Disrupting the Digital Humanities

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As a meditation on the theme of “disrupting” the digital humanities, I offer five moments of disruption for consideration:

1

At an MLA 2015 panel, #QueerOS: Queerness as Operating System, my fellow panelist Jacob Gaboury gave an amazing paper on “Compiling a Queer Computation.” He examined the possibility and purpose of a queer computation, and how it might be compiled — or how it might be uncomputable in some fundamental sense. As some of the examples, he offered a number of esolangs, or esoteric programming languages, including one of the most infamous, Brainfuck. Esolangs vary in purpose, but they all tend to work in that they can be used to write a program that actually compiles and runs, though usually for non-productive or humorous reasons.

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The disruption of an esolang isn’t that it fundamentally won’t compile, but that it doesn’t operate according to the principles of mainstream languages which tend to privilege flexibility and productivity. The disruption isn’t one of a stoppage, but a slowdown, a pointed diversion, a deliberate detour through opaque rules and oftentimes humorous commands.

While we were tweeting our #QueerOS panel, I was following the tweets from another DH panel happening at the same time. Folks in that room were tweeting about emulators. Meanwhile, folks in our room were tweeting as Zach Blas touched on the aesthetic and political appeal of Dildotectonics (as originally imagined by Beatriz Preciado). Emulation often presumes an exact imitation or duplication of a system, whereas dildotectonics seems to presume a superfluous simulation, one which is sensitive to the slippage between mimesis and mimicry. It’s not that dildotectonics disrupt the history of emulators, so much as it showcases the limits of their presumed status as the definitive computational method of duplication and imitation. Sometimes disruptions point to the impossibility of the very system they are interrupting, and sometimes they are exposing just how pervasive and insidious that system might be.

As part of the ongoing Ferguson protests and social actions, groups have been staging “Black Brunches” as a way to point out the “people who have money and privilege have the leisure to brunch.”

The protests had already disrupted city streets, highway ramps, shopping malls, airport terminals and courthouses.

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2 See Beatriz Preciado, kontrasexuelles manifest (Berlin: b_books, 2003).
es—and now weekend brunches. These disruptions are an especially ingenious method for pointing out that power operates not only in the arcane rules of our legal system, but in our bodies, spaces, communities and quotidian moments. The disruption is not intended to “ban brunch” as one commenter proclaimed, but to make visible and tangible the ways through which power is pervasive and invasive at a fundamental level, even at the breakfast table. Disrupting comfort is affective, performative, declarative and community-building. The intervention of the black brunches brings to mind the question of how to respond when you are “disrupted”—do you continue trying to eat your pancakes in peace? Or try to find out how to engage with the disruptors? Or file a complaint? Or even wonder if the disruption was not about you as an individual, but about a systemic structure of power and community?

4

A recent *New York Times* article, Among the Disrupted, begins with the treatise, “Amid the bacchanal of disruption, let us pause to honor the disrupted.”⁴ Here, the disrupted entity appears to be the human body and our social world before it was transformed by the tyranny of pervasive technology. What has been disrupted is a way of life, an ethos, an end to our humanism and an introduction to our posthumanity. The article declares that the concept of the human has been disrupted by the posthuman, a disruption, I might add, that apparently is not very welcome.

5

At a recent workshop I attended, the developers were showcasing a new mapping tool. They promised that the tool would not only be able to intake diverse data points, but also output many other formats which would instantly revolutionize how we interpreted the data. This claim to rationalism has a history, or

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perhaps many histories, and doesn’t always make visible the ethics of the proliferation of data.

We know that data doesn’t determine its own outcome, and the desire for evidentiary proof isn’t always enough. We saw this happen this past December, when a grand jury came back with the verdict not to indict the officer who killed Eric Garner, even though the video evidence offered exactly the kind of data called for by proponents of body cameras to prevent police brutality.

Evidence doesn’t always offer its own interpretation. Evidence isn’t rational. Evidence doesn’t come with its own decryption code, or encryption code, or guide to interpretation. Data doesn’t determine the way in which it can be mobilized, deciphered, or deployed. More evidence doesn’t always make better evidence. The promise of data alone to disrupt our status quo completely negates the ways in which data and its interpretation have a history. This isn’t to say we don’t need new data, better data, or more ways of providing and interpreting and comparing data; but along with that we must foreground the questions we are asking of the data throughout its natural life.

In some ways, the Digital Humanities has been understood (or has staged itself) as “disrupting” the humanities, offering a new way to think and interact with other scholars, with materials, with objects and texts and disciplines. So does disrupting the digital humanities signal a return to… the humanities? Or is DH incommensurate with the sort of data we want it to compile and contain?
Bibliography


