Beyond the Valley of the Shadow: Taking Stock of the Virginia Center for Digital History

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Abstract

The Virginia Center for Digital History is one of the leading programs for online scholarship in America. In an interview with Will Thomas, the center's director, the authors of this article investigate the many opportunities and challenges of creating electronic scholarship in a university setting. Topics include a discussion of the innovations currently under development at the VCDH, the curriculum in digital history at the University of Virginia, and the place of online scholarship in the academy's tenure and promotion process.

In 1998, Edward L. Ayers and Will Thomas launched the Virginia Center for Digital History (VCDH). The impetus for this program had been the award-winning *The Valley of the Shadow* project spearheaded by historian Edward Ayers. Widely recognized for its innovation and scope, the *Valley* site represented the leading edge of web-based historical scholarship at the end of the twentieth century, however under Thomas's leadership, VCDH has expanded rapidly. Nearly six years later, despite the center's growing staff and list of projects, quality scholarship and technological inquiry remain at the heart of the VCDH's mission.

Edward L. Ayers is the Hugh P. Kelley Professor of History at the University of Virginia and currently Dean of the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. He was involved in the creation of the Institute of Advanced Technology in the Humanities (IATH) at UVA in 1991-92 [1]. Ayers soon realized that hypermedia offered distinct advantages for the scholarship of local history. As a result, he decided to turn his idea for a dual community study of the Civil War into a mixed media project. Ayers said he initially started his first digital history project in 1991 "as a way to share with others the excitement my students found in working in a major research library" [2]. The Web as we know it today did not exist at this time, and Ayers imagined The Valley of the Shadow Project as a large database that could eventually be shared through some kind of fixed media. By 1993, the Web emerged as the perfect location for this kind of digital history project and he was instrumental in putting the Project on-line in that year. However, since then the Valley of the Shadow has continued to grow and change as more records and information are added.

Besides the Valley of the Shadow, VCDH digital collections now include Virtual Jamestown, Race and Place: An African American Community in the Jim Crow South, Geography of Slavery in Virginia, The Dolley Madison Project, the Modern Virginia History Project and One Hundred Years of Life on the Lawn. Although these projects are mainly concerned with Virginia history, current plans at the VCDH are to expand its boundaries far outside the borders of the state extending from the Atlantic World to the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa [3]. In addition, the VCDH has established an Outreach Program for both K-12 systems and the community at large.

William G. Thomas III, Associate Professor of History and Director of the Virginia Center for Digital History has been the project manager of the Valley of the Shadow since 1996. Recently he worked with Ayers to produce a digital article based on the Valley project that was published in the journal of the AHA. Besides more traditional scholarship, he was co-author and producer of a series of films on Virginia's post Civil War history.

Recently, we sat down for a conversation with Will Thomas and he outlined for us some of the new directions and challenges faced by the center. Many of the questions raised in this interview crossed disciplinary lines – issues of technological skill, production standards, professional recognition for work, peer review, and of course, funding. Others dealt more directly with the historical profession, particularly as to how our sometimes hidebound field will absorb this new medium as it moves into the twenty-first century.

A central question in our interview revolved around the center's role within the university community. When asked if the VCDH might function much as university presses do for the printed medium, Thomas was emphatic with his reply; "only marginally, if at all." Instead, Thomas stressed, they see themselves as "incubators of scholarly inquiry." The center's goal is not to produce projects that necessarily resemble their last success. They want to be able to develop new initiatives without the restraints of a press model. Much of this has to do with the newness and rapid change in the medium itself. Nothing is more emblematic of this than the replacement of the old standby of HTML in favor of the emergent technology of Extensible Markup Language, or XML.

William Thomas and Edward Ayers co-authored a recent work in the *American Historical Review* that reveals both the extent of the center's commitment to technological innovation and the general direction that it is headed. Their article, "The Differences Slavery Made: A Close Analysis of Two American Communities" debuted in the December 2003 print issue of the *AHR* and concurrently online. The paper article included a brief summary of the authors' scholarly argument about slavery and modernity, but it served more as an introduction to the methodology and purpose behind the electronic basis for that argument. In short, what appeared in the paper version of the *AHR* was a persuasive argument for readers to set down their journal and head online to explore the XML site produced by Ayers, Thomas, and the capable staff of the VCDH [4].

The *AHR* article reflected the center's new direction in several ways. It grew out of the original *Valley of the Shadow* project, but was far from a recapitulation of that earlier work. As its

introduction candidly begins, "This article is an applied experiment in digital scholarship." Indeed, through the deft use of XML stylesheets developed by VCDH Associate Director Kimberly Tryka, the article does what a traditional scholarly piece cannot. Visitors to the site do not read and absorb the material in the customary linear fashion that has been familiar to the profession since before the time of Thucydides. Instead, the digital article challenges the user to select their own path through the material, following what most closely aligns with their specific interests – "alternative readings" in the words of the authors. Initially, their use of the digital medium seems fairly straightforward until one realizes just how much is there, and as an extension, how much one might miss inadvertently.

As Thomas pointed out, there are very few true scholarly articles on the web today that harness the advantages of the medium. Most electronic journals merely reproduce a digital copy of traditional narrative-based scholarship. Further, most web-based history sites, whether aimed at the profession or general public are examples of digital archiving. Many of the projects online today at the VCDH fit the archival model. This *AHR* article, however, is something quite different. Thomas pondered, with some justifiable pride, "I wonder if we're the first to put the acronym XML in the *AHR*?" It is the very expandable nature of XML that has made "The Differences that Slavery Made" work in the fashion that it does. Footnotes lead to complete historiographical citations. Within the "evidence" section, users can peruse all of the raw data and analysis that made the authors' argument possible. A handy "tools" section provides a record of what has and has not yet been explored by the visitor. The nearly limitless space provided by electronic medium is not wholly the reason for the inclusion of so much material. The presentation of a more discreet set of evidence confronts new methodological and pedagogical questions that sometimes do not willingly yield clear answers.

Being relatively new, feedback from the profession has been somewhat limited. In the production phases, however, many questions arose. The article makes use of technology in a way that seems beyond the technological and financial resources of the individual historian. Further, the issues of peer review and recognition by the greater community of scholars remains a worry for many – particularly where tenure and promotion are concerned. Promoting such recognition within the academy was a key motivation behind the *AHR* article. As Thomas noted, "Ed Ayers and I know if the article is a success if it is assigned in graduate colloquia all around the country." When that happens, and it seems likely, perhaps this new medium has begun to come of age.

A recurrent question among those working in digital media ponders the role templates might play in streamlining new scholarly projects. Indeed, this is a frequent topic within the MERLOT system. When asked if the VCDH had plans to create a model for individual historians to follow, Thomas was quick to point out the real dangers of such a move. "We don't want to foreclose experimentation," he noted. "It was something we considered but set aside because it was very presumptuous in this new medium… with everything changing to say, 'here's the model.' Let's get more models out there and maybe we can talk about a more streamlined process." The VCDH's focus as a research laboratory for digital scholarship parallels this philosophy. In the view of the center's staff, it is too soon to lay down strict guidelines for digital scholarship. "Templating sets parameters in a way that restricts creative development," notes Thomas. Additionally, as he explained, most of the roughly ten years of online development has been dedicated toward archive development. Thomas sees the digital media finally "entering a new phase," that he hopes will be "more about interpretive analysis and scholarship." This second phase does not preclude the earlier, but underscores the flexible and changing nature of the medium.

Of course, without templates available to simplify the process, it raises questions of accessibility of the digital media for individual historians. Those not possessing the technical skills or who are not blessed by the presence of able technical support could be left behind. Thomas recognizes this issue, but also notes that the expertise may not be widespread, but understanding the possibilities of the medium will ultimately become a requirement of the profession. He believes that the technology will grow to become more transparent, allowing scholars with more modest resources to innovate and harness the power of digital media. At the same time, other historians will increasingly develop a specialization in technology. When asked if the profession might

create a "new type of historian," Thomas suggested that it is really more a matter of medium, much like the differences between a documentary film historian and a print historian: "There's this whole new change happening in structuring information online and historians need to know about it. …I think it is critical that we mainstream our work – that this is not some technical little corner of our work, and this is why we did the article in the *AHR*. We want to mainstream our medium in the professional arena of the AHA."

Perhaps the greatest non-technical challenge of online scholarship today is the issue of scholarly recognition. Historians might spend years developing a learning module or an extensive digital project often with no guarantee that their institution will validate such work. For historians moving into the area of digital or hybrid publications, tenure and promotion will ride on institutional acceptance of web publication, so much is at stake. Mainstreaming digital media within the profession will go a long way toward remedying this situation. Yet, there remains no given standard for endorsing online scholarship in the same fashion as a peer-reviewed journal. Thomas concedes that an objective standard remains elusive, but that web reviews in the *Journal of American History* as well as the electronic imprint of digital publishers such as University of Virginia's electronic press are a good start. Cognizant of the needs of the academy, hopefully MERLOT will play a crucial role in gaining global recognition and acceptance of its peer-review standards for online scholarship.

The undergraduate and graduate students of the University of Virginia's history program may be the greatest beneficiaries of the forward-looking vision of the Center for Digital History. Beyond the students working at the center, the history department encourages all of its majors to explore digital media within the context of their own scholarship. Ayers and Thomas offered their first course in digital history in 1997. Titled, "Digital History and the American Civil War," HIUS 403 challenged its undergraduate students to marry the traditional archival research of the historian with the possibilities of the digital media [5]. Today, this course continues under the direction of the center's post-doctoral fellow, Douglas Seefeldt, as MDST 382: "History and Digital Media".

The University of Virginia and the VCDH have ambitious plans for the future of history education in the digital medium. The next step, according to Thomas, is the development of a Master's program in Humanities Computing. To complement this major, new graduate level courses in digital history will allow PhD students to concurrently develop an online component of their dissertation. When such a doctoral candidate graduates, they will not only have their traditional scholarship but also the beginnings of a digitally-based project to carry forward during the next phase of their career. Further, the center is currently working on fundraising for an endowment for graduate students in digital scholarship.

Another important initiative of the VCDH is the future development of CHART, or the Comprehensive History Research and Analysis Tool. Part of CHART's original mission was to provide a template for historians working in the online environment – a goal that the center has moved away from for reasons already mentioned. Instead, the focus of this new developmental framework has been redirected at fostering undergraduate education in digital media. The move toward CHART came out of Thomas' and Ayers' experience with HIUS 403. They found themselves wanting "to channel the efforts of students because they [were] spending an inordinate amount of time on idiosyncrasies and visual elements." Such idiosyncratic development often detracted from the time spent on interpretation and analysis. CHART emphasizes that these students are foremost training to become historians who use digital media, and not technicians dabbling in history. Thomas envisions CHART someday providing a framework for undergraduates working in a collaborative manner on digital media projects without the distractions involved in learning more sophisticated online tools.

The Center's plan for future online projects also follows its vision of innovation. When it started in 1998, the VCDH established some limited but important guidelines governing the type of new material it would bring to fruition. Initially, just about any topic of reasonable merit was considered as long as it met some basic requirements. Firs and most important, the project had to be scholar-led, not only reflecting the methodological integrity of the historical profession, but

also working in tandem with the center's long-standing goal of mainstreaming digital media within the field. Second, the project needed a wide audience, both within the scholarly community and the general public. Third, Ayers and Thomas were willing to take a chance on unfunded projects as long as they would reach a level where, at the end of two years' time, the center could realistically apply for funding through peer-reviewed grants such as the NEH.   Last, and perhaps most importantly, the projects would require or lead the center into new territory through the use of the medium.

Of course sustainability is the key to the success of the VCDH. Digital history products are both expensive and time consuming. Those who grant funding to universities are not often excited by projects that have long range goals and bring no revenue to the system besides the prestige of cutting-edge scholarly innovation. Nevertheless, from its beginning the Center has received limited but extremely important support from the University of Virginia in the form of space, equipment and limited funding of staff. However, 5 full time staff members, one post-doc fellow and 18 graduate and undergraduate research assistants are funded by grants; in reality the VCDH is almost entirely run with grant money. Thus a main part of Thomas's role as Director is to write grants as well as to seek out appropriate public and private agencies whose interests match the VCDH's projects. He compares it to finding funds for a venture capital firm. According to Thomas, funding is equally available for university and K-12 projects, but it is often difficult to cross the lines between the two with grant funds. To forward their Outreach goals, the Center recently hired a K-12 coordinator, Andy Mink, who will work with new proposals in this area; some of which will not be led by university scholars.

Going forward in 2004, the VCDH has refined its model for future development. The four initial guiding principles remain, but they have been joined by new criteria the staff believes will keep the center on the leading edge of technological and scholarly inquiry. In this regard, projects that will engage international scholars now receive priority. The center is particularly interested in studies of the Atlantic World, broadly defined as the interaction between Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa.   They believe that by merging such a wide-ranging field with the possibilities of the digital medium, scholars will grapple with some of the "big questions" in world history.

What is MERLOT's role in the continued development of VCDH and other websites devoted to the scholarship of digital history? As Ayers commented, "I do indeed think that MERLOT performs a crucial task. If we don't have peer review, we don't have scholarship" [2]. Thus the peer reviewers of the MERLOT History Team will play an increasingly important role in the promotion and development of standards for web publications like the Valley of the Shadow, adding validation and justification for digital scholarship.

References and Notes

1. The concept for the IATH was to have a place where technologists would collaborate with faculty from the humanities to develop cutting-edge research projects. Ayers was chosen as one of the two "prototype fellows" in 1992-1993. For more information on the creation of the Valley of the Shadow see http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/usingvalley/background.html

2. Edward L Ayers to Elsa Nystrom, Interview about VCDH. Email message, 06/02/04.

3.   For more information on the research of the VCDH see
http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/research.html

4. "The Differences Slavery Made: A Close Analysis of Two American Communities," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 108, No. 5, (December 2003) 1299-1307.

5. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* featured HIUS 403 in 1997, [citation]

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Editor's Note: [The Valley of the Shadow](#) web site received a 2005 MERLOT Classics Award from the MERLOT History Editorial Board.