Conclusion

Because the digital realm is a space of rapid change, this book could never be more than a snapshot of that realm at a given moment. Between the time I began writing in 2009 and the winter of 2011 when I finished the full draft of the manuscript, much had already changed in the world of digital history. Some of those changes needed to be incorporated into the book, some did not, but all had to be considered. For instance, when I began writing the book, the mining of digital imagery was still in its infancy, but by the summer of 2011 a number of important developments in that field have accelerated the pace at which historians can expect to be able to do sophisticated mining of large databases of photographs and other images. I had to rewrite that entire section of the book twice along the way. When I finished the draft of this book no one had ever heard of a massive open online course (MOOC), but now it seems that MOOCs have taken over the conversation about teachers, learning, and technology. But even as the technology upon which we rely and what that technology can do for us changes rapidly, there are many things that will not change, or at least will not change much, in the teaching and learning of history in this digital age.

I think it is safe to say that history will remain an essential part of the school and university curriculum for as long as any of us will live. Too many people are interested in the past and too many others believe that a knowledge of history is essential to the smooth functioning of a modern democratic society for us to have to worry too much about a precipitous decline in the fortunes of our profession. But questions remain. Will history maintain its place in that curriculum, or continue to slip in terms of
its overall popularity and the resources it commands in the face of competition from the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics)? As I have indicated a number of times throughout this book, I believe that unless we muster the will to reconceptualize the way we teach students about the past, taking into account the new realities of the digital world and the many and varied ways our students work, think, and live in that world, we are in trouble. I do not think that trouble would ever spell the end of history as a discipline, for the reasons just cited, but I do think we need to consider whether or not we are in danger of losing a substantial portion of our natural audience. And we do have a natural audience. Many students are just plain interested in history and so are willing to spend time in one or more of our classes even if they do not choose to major in history. Whether we teach them once or many times depends, at least in part, on the success we have in making our discipline relevant to the world they live in and plan to live in after graduation.

We can also count on the fact that the number of available digital historical sources will continue to increase at a rapid rate. As more and more of the national cultural and historical collections around the world are digitized, marked up, and made available to anyone who wants to use them, the incredible amount of historical content that will be available to us and to students will be such that even thinking our way around its edges will be an existential experience akin to standing on the beach and trying to make sense of the entirety of the world’s oceans. The billions of historical sources out there for us to work with—more and more of which will be marked up with XML coding—will simply be too much to contemplate or reasonably consider working with. It used to be a commonplace to talk about trying to get a drink from the fire hose that is the Internet. Going forward from 2013 a better analogy might be trying to get a drink from one of the mammoth waves of Hawaii’s Banzai Pipeline as it crashes down on your head. For this reason, where just a decade ago we had to teach students how to find enough primary sources to do interesting and original work, today we need to teach them how to pare down the results of their searches for such sources to something manageable in the context of a semester or a quarter.

There is no reason for us to believe that our students will suddenly stop being enthusiastic creators of online content. Survey after survey of the behavior of youth indicates that their love affair with creating online content is still waxing. What we cannot say with any certainty is how and where they will indulge their creative impulses. In 2013, Facebook and
YouTube are the two most common places where young people create content for others to see, use, and modify, but as anyone who studies youth culture will tell you, that culture is famously fickle. Who can say whether these two websites, one founded in 2004 and the other in 2005, will be as popular in seven years as they are today? It is instructive to remember that in 2006 MySpace dominated the world of social media and commanded a then-astronomical purchase price from Rupert Murdoch’s NewsCorp. At the peak of its popularity, MySpace was growing by almost 300,000 users per day, but by 2011, MySpace was hemorrhaging 1 million users a month.1 Before MySpace, there was Friendster, which discontinued its social networking accounts in May 2011, reconfiguring itself for a life in the gaming industry.2 In late August 2012 President Obama held an “Ask Me Anything” session on Reddit that drew more than 2.5 million unique page views and more than 23,000 comments in one hour and in October 2012 Facebook announced that their site had surpassed the one billion member threshold. Among the things historians know is that all dominance is fleeting, and so it is a safe bet that a decade from now web platforms other than the ones that students rely on will be the places to be, to play, to work, and to create. But wherever they do it, it is also a safe bet that they will continue to create content at a rate that surprises us.

One reason it seems to be such a safe bet that young people will continue creating content online at ever greater rates is that the tools necessary for that creation keep getting easier to use and cheaper. In the preface I described having to learn to write my own HTML code to put my class syllabus online. When Netscape Composer hit the market in 1997, I was thrilled, because suddenly I could let the software help me create web pages without my needing to acquire more coding skills. The following spring, Dreamweaver appeared and made my life even easier (albeit a bit more expensive), because the software’s interface not only helped me build web pages, it also helped me build entire websites in a much more organized manner. Ever since, the tools for making and maintaining online content have gotten easier and easier to use. Consider, for a moment, how difficult it was to geolocate historical content and display it through a web browser. Although the desktop version of the ArcGIS software had been available since 1999, this software was designed for those with a background in geographic information systems rather than the casual user (including historians and their students) who wanted to mash up historical and geographic datasets. Google changed the terms of this particular game
when they made their Maps API available to the general public in 2005.\(^3\) The Google Maps API has proven to be the most popular API embedded on websites worldwide, is now available on most mobile devices and, as mentioned earlier, is being used by hundreds, if not thousands, of historians, students of history, and casual enthusiasts for the past to create various mash-ups of historical and geographic data. In 2011 the Open Knowledge Project released a simple tool for creating even more sophisticated mash-ups of historical and geographic data—Weaving History—that links the Google Maps API with the popular open-source time line creator, Simile, created at MIT.\(^4\) Now, with just a few clicks of a mouse and a few minutes of typing, anyone can create the kind of reasonably sophisticated historical map that only professionals could make a few years ago.

The world we are preparing our students to enter continues to change almost as rapidly. Employment opportunities with some sort of obvious and direct connection to a degree in history used to fall into a relatively small number of categories, including education, museums and archives, or work at historic sites. Over the decades many history students have seen their major as strong preparation for a career in education, law, politics, or government service. All of these options continue to be there for history students, and there is nothing to indicate that this will change much in the coming decade. However, the digital revolution has opened up many new, exciting, and often lucrative opportunities for students that history departments only rarely take into account. For example, organizations ranging from large corporations, to cultural institutions, to government agencies are all but desperate to hire digital archivists—at starting salaries in the same range as those paid to beginning assistant professors of history. Working with and in archives is something history departments typically spend a fair amount of time teaching our students how to do, but only a few departments around the country offer students an opportunity to develop the kinds of sophisticated digital archiving skills that are required to claim one of these jobs.

Finally, I think we can safely assume that if we find ways to turn students loose—to give them room to create history the ways they want rather than the ways we insist on—while still maintaining our standards and remaining true to our learning goals, our students will surprise us more and more often with what they produce. It may be a video like the Tank Man mash-up discussed earlier; it may be a new use for a mobile app; it might be a series of blog posts; it might be a map overlay; or it might be a combi-
nation of any or all of these. While it is impossible to say what exactly they might produce if we give their creative impulses more room to maneuver, I think it is also a safe bet that if we do not give them this sort of creative license, only rarely will they surprise us with what they do. Certainly, we will continue to receive carefully crafted, well-researched, and well-argued essays from our best students. What we will not see is the kind of creative work—work that takes partial or full advantage of the potential of the digital realm—that they are actually capable of. Students study history because they want to, not because it is a path to fortune or fame. The time has come for us to recognize that our students have a lot to teach us about the past and how we can combine what we know with what they know to make history together.