Doing Digital Humanities Work in a Lab Space:
An Interview with Gabriel K. Wolfenstein
by Cayla D. Eagon

In this interview for Theory & Practice of "Doing" // From Digital Humanities to Posthumanities*, Cayla D. Eagon, PhD Student at the University of Colorado Boulder, chats with Gabriel K. Wolfenstein, the Crowdsourcing Project Manager for the Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis (CESTA) at Stanford University. The interview focuses on describing what digital humanities work looks like in a specific lab space.*

CDE: First of all, thank you for taking time out of your schedule and allowing me to interview you. I'm really excited about the work you're doing with projects like "Mapping Emotions in Victorian London," and I'm glad I get to learn more about what you do—which leads to my first question. As the Crowdsourcing Project Manager at the Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis (CESTA) and their Spatial History Project (SHP), what does your work look like on a day-to-day basis?

GKW: My job contains three different components: Crowdsourcing for the Humanities, the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford, and Lacuna Stories. I manage, or help manage, each of these projects. The Crowdsourcing project accounts for approximately a third of my time (until the end of this year, when it begins to wind down). So, sometimes an entire day can be focused on one project, other times it might be evenly split. Basically, in terms of the projects, my work moves somewhere on a continuum between focus on one project to a more even distribution of time.

This is all to give you context for my work on Crowdsourcing. In terms of the Crowdsourcing project, more specifically, my day would generally look as follows: Check and respond to emails. This continues throughout the day; Regularly communicate with outside lab partners. This means Skype or Hangouts or some form of Instant Messaging. These conversations could be about requesting data, discussing changes to platforms, or planning events; Check in with the student Research Assistants on the project. Look at the work they have been doing, making sure things are progressing in terms of their tasks and projects; Schedule and facilitate any relevant meetings; Research on crowdsourcing. Reading new papers, blogs, etc.; Analyze data from our Historypin websites, and respond to any new posts. This accounts for most day-to-day activity. Obviously, sometimes these tasks can take up more or less time. For instance, some days there are no necessary communications with the outside lab partners, or there may not be any meetings (though because RAs work in the lab, there are numerous opportunities for *ad hoc* meetings and conversations. This is an important part of the workflow). On quieter days, I will therefore have more time for research or analysis. Conversely, on busy days I might not do any research at all.

CDE: What are the daily activities of those who work in the lab?

GKW: There are, broadly, three groups of people who work in the lab.

1. PIs. The Principal Investigators are generally Faculty, Postdocs, Grad Students, or Visiting Researchers. These folks, on a day-to-day basis, remain focused on their individual projects. The activities here are varied, from research, to coding, to writing, to data collecting and analysis, and the like. They will also meet with the student RAs that are working directly with them.

2. Student RAs. These are undergraduates who work on specific projects. Their tasks range from reading and analysis, to coding, creation of visualizations, mapping, etc.

3. Staff. These include the Lab Manager, the Creative Director, our GIS (Geographic Information System) specialist, and myself. These folks take care of the daily running of the lab, answering student and PI questions, and assisting in research and analysis depending on need and expertise.

CDE: Considering that CESTA is invested in spatial analysis, how have you conceptualized the space of the CESTA lab—is it like a science lab, a computer lab, or something else? What makes it lab-like? And how does its physical layout encourage the work that CESTA is doing?

GKW: "Lab" is an imperfect word here; but it distinguishes us from other humanities spaces on campus. We are involved in experimentation in terms of methodologies, new technologies, and new digital tools. In some sense it is very much like a science or computer lab. We have PIs who have their individual projects, and RAs and Staff who support those PIs. But we are very different in that the conceptual space here is as horizontal as possible. Everyone working on a project, including the undergraduate RAs, is encouraged to be a member of the team. This means that everyone is the driver of the projects, at least to some degree. RAs do not just do scutwork. They create visualizations and websites; they do writing. If there are publications and they contribute, their names go on it. The PIs work closely with the RAs, doing more than assigning tasks.

The layout of the lab is meant to encourage that. Both areas of the lab are set up as open floor plans. PIs are generally clustered in one area, as they have their own spaces. The other area is filled with high-end GIS computers and Macs for design. These are open to anyone with a Stanford ID and login. So, when work of that nature is done, RAs, Staff, and PIs, all mingle in that space. This encourages the horizontal nature I discussed above, as well as encouraging cross-pollination's between labs and projects (there are three core labs, and a couple of major research projects that make up CESTA). In addition, there are two open spaces where people can sit down with their laptops on *ad hoc* bases.

CDE: What is your favorite part of working with CESTA?

GKW: There are two parts to this answer (which I know is cheating), but they are directly related. One part is the excitement of getting to ask and answer humanisitic questions with new tools, doing things that would not have been possible even a few years before. However, I am able to do that, or help do that, because of the people and the horizontal nature of

authority in the lab. That is, it is the community that makes it possible. So, if I had to answer the question in one word, I would say community.

CDE: You've segued nicely into my next question. I'd like to ask about your philosophy regarding digital humanities and how your work with CESTA fits into that. For instance, Stephen Ramsay views digital humanities as a move from "reading and critiquing to building and making" that emphasizes technical skills[1]. Whereas Jean Bauer recently blogged that, "DH should be a conversation, a process, and a community."[2] What is your take on DH and how do you see your work *doing* DH, or do you?

GKW: Here, I am closer to Jean Bauer, or really to Anne Burdick. Anne said, in *Digital_Humanities*:

> The digitization of the world's knowledge and its movement across global networks, no matter how incomplete or incompletely free, have transformed what we understand by and how we approach the humanities in the 21st century. We are continually creating new ways of accessing and assessing this new cultural production, which continually open up important new spaces for exploring humanity's cultural heritage and for imagining future possibilities using transmedia methods and genres of the digital present.[3]

At its simplest, I see DH as using computers to do humanities things. I use new digital tools (e.g., online communities, text mining, digital mapping) to answer old questions or ask new ones. But these questions are still basic, humanistic questions. I also think DH is definitely communitarian in some way. This is a key thing that distinguishes it from classic humanities work. I work with other people in order to ask and answer questions. In fact, the work I am part of would not be possible without that team or community. I disagree with Ramsay, since, in actuality, we are very much still engaged in reading and critiquing. We just sometimes do it in different ways.

So, yes, I see myself as doing DH, even though I am not the one primarily doing the coding or the mapping. I am using digital tools, ever changing digital tools, to explore our cultural heritage, thought of broadly.

CDE: I browsed through some of the SHP's projects, and—to no surprise—many of them are mapping projects. What do you see as the benefits of spatial research and mapping projects?

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[1] See Stephen Ramsay, "On Building," Blog entry, StephenRamsay.us, 11 Jan. 2011.

[2] See Jean Bauer, "Baking Gingerbread, as a DH Project," Blog entry, JeanBauer.com, 3 Oct. 2015.

[3] See Anne Burdick, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunefeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp, *Digital_Humanities,* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 26.

GKW: Spatial History and mapping allow for a very different way to see data. When DH is done well, it is not simply creating illustrations; instead, you create visualizations, maps, etc. as part of the research and data analysis process. This allows you to ask different questions and to understand the movements of people, goods, ideas, etc. in a way that can reveal different forces at play than you would if you simply saw, say, the shift in class from one part of a town to another. Which types of people are moving? Does it have to do with a specific job? Or a particular street? Did the weather change? Being able to map multiple factors allows for different understandings of things like urban renewal, gentrification, cultural production, etc. It can also allow us to differently access the way people at the time would have experienced these kinds of changes. Reading someone's response to a declining job market reveals one way to access that experience. Seeing how their physical world changed gives another. It isn't that spatial research replaces other modes or inquiries; rather, it supplements the kind of inquiry we are already engaged in.

CDE: Thank you again for this interview, Gabriel. You've certainly given me a better understanding of CESTA, the important functions of humanities lab activities, and your own work. I sincerely appreciate your time.

GKW: You are very welcome, Cayla. It was my pleasure.