but it also moves beyond digital annotation by creating a space for online dialogue. Her project is about bringing together people to read *Ulysses* jointly, creating a space in which people can read the novel with immense community support. And there are many ways to diverge from the traditional monograph form. I don't feel that it's necessary to emphasize that today, and I feel lucky that people before me have already started to change traditional departmental requirements. I think that'll only change and get better in the future. We're already seeing tangible manifestations of interdisciplinary scholarship via dual appointments for faculty members. One of my advisors has an appointment half in English and half in Information Studies, for example.

J: Yes, Dr. Emerson is split between English and CMCI at the moment.

K: Really? I didn't know that, but that's great. DH seems to promote working across departmental walls and allows folks with a different point of view to review your scholarship. And digital work is typically a little bit more open in what's considered equivalent to a journal publication or monograph.

J: I'm very interested in the notion of equivalence between humanist and digital scholarship. You mentioned that the digital world is open to reimagining the monograph. Yet our class's attempts to conceptualize the digital monograph haven't resulted in a tangible blueprint—and maybe that's a great thing! But that's the next question I'm going to throw at you: what is the digital humanities monograph? What does a close-reading look like in digital studies? Or is the whole point to avoid equivalence?

K: I wouldn't avoid equating DH with traditional humanities scholarship. I think humanism—the focus on the human, the “human-centric” approach—is important when studying digital cultures. That's one of the reasons I'm drawn to it. We're all concerned about the *human* condition, and ways in which our media change that condition. If you think about it, we communicate with each other entirely different today than we did, say, a decade ago, or two decades ago. And regarding your question about close-reading, I think the term certainly transfers across disciplines. I close-read in a way that media studies scholars close-read. A “text” can refer to a printed book, but a movie or video game can also function as a text. At Colorado, I was trained heavily in media archaeology. The media archaeology approach to understanding allows you to close-read objects the way you close-read texts. You might perform a close-reading of knobs on the Atari versus the original NES versus an Apple IIe, for example. There are many forms of “close-reading,” and those forms are constantly changing with the technologies we use. But we can't completely sever the human element because the computer is informed by the book. We read and construct software in very similar ways, and this leads to a conflation of screens and texts in the field.

J: When I read your thesis, I noticed that you often flip between the words “reader” and “user.” I want to conceptualize the difference between those terms. Part of your response addressed that already: your explanation that a screen interface can function as one aspect of a text. But I'm going to push you on your human-centric view--not necessarily because I disagree, because I am a humanist—but because I feel digital humanities work has opened so many possibilities for posthumanism. What do we risk when we adopt a humanist approach to digital studies? Does this prioritize the human in our relationships with technology?

K: I almost wonder if we risk anything. I think that we *need* to bring in the human. There's a project at MITH run by Ed Summers (<https://archive.org/details/ferguson-tweet-ids>). It doesn't have a formal name yet, but essentially, Ed Summers and his team are collecting tweets related to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. They've scraped through a lot of social media data, particularly in relation to the events in Ferguson last year and some events in Baltimore as well. And I don't think you can necessarily look at this data as *raw data*--you have to say, “Well, this is about people, and specifically black people and racial tensions, and we want to find more meaning in this collection” all to try to speak to the events that occurred last year and unfortunately keep occurring. I mean, I think it has to be about people to find meaning. So I think that we have to bring in our humanist training to speak to this. Maryland focuses on ongoing projects that reach across the worlds of library science and information science. In some ways, that collaboration is focused on preservation and access: how do we preserve digital content? How can we make it publicly available to the scholarly world? But in other ways, DH scholarship pushes far beyond notions of preservation and access to incorporate a community. Digital Humanities is about using academic work for social good, to better underprivileged communities—and how can we do that without a humanist foundation?

J: That's a great answer. So I heard you use the word "data," and I've been waiting for you to use that term so I could throw this question at you. The BitCurator site stipulates that "the use of forensic technologies will allow for detailed metadata to be generated," and quotes several scholars who refer to "cultural data." You yourself use the phrase "data-dense art" in your thesis (Bickoff 8). So my question is this: what is humanities data, and does this term function successfully in humanities scholarship?

K: The BitCurator project (<http://www.bitcurator.net/>) was a multi-year project, a collaboration between the University of Maryland and the University of South Carolina's Information Science Department. I was only involved for a brief period toward the end of the grant. But yes, data is important. There are a lot of different communities within digital humanities: you've got the folks who do Big Data, so maybe you're thinking of the work being done at Stanford or the University of Nebraska, or Franco Moretti's (Stanford) data-oriented approach to texts, which he calls "distant reading." But I tend to find myself on the side that adopts more traditional media studies close-readings. And on that side, the term "data" is used in a myriad of ways. There may be better terms than, say, "cultural data." I'm thinking about archives, libraries—perhaps *cultural memory* is a better term than cultural data. There are so many cultural memory institutions around the D.C. metro area. Memory is word that functions in human and digital terms. It implies something human about technology. And to return to the term "data," perhaps data is a text—there are many ways to read that. Maybe it's content, or medium—but we have to recognize that the term is used in many ways. We're not just studying printed books, but born-digital content, like electronic literature. I worked on a project last year on Emily Dickinson's manuscripts, which is all hand-written, not printed. And that could qualify as "data" too. So perhaps the data-method emerges as a technique to work with non-traditional media types.

J: Speaking of non-traditional media types, I was hoping to ask you about your work at the MAL—Dr. Emerson's Media Archaeology Lab (<http://mediaarchaeologylab.com/>)—because I'm fascinated by the space of the lab and how it affects the production and dissemination of knowledge. I just read Stewart Brand's *Inventing the Future at M.I.T.*, which briefly discusses "the tyranny of place" and argues that the digital world will allow us to supersede centralized space. But I struggle with that, because there's something sort of magical about laboratory space that's difficult to put a finger on. I'm curious as to how you felt space may have shaped your scholarship just because you've had the opportunity to work in multiple laboratories in your time as a digital humanist.

K: Space is immensely important. The Media Archaeology Lab depends heavily on space. And I mean, it's not just a space—the implication of the word *laboratory* is important too. The MAL is a hands-on space, and it's a space for tinkering, for playing, or even circuit-bending, which are fairly popular in the DH and media archaeology community. The simple fact is that we need physical space for that. Matt Kirschenbaum uses the "honey pot" example: when you put an old

computer in the middle of a laboratory and invite people in, they go, “Oh! You have an old computer! Let me give you another one.” I think something similar happened with Lori with the MAL. And at some point, you just run out of room. But I think that’s an ok place to be.

J: Yes, I believe she has. The MAL is not currently accepting donations.

K: Right, it’s a small space. But in addition to being a laboratory, the MAL has functioned as an art space, a space for video projections, community gatherings. One of the events I attended was a live music show with musicians performing with some of the machines.

J: Awesome!

K: Yeah. In contrast, MITH is a *big* space, much larger than the MAL—it’s an office space. But it’s also a space for old computing machines. The vintage computing collection at MITH is nothing like the size of the MAL’s, but it does have a large collection of born-digital media. The Deena Larsen collections are a permanent part of our electronic literature authors in the library, where there a lot of collaboration takes place, and as a result we’re actually sharing responsibility over those resources (<http://mith.umd.edu/research/project/miths-vintage-computers/>). MITH is also involved in social media archiving. I suppose that’s remote, like BitCurator, where much of the work is performed outside of the space. So space is important—I think it’s necessary to have space—but a lot of this work can also be completed in a collaborative online format.

J: When we were thinking about space in class, we all felt that it was important, but had trouble articulating why. The challenge we gave ourselves was to think in terms of funding—say, a grant proposal for a media laboratory space. How do we justify asking for money and space if the lab workers don’t actually require the space to complete their work? That’s one thing Brand speaks about in his book. The digital revolution has allowed everyone to key in from home. In one sense, workers are never really *gone* from the lab—but in another sense, they’re never really there. I’m really interested in how that dichotomy changes digital work.

K: I mean, I can agree with your assessment. I visited the Moretti’s Stanford Literary Lab (<https://litlab.stanford.edu/>) a couple of years ago and I wanted to see the space. I was *very* interested in seeing the space. And Franco Moretti, he basically said, “Space? It’s not about space. The servers are off-site.” So it’s interesting to see where the work is being done, because setting is important. To give you an example, we have a Python reading group here at Maryland. Everyone works staring into their own computers trying to learn Python together, but we choose to do it in the same room. There’s a support mechanism there. And I think having that element of human support that reaches beyond screen interfaces is immensely helpful. If you’re stuck on a particular section, you get support immediately. I mean, it’s important to be able to do work from afar—for instance, the fact that you and I are collaborating from afar right now wouldn’t be

possible without our media technologies. But for me, it always comes back to community. Having a set space to bring people together is essential. The Media Archaeology Lab is a good example because so much of that work needs to be hands-on, and it can be with very ephemeral media. The physical subjects you to the beeps and whirs of the computers, forces you to turn the machines on, put in floppy disks, etc.—which is a completely different experience than looking at an emulator on a laptop.

J: That’s something I actually experienced when I went to the MAL. I had never played an Atari—that was before my time—and it was a learning process. When I picked up the joystick initially, it was inverted. I had actually picked it up the wrong way. I learned that I don’t know how to play Pac-Man upside-down.

K: (laughs)

J: I’m familiar with media archaeology because I’m at Colorado with Lori, but I’m anticipating that not everyone who reads this interview will be. I would love to ask you about the kind of work that takes place in the MAL. Your thesis, “The Convergence of Digital Literature and Net Art: Networked Creation, Distribution, and Operation,” actively describes its own process of production, which largely occurred in the MAL surrounded floor-to-ceiling by machines. I’m interested in how this sense of physicality--being in a basement that mimics an eclectic old bookstore, encircled by dusty computers--would affect the shape and scope of your scholarship. But for those of us who are unfamiliar with media archaeology scholarship, especially, how can such work reshape modern knowledge dissemination? How do such retroactive projects become valuable in DH?

K: Working in an environment like the MAL was supportive in a lot of ways. I read a book recently by Jussi Parikka called *A Geology of Media*, and he’s fairly foundational in talking about media archaeology. This book tackles media geology, which doesn’t necessarily mean *closed* spaces, but certainly relates to space, materiality, and understanding the products and methodologies with which our computers are made. Parikka is interested in what is produced and delves into the types of heavy metals and such that compose our media technologies. Much of his own writing is also really informed by where he wrote the book, in Istanbul, Turkey. Being in a community greatly informed the way he wrote. Parikka attended art exhibitions, acts in his community, and paid attention to the sort of media around him. I think that’s for everyone. To bring it back to media archaeology and the MAL, I’m thinking of bpNichol’s texts and early poetry. I could go onto YouTube (<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CB4QtwIwAGoVChMIzenJ9eryyAIVC9RjCh3k6wSV&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DredUSQ7WCSM&usg=AFQjCNGyqgPjxt-EG3NbaamtNUqflzfwkA>), I could emulate, I could use some server somewhere in Denver or

California or wherever, and theoretically experience bpNichols poetry. *Or* I could go to the laboratory and actually listen to these 8-bit sounds on a monitor that has very different contrasts and better refresh rates. So working in a place like the MAL is very beneficial when attempting to actually understand the media. You know, I'm not sure I would have really even enjoyed bpNichol's poetry if I had seen it in a YouTube video, but when you finally see it in person, you go, "Oh, wow. This is really wonderful. There's something magical about this." And maybe you can't put that magic into words, but you keep working, and spend your days trying to capture it.

J: Kyle, thank you so much for your time! This discussion has been wonderfully enlightening.

To experience the magic of bpNichol's work in person, drop by the Media Archaeology Lab at 1320 Grandview Avenue, Boulder, Colorado. Open House hours are Mondays 12-4pm, Tuesdays 3 - 7pm, Wednesdays 5-9pm, Thursdays 2-6pm, and Fridays 10-2pm.