Transmedia Storytelling and Other Challenges (and Opportunities) for the (Digital) Humanities

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Abstract

The evolution of research infrastructure toward digital formats seems to undermine not only the ways we do research in the humanities but also widespread assumptions about the role of the humanities as a whole in contemporary society: what is at stake is not only the transformation of the *procedures* of humanistic research but also, and more importantly, the transformation of its goals. The emergence of the so-called Digital Humanities (DH) has further fuelled this debate within our profession. The Authors identify five fundamental challenges for humanities research in the digital age: 1) a challenge of **scale** - in the age of big data, also the humanities feel somewhat compelled to increase the scale of their object of study; 2) a challenge of **evanescence/obsolescence**, the actual vanishing (or deliberate destruction) of our object of research; 3) a challenge of **ethos**, with an alleged shift from individualistic toward increasingly "collectivized" values, as a result of the pervasive networking and "socialization" of research; 4) an **institutional challenge**, as a neo-liberal ethos pervades the contemporary "corporatization" of higher education; 5) a challenge of **public relevance**, directly connected to the output of humanities research. One example of how a traditional, feature of humanistic culture is radically evolving in the current environment is "transmedia storytelling" (TS). Since storytelling (and more generally, narrative discourse) is also one of the most distinctive forms of humanistic knowledge production (production of "meaning" beyond mere "information"), this evolution may also offer an opportunity for a thought experiment aimed to test the state of humanities research, both from a critical and an operative point of view: a comprehensive look at this multidimensional phenomenon (and complex object of research) can stimulate a discussion about all the points (challenges) mentioned above.

Part 1
Five Challenges for the (Digital) Humanities
Massimo Riva

Over the past fifteen years, like many colleagues in the humanities, I have been directly concerned with the evolution of our research infrastructure toward digital formats. Of course, this is not a phenomenon limited to the humanities, but its impact on humanistic research has been perhaps more significant than in other scientific fields, because it seems to undermine not only the ways we do research in the humanities but also widespread assumptions about the role of the humanities as a whole in contemporary society. In short, what is at stake is not only the transformation of the procedures of humanistic research, including emerging methodologies and scholarly communication - the ways scholars communicate with each other in the process of research, as well as the ways in which they communicate to each other, and to the public at large, the results of their research - but also, and more importantly, the transformation of its goals. The emergence of the so-called Digital Humanities (DH) has further fuelled this debate within our profession. In one of the most interesting interventions in this debate, Alan Liu (Liu 2013) assigns a symbolic role to the DH: "the digital humanities serve as a shadow play for a future form of the humanities that wishes to include what contemporary society values about the digital without losing its soul to other domains of knowledge work that have gone digital to stake their claim to that society."[1] Along these lines, I will identify five fundamental challenges for humanities research in the digital age:

1. The first challenge is a challenge of **scale**: in the age of big data, also the humanities feel somewhat compelled to increase the scale of their object of study: from a single text or a single painting to ever larger aggregates (corpora, digital collections, one million books, one million paintings, visualizations of *long durée* or "deep time" phenomena, etc.). This scaling up of the humanities[2] is based on the quantification of humanistic data, or better, for the most part, on the selection (or filtering) of more easily quantifiable (meta)-data out of the objects of research (texts, images, etc.) in order to implement automatic parsing and analysing procedures. These procedures require the development of new methodologies aimed at either replacing traditional qualitative interpretation with quantitative (algorithmic) analyses or, in the most critically aware practices, bridging the gap between qualitative hermeneutical techniques and quantitative data parsing. The latter is often embedded in visualization techniques, such as graphs, etc. (Figs. 1 and 2) that the humanities increasingly borrow from methodologies and models developed by the social or even, sometimes, the physical and biological sciences. Trans-disciplinary experimentation in the humanities often amounts to this borrowing.

The upscaling of humanities research, however, is not limited to its objects but also affects its subjects, the community, or better (in the plural) communities, or in Liu's terminology, "tribes," of humanistic research, in at least two ways: connectivity and the digital infrastructure dramatically broaden the dimensions of what was considered a "research community," beyond its traditional academic boundaries. This is without doubt the most visible transformation at work and perhaps also the most tangible consequence of the paradigm shift mentioned in Mario Ricciardi's editorial. This change is far from being only demographic, or geographic, or simply incremental. Along with trans-disciplinary experimentation (and media portability), the true driving force behind the transformation in research methodologies in the humanities, is perhaps interactive collaboration: the digital infrastructure reshapes the very nature of a research community (what was conceptualized in Western early modernity as "the republic of letters," etc.) in ways that profoundly affect its traditional values and protocols, its very self-definition.

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[1] Liu (2013) describes the DH as "something like a grid of affiliations and differences between neighbouring tribes", distinguished from other academic tribes in the humanities (such as "new media studies", "continental theory", etc.).

[2] See for example, among many possible examples, the rationale of the HathiTrust Research Center (available at https://www.hathitrust.org/htrc) and the set of initiatives *Humanities at Scale* (available at http://dariah.eu/activities/humanities-at-scale.html). Also: Kretschmar, 2009.
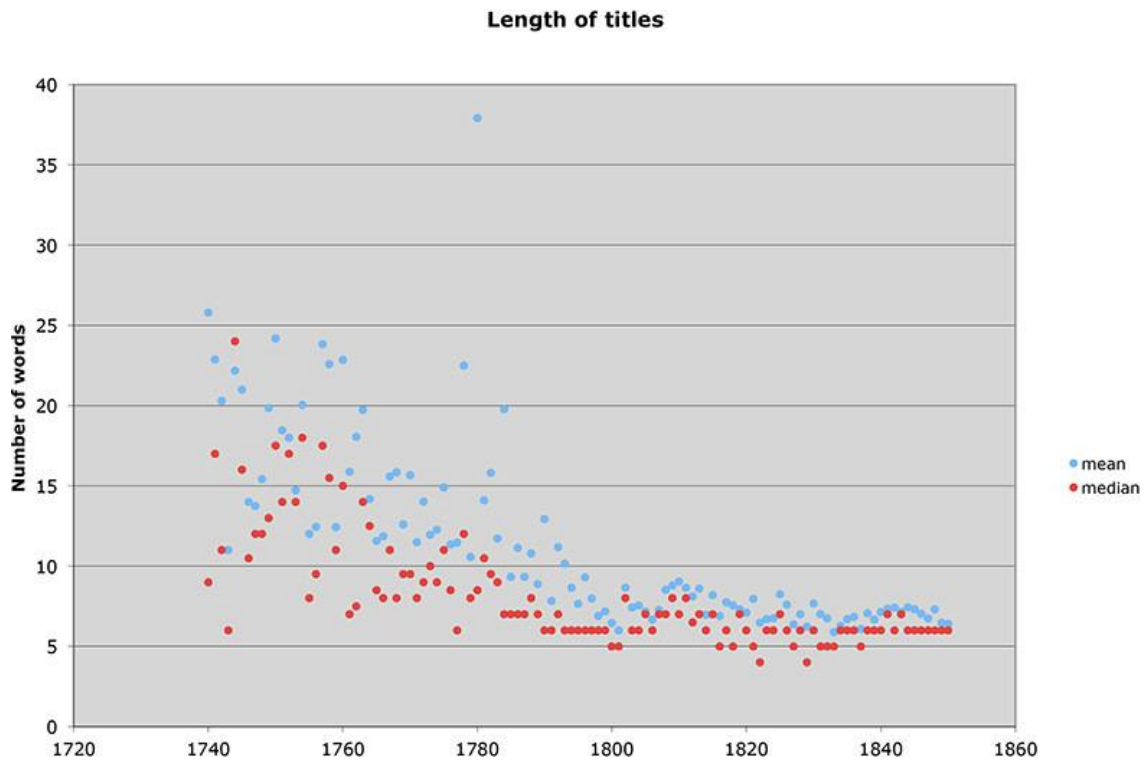
Figure 1. A graph from a Stanford LitLab project, "The Taxonomy of Titles in the 18th-century Marketplace", directed by Franco Moretti and Mark Algee-Hewitt. (source: VersoBooks article on Distant Reading, available at http://www.versobooks.com/blogs?post_author=3130).

Figure 2. Image from Lev Manovich's "Mapping Time" (source: remixtheory.net, http://remixtheory.net/?p=450).

2. The second challenge is a challenge of **evanescence/obsolescence**, the actual vanishing (or deliberate destruction) of our object of research (Fitzpatrick 2011; Tischleder et al. 2015). "Humanities scholars now live in a moment when it is rapidly becoming possible – as Hod Lipson and Melba Kurman suggest – for 'regular people [to] rip, mix and burn physical objects as effortlessly as they edit a digital photograph.'" (Schreibman et al. 2016). Moreover, the "scaling up" of humanistic knowledge-work (Liu 2004) often paradoxically coincides with a scaling down, or even an "atomization" of research targets: digital humanities research seems increasingly aimed, for example, at "distant reading," to detect and visualize semantic patterns based on the macro-logical sequencing of pulverized data, or meta-data, extracted (ripped) from their "onto-logical" embedding in historical and cultural systems and sub-systems (textual and contextual). This atomization of humanistic data (as deposited in our digital archives) jeopardizes the integrity of human artefacts in a more subtle way: by eliding their hermeneutical understanding within their proper human dimension (or scale). Rather than looking (or reading) in depth, current methodologies and tools, for example valuable text analysis tools, invite us to see *through* our objects (Figs. 3 and 4).
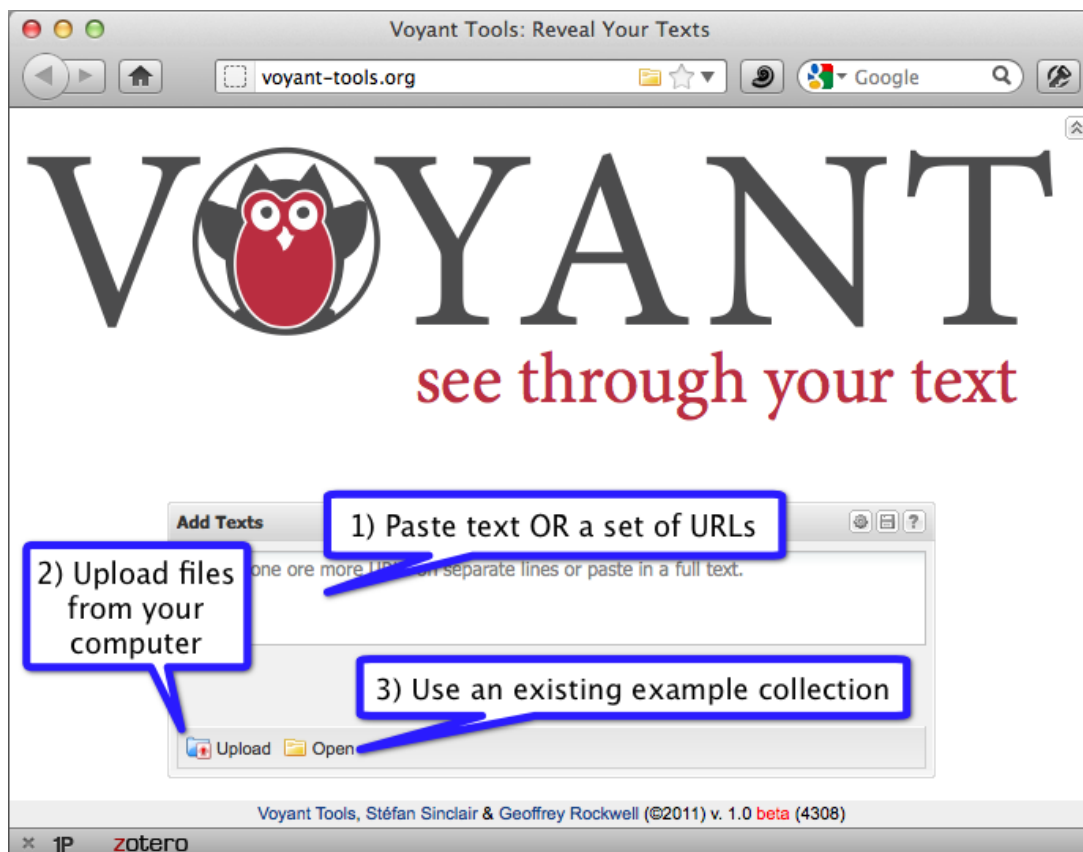

Figure 3.   Source: http://voyant-tools.org/ (accessed May 18, 2016)

Figure 4.   Source: http://voyant-tools.org/ (accessed May 18, 2016)
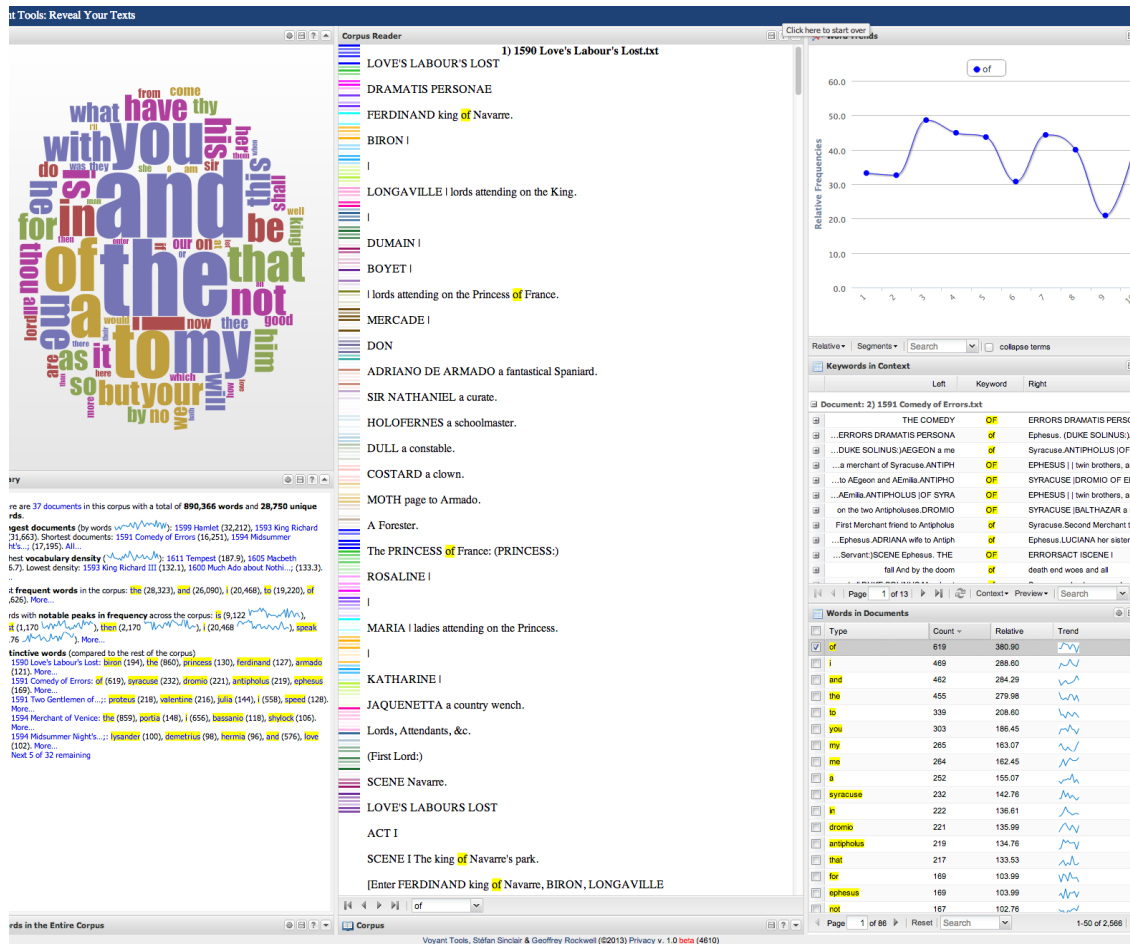
The general move from document-centric to data-centric research in the humanities seems to necessarily imply a parallel move from discursive to graphic-algorithmic forms of data visualization and interpretation (including textual data): this has eventful consequences for critical thinking. As Ryan Heuser and Long Le-Khac write (Heuser et al. 2012), "the greatest challenge of developing digital humanities methods may not be how to cull data from humanistic objects, but how to analyse that data in meaningfully interpretable ways." Within this changing landscape, I agree in principle with what Franco Moretti (co-director of the Stanford Literary Lab and one of the most prominent proponents of the new protocols of research) and his collaborators have written presenting the results of another Stanford LitLab research (Allison et al. 2011): "These are new methods we are using, and with new methods the *process* is almost as important as the results." A robust debate about the process, techniques, methods, models and their *objectives*, is perhaps the most productive way to tackle the alleged obsolescence and evanescence of the (traditional) humanities. After all, humanistic data only make sense if (and because) *we* make and "unmake" them.

3) The third challenge is a challenge of **ethos**. A fundamental change in the research ethos is accompanying the upscaling of the humanities, with an alleged shift from individualistic toward increasingly "collectivized" values, as a result of the pervasive networking and "socialization" of research. According to its critics, this supposedly erodes the very foundations of what we call "liberal arts education," traditionally focused on the individual as an autonomous ethical-political *thinking* entity, pre-existing a technologically conditioned environment. Whether this individualistic ethos (which affects ideas of authorship, ownership, intellectual property, etc.) is still prevalent and/or should be entirely overhauled is, however, open to discussion. As Liu (2013) points out, concurrent with the question of "meaning" in the DH, is the question of collaboration:

> Just as meaning is both a metavalue and a metaproblem, so is collaboration as it bears on such urgent issues in the digital humanities as coauthorship, collective project building, multigraph books, open peer review, social media, crowdsourcing, and the hiring and promotion implications of all these. Rather than explore the collaboration problem in its own frame here, I note only that it is fundamentally convertible to the meaning problem. For example, the question of what kind of knowledge is produced by "the wisdom of the crowd," "collective intelligence," "the long tail," "the hive mind," "folksonomy," and so on (dominant memes of Web 2.0) is essentially a question about *the meaning of the social version of big data*, the big crowd. The mind, or mindlessness, of that crowd has been a core problem of modernity since at least the French Revolution. (Liu 2013, 412)

More insidious is the subtly "collectivizing" (ideological) force embedded in software design and the way it may radically affect how a research community comes to exist and thinks (of) itself in the digital age (see Chun 2004 and 2011). Designing software *for* the humanities is perhaps the most interesting intellectual challenge we face: new forms of digital scholarly production and communication are challenged to embed in software protocols the key values scholars attach to academic publishing, such as sharing and knowledge advancement, best embodied in open source publishing and open access (see Guédon 2008 and Spiro 2012).

4) The fourth challenge is an **institutional** one: how the ever more pervasive digital infrastructure changes the academic environment in which learning and research are conducted. I don't just mean online learning as an alternative to brick-and-mortar universities. In a recent attack on the Digital Humanities as a pseudo-discipline, the DH have been branded wholesale as a byproduct of the hegemonic neo-liberal corporatization of (American) universities (Allington et al. 2016). While the latter is undoubtedly a process we all have been facing in recent years (especially in the North American academy), I would still argue that the best critical practices in the DH (whether they form a coherent meta-critical discourse or not, is a different matter) are not "intrinsically" consistent with this process (the LARB article drew a wealth of critical comments, ranging from shocked and outraged to amused). It is undeniable that a neo-liberal ethos pervades the contemporary "corporatization" of higher education, in which (reflecting larger societal trends) "data-driven" decisions seem to increasingly prevail over refractory and alternative forms of "qualitative" thinking, making the latter all but "obsolete" or "irrelevant": however, an effective resistance to this societal upheaval, which greatly impacts institutions of learning and research, as well as the way future generations are trained to think, is hardly compatible with a paleo-liberal mentality or the "data-negligent" or even "data-allergic" attitudes which, by and large, still seem to prevail among many scholars in the humanities.

As mentioned above, more relevant for humanities research are issues of data ownership and/or control, what has been recently characterized as a "global copyfight" (Haggart 2014): who owns the products and process of (our) institutionally supported research in digital formats as it is increasingly dependent on collaborative endeavours which extend well beyond the boundaries of our institutions and sometimes of the academy as such? If the institutionalization of knowledge is at the origin of the modern university (with its libraries, archives and repositories, etc.), current trends seem to point to a radical de-institutionalization.

However, it would be naive to consider every "communitarian" instance of knowledge production or exchange on the digital platform as a positive example of an inevitable socialization of knowledge: the communitarian values of open access or media commons and the valorization of individual knowledge work, while not necessarily in contradiction with each other, must be vetted against comprehensive social goals as well as economic constraints in a democratic, market-oriented environment in which "knowledge" itself (as far as it is distinguishable from "information") is both a commodity and a "common good." Centripetal and centrifugal forces are concomitantly at work within this emerging digital ecology, and so are drivers of fragmentation as well as homologation: an obvious example being the impact of social media on research networks.

5) The fifth challenge is a challenge of **public relevance** and is directly connected to the output of humanities research. As we experiment with new forms of academic publication in the humanities (I am myself involved in one such experiment, generously supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, in collaboration with a number of research libraries and university

presses),[3] we are faced with two different challenges, on opposite sides: on the one hand, how to preserve protocols of qualitative peer-reviewing which preserve the credibility of the humanities (on a scientific level) and regulate the progression of careers within the academy, while configuring new forms of authorship;[4] on the other, how to enable and accredit forms of scholarly communication which may bring humanities research out of its academic cocoon and impact public opinion and social decision making at large, perhaps also countering the prevailing corporative, neo-liberal way of thinking, as well as providing an antidote to rampant populistic rhetoric and demagogy.

It would be a mistake to set these two tasks against each other, and yet: as the research process in the humanities (with its protocols) must necessarily adapt to more collaborative, and trans-disciplinary, or even trans-mediatic forms of knowledge work and output, new protocols must be elaborated and these, rather than being institutionally (or disciplinarily) self-referential, as it is still the case nowadays, should greatly value the public impact of the research output, in terms that go beyond the traditional boundaries of an academic discipline. This is particularly true for the humanities as they become "digital" (like everything else in our society). After all, the transformative power of the so-called "digital humanities" (humanistic modes of knowledge production in digital formats which take advantage of computational tools) depends on this, both within and without academic walls. Again, it is not only the changing objects, procedures, formats or products of research which are at stake but the very goals of what we call the humanities.

Part II
Transmedia Storytelling: A Case Study
A. Carpin and M. Riva

One example of how a traditional feature of humanistic culture is radically evolving in the current environment is "transmedia storytelling" (TS). These words indicate both a specific aspect of what is understood as "convergence culture" (Jenkins 2006) as well as a more complex and to some extent fuzzy phenomenon with broader technological, institutional, and socio-political implications (an example of fuzziness is the entry "Transmedia Storytelling" in Wikipedia). Since storytelling (and more generally, narrative discourse) is also one of the most distinctive forms of humanistic knowledge production (production of "meaning" beyond mere "information"), this evolution may also offer an opportunity for a thought experiment aimed to test the state of humanities research, both from a critical and an operative point of view.

A point of departure for a rapid survey of TS could be Jenkins' well known definition: "Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own contribution to the unfolding of the story" (Jenkins 2011). Implicit in Jenkins' definition is the interactive component of TS, the audience participation in W2 forms. One fundamental distinction also introduced by Jenkins is that between "top-down" and "bottom-up" forms of TS, in short those planned and promoted by media conglomerates and those instead initiated by more or less "spontaneous" communities (or "tribes") of "distributed" storytellers. Of course, this distinction is not necessarily an "ontological" one and hybrid forms are perhaps predominant in the contemporary networked ecology. Nevertheless, it remains a useful way of approaching this phenomenon, and analyzing it case by case.

As an object of study, transmedia "narrative" practices require inter-, or better trans-disciplinary critical and analytical tools, drawing from sociology, narratology, media studies, audience and reception studies, to name just a few (Dena 2009). In short, "narrative eco-systems" emerge

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[3] https://blogs.brown.edu/libnews/digital-publishing-pilot/. See also the recently launched initiative, The Academic Book of the Future, in the U.K., http://www.futureofthebook.org/ (accessed on May 18, 2016)

[4] See for example the Modern Language Association of America web site devoted to guidelines for digital publishing and authorship: https://www.mla.org/About-Us/Governance/Committees/Committee-Listings/Professional-Issues/Committee-on-Information-Technology/Guidelines-for-Authors-of-Digital-Resources; https://www.mla.org/About-Us/Governance/Committees/Committee-Listings/Professional-Issues/Committee-on-Information-Technology/Guidelines-for-Evaluating-Work-in-Digital-Humanities-and-Digital-Media

(also as trans-disciplinary pedagogical experiments)[5] - open systems, composed of interconnected or interlaced structures, capable of evolving and generating participation which somehow also includes the narrativization" of what we call "real world" (as far as it is distinguishable from its virtual mirror). This also affects our understanding what a "public sphere" is nowadays, a public space made of interlacing individual and collective stories. All this points to TS as a particularly interesting phenomenon, or complex of phenomena, investing practically all aspects of our contemporary digital ecology, with a large cross-cutting public or social impact. A comprehensive look at TS appears therefore useful for at least two reasons: in order to test the ability of humanistic critical methods, enhanced by digital tools, to capture (the meaning of) contemporary transformations of traditional humanistic forms of expression and communication such as storytelling; and in order to better understand how traditional humanistic modes of thought must themselves adapt to the changing environment made possible by the digital infrastructure, in order to pursue their goals. Of course, to be clear, a humanistic approach to TS is not necessarily *exclusive* of other approaches; indeed, it must intersect and interact with protocols developed by the social sciences, in particular, including the adoption of computational tools such as those mentioned above. For example, as Liu also points out (2013), historical sociologists such as Roberto Franzosi (2010) and Peter S. Bearman and Katherine Stovel (Bearman et al. 2000) have shown us how we can analyze narratives as particular kinds of network structures. However, a holistic approach to TS seems to at least require something like a humanistic frame of mind (critically conscious of its own goals). Moreover, contemporary transmedia forms are not entirely new: a historical, and archaeological, approach, also typical of the humanities, can reveal both what is "new" and what is *not* entirely new in what we nowadays call TS (Scolari et al. 2014).

An interesting thought experiment may extend the value of this case-study even further: if, in the definition by Jenkins quote above, we replace "fiction" with "discourse" - a logical-rhetorical formation which may contain fictional elements but whose values and goals are not necessarily, or only, entertainment - then we can establish an interesting analogy with forms of humanistic expression and communication which imply a "narrative" or even "fictional" component (we won't dwell here on the huge debate about what constitutes a "narrative" but clearly TS is in itself a redefinition of what a "narrative" is, on a digital platform). As we said, this time-based narrative element (however formally defined) distinguishes traditional humanistic discourse from emerging non-discursive (non-narrative, non time-based) ways of elaborating and communicating knowledge (for example, as mentioned above, data-driven visualizations which can generate, or be turned into "stories", but are not in itself stories). Already Lev Manovich (Manovich 2001, 225-ff.) established a "hierarchical dichotomy" between Database and Narrative as (symbolic) cultural forms. This definition can be profitably revisited in our contemporary context. In short, TS presents a challenge and an opportunity for the humanities which is not necessarily limited to an epistemological and methodological self-reflective discussion but may also suggest "operative" implications (even beyond existing "educational" application of TS).

Finally, a comprehensive look at this multidimensional phenomenon (and complex object of research) can stimulate a discussion about all the points (challenges) mentioned above: TS is a large scale phenomenon which potentially renders obsolete or irrelevant traditional forms of critical interpretation, requiring a decidedly trans-disciplinary and collaborative or even participative approach in order to be fully understood. Furthermore, by instantiating a socialization of narrative discourse conditioned by macro socio-economic and techno-logical structures, TS reflects a transformation of the very humanistic *ethos* of storytelling, in both its individual and social goals and values. Finally, the emergence of TS storytelling invites a

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[5] See for example the resources contained in the course taught by Kai Pata, at Wikiuniversity, https://beta.wikiversity.org/wiki/Narrative_ecologies (accessed May 18, 2016). An ambitious research project is currently financed by the National Science Foundation: "Informal Learning and Transmedia Storytelling, a joint endeavor between Brigham Young University and the University of Maryland in partnership with NASA, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Computer History Museum, plus leading game designers, educators, scientists, and researchers. " As Kari Kraus, one of the Co-PIs for the project explains on her web site: "We'll be designing, implementing, and conducting research on two large-scale games – authentic fictions," in the words of Kery Eglund, one focused on computational thinking, the other on deep-time sciences; the games will target youth aged 13-15, with a special emphasis on girls and other groups underrepresented in STEM. The project will iteratively design and test two distinct types of transmedia fictions (closed- and open-ended) to study their effects on learning." (http://www.karikraus.com/?p=297) (accessed May 18, 2016).

reflection upon traditional forms of auto-legitimization of academic discourse as well as its capacity to expand its impact beyond the boundaries of the academic world.

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