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Interview with Dr. Matthew Kirschenbaum

Subject: Maryland Institute for Technology

Transcript:

1. Can you explain a bit about you, your role in the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities and how you came to be involved?

Well, that's a long story. I am an Associate Director at MITH (one of two), a position I have held for a decade. In practice what this means is I help set the research agenda at MITH, and contribute to its overall intellectual vitality through participation in programming and events, project development and project direction, and being a visible ambassador for MITH and Maryland in the international DH community. As for how I "came to be involved," I made the decision in the midst of my graduate career to switch from a focus on 19th century American literature to what at the time was termed "humanities computing." Virginia, where I was doing my PhD, was one of the emerging leaders in that field, and I found myself in the proverbial right place at the right time. My first job out of graduate school was an Assistant Professor at the University of Kentucky, with a specialization in humanities computing; I stayed two years before coming back east to Maryland, for a position defined (in 2001) as "digital studies." In practice I took this to mean that I had a mandate to do both theoretical and applied work in digital media, and MITH (which had been established back in 1999) was a key draw for me in my decision to come to Maryland.

2. How do you define the goals or objectives of the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities?

MITH is a working digital humanities center, and one of the longest running such centers in the country. Here's what we say on our site:

> "The Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH) is a leading digital humanities center that pursues disciplinary innovation and institutional transformation through applied research, public programming, and educational opportunities. Jointly supported by the University of Maryland College of Arts and Humanities and the University of Maryland Libraries, MITH engages in collaborative, interdisciplinary work at the intersection of technology and humanistic inquiry. MITH specializes in text and image analytics for cultural heritage collections, data curation, digital preservation, linked data applications, and data publishing.

> "Enabling the analysis of cultural heritage collections on a large scale, we create frameworks that allow us to develop new methods and tools for the exploration and visualization of digital materials. Our applied research and practice supports curation and publication of data that contributes to improved methodologies for the organization and stewardship of humanities research. We develop tools for preserving and archiving

born-digital artifacts of recent and contemporary cultural heritage. We emphasize explorations of forensic methods and vintage computing. We encourage potential research applications for linked data in the humanities that promotes publishing data in support of scholarly argument.

"Founded in 1999, MITH has been committed to sharing our excitement and experience around these areas of research with our campus and the broader community through an intensive program of conferences, lectures, fellowships, workshops, and weekly seminars. We continue to expand our outreach and public engagement through projects focusing on institution-building, curricular transformation, and diversity in the digital humanities."

3. What is the role of institutes such as the MITH or centers to Digital Humanities? How do you see the MITH as playing a role in digital humanities scholarship, particularly in born digital scholarship? Do you think labs or centers have a responsibility in regards to this type of scholarship?

Centers and labs have been one of the distinguishing features of the rise of digital humanities as an articulated field, going back to (at least) the early 1990s. Many of them are clean, well-lighted spaces, the beneficiaries of institutional resources and external funding or investment. At its best, this kind of support enables collaborative research at a scale rarely seen the humanities, and can be empowering for researchers at all ranks. In my own case, the existence of both the Electronic Text Center and the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at Virginia (the latter very much the original model for MITH) were essential to my "discovery" of the digital humanities. They functioned not unlike the "third space" sociologists speak of, that is neither the office nor the home but rather a communal hub and a focal point for common interests and serendipitous contacts. I try to be especially attentive to recreating this atmosphere for the graduate students who work at MITH.

Some institutions appear to take the establishment of a center as a sign that they have now "done" digital humanities or otherwise satisfied some vague need to "cover" it. Nothing can be further from the truth. The map, which is to say the intellectual mandate for a center, must still precede the territory. There is no one size fits all solution or center in a box. For one recent, skeptical take on centers, see: http://www.oclc.org/research/publications/library/2014/oclcresearch-digital-humanities-center-2014-overview.html.

With regard to born-digital scholarship in particular, I think of places like MITH, as well as the MAL, the MA Fundus, and Nick Montfort's Trope Tank at MIT as similarly inhabiting a kind of "third space" between manuscript repositories processing born-digital collections on the one hand, and computer history museums on the other. They're really much more akin to fan sites and grassroots initiatives, like the Musee Mecanique penny arcade in San Francisco. Above all, these are entities whose commitment to the materiality of computer history is absolute. They adopt the media archaeological precept that not only does the materiality matter, but that the machines ought to be switched on. At MITH, you can fire up an Apple II or Amiga or Vectrex. You can also take a look at "Mysty," a 200 lbs. IBM MT/ST word processor (1964!) that I have high hopes of one day restoring. We began collecting vintage computers when Doug Reside was still there, and over time the collection grew. They have been useful to us in

several different funded projects over the years, and help distinguish us as a working digital humanities center. But what sets us apart is that we also have two individual author collections, Deena Larsen and Bill Bly—both early electronic literature pioneers—and we have worked to build a relationship to Library Special Collections to ensure their long-term safekeeping.

4. I am interested in viewing the ways in which certain types of knowledge or scholarship is valued. For example, one type of scholarship focused on the website is archival with projects such as the Billy By Project, the Shelley-Godwin Archive and the Foreign Literatures in America Project. Another focus appears to be networks and data curation through the O Say Can You See Project and the Digital Humanities Data Curation Project. I am hoping you can discuss more about whether you see these points of focus existing at the MITH and how these develop. Do you see the MITH as valuing certain kinds of scholarship, why or why not? What type of scholarship do you see valued and how do you see this influencing the development of the MITH past, present and future?

No research takes root at MITH without it being somebody's baby. By this I mean that what we choose to work on is *always* a function of someone's interest, whether one of the directors like myself, one of our staff—it's worth emphasizing that our staff also initiate and lead projects—or a faculty or graduate student affiliate. So the Shelley-Godwin Archive which you mention comes out of our director Neil Fraistat's career as one of the world's leading scholars and editors of Shelley and his circle. When Doug Reside was with us we did a lot of performing arts projects because that was one of Doug's special interests. As the individuals associated with MITH come and go, the overall contours of the research agenda similarly shift in emphasis.

There are lots of things we don't do, or at least don't do very well. MITH is not the place to go to for GIS expertise, for example. If that was your project we'd send you to the Scholar's Lab at Virginia. But there are a couple of key things that I think do distinguish us as a DH center and which have remained very consistent over MITH's decade-and-a-half of history. One is a focus on the archive as a site of intellectual exploration and contestation. This has manifested itself sine the earliest days under Martha Nell Smith's directorship, when the Emily Dickinson Archive (similar in some respects to the Shelley-Godwin Archive) was one of MITH's most visible projects. A fixation on the "archive" also accounts for our history of work in media archaeology and born-digital cultural heritage. Nowadays we have a special interest in Web archiving, specifically social media, growing out of Ed Summers's early and prescient work archiving Twitter feeds from Ferguson; Ed has amassed a corpus of some 13 million tweets, which have been used by researchers from many different quarters of the campus. This, in turn, leads to a second and equally important distinguishing feature of MITH, which is its emphasis on diversity, again going back to Smith's directorship. Of course questions of archives and diversity of inclusion (and the history of power relationships they entail) are themselves deeply intertwined. That emphasis continues today with a recent award from the Mellon Foundation to develop partnerships between DH resources and the study of African American History and Culture (see http://umdrightnow.umd.edu/news/125-million-mellon-grant-awarded-umds-arts-and-humanities-college).

5. As well as certain scholarship being valued at the MITH I also am interested in the roles of graduate students and how much they are responsible for. I noticed on your website for each project you list both students and faculty under "participating people." What opportunities are available for graduate students or junior faculty? How do the various roles influence the development of projects? Do these projects develop due to those with particular skills already being involved with the MITH or did the MITH develop the idea and then bring in external graduate students and interested professors? How is this relationship mediated?

From its inception, graduate students have been an integral part of MITH. If you'll permit me to brag a moment, here is a very partial list of notable persons who have worked at MITH while graduate students: David Silver, Jason Rhody, Tanya Clement, George Williams, Lisa Rhody, Jarom MacDonald, Kevin S. Hawkins, Amanda Visconti, Porter Olsen. And I know I'm forgetting many. We support graduate students in a couple of different ways. The first is through a dedicated dissertation fellowship, available each year on a competitive basis. This opens the door to some project consulting for graduate students, while also furnishing the most important commodity: time. The second is through opportunities for paid project work, the nature of which varies from highly technical to project management and event programming. Perhaps most importantly, we strive to be an intellectual hub that brings graduate students from different departments together, for our weekly Digital Dialogues talks and other events.

We're currently in the final phase of seeking approval for a Graduate Certificate in Digital Studies, which is long overdue here. The Certificate will be co-administered by MITH, and will allow us to further integrate graduate teaching into the day-to-day life of the center.

6. What are some of the difficulties in creating or developing projects such as those at the MITH at a large institution? What are some of the benefits (as opposed to doing it independently or with an organization like THATcamp)? Does it make it more accessible or inaccessible in your opinion?

There's a lot one can say here, but one of the most interesting challenges we're addressing right now has to do with the stewardship of our legacy projects, some of which are nearly a decade and a half old! See this blog post by my colleague Trevor Munoz for a more detailed discussion: http://mith.umd.edu/stewarding-digital-humanities-work-on-the-web-at-mith/.

7. Following up on the previous question I am wondering about the MITH's policies on open access and publications. It is a topic I am interested in, particularly in seeing how digital humanities enables collaboration through open access and community. Looking through the website I saw that white papers and reports were available; however I did not necessarily find specific outcome publications. What is relationship between the MITH and open access? Do you see the work at the MITH as part of an alternative form of research to traditional means (please elaborate)?

Pretty much anything MITH does, from actual project work to the kinds of white papers and reports you mention will be available under open access protocols. We also regularly deposit material in our institutional repository here at Maryland. This is a responsibility we take very seriously, not least because of our publicly funded mission. As regards publications, while we do not mandate open access venues—because we're not in the business of telling individuals where and how to disseminate their scholarship—I think it's fair to say that most everyone associated with MITH would tend to gravitate toward them anyway.

8. In thinking about open access as a type of disruptive or subversive space that allows for communication between those outside the academy and those working within, I have been interrogating how open access

connects to new infrastructures. How does the MITH support or perhaps even create new infrastructures? How are the MITH's labs or spaces incorporated into educational material and institutional structures?

We're not a public space, though many of our events are open to the public. We do get a fair amount of walk-in traffic, owing both to our locale within one of the campus's main libraries and the collection of vintage computers that has a tendency to catch people's eyes. But we couldn't do our work if we were interacting with the general campus population all day long. That said, we're always on the alert for opportunities to integrate what we do into the institution's core teaching and research missions. Not necessarily for purposes of "disruption" but rather so as to take what we do best and allow others to utilize the unique resources and expertise MITH has accrued.

Let me give you an example or two. Like the Media Archaeology Lab (whose holdings have far eclipsed ours) we maintain a sizeable collection of working vintage hardware and software: Apples, Macs, Osborne, Kaypro, Tandy, Amiga, and much more. We also have advanced forensic computing resources in-house as a result of some of our past grant funded work. We've therefore become something of an unofficial campus go-to for people who have legacy media, and we have helped a number of individuals with compelling needs for data recovery.

My favorite episode in this regard involved the pioneering digital artist Paul Zelevansky, who Lori Emerson has also written about. Paul did his first work on an Apple II computer, but was left with a stack of 5¼ floppies when that original machine died. He's based in Pittsburgh, which is not too far, and had heard about MITH from a mutual friend; so he drove down and we spent an afternoon together, with me helping him to recover a copy of his most important digital work, SWALLOWS, which no one, Paul included, had seen in many years. We were able to do that because it was compatible with our general research mission.

On a much larger scale, we also became the home of the Deena Larsen and Bill Bly Electronic Literature Collections, big, messy, but very important hybrid collections of computers, software, data, physical papers, ephemera, and much more related to early hypertext and e-lit. We were able to accept these collections at a time when our traditional library Special Collections would not have been able to do so—again, our freedom and flexibility to pursue projects in keeping with our research agenda gave us the agility to do what other institutional units could not. Nowadays I use those collections in my electronic literature courses, and students have the opportunity to fire up a copy of *Marble Springs* on one of Deena Larsen's original Mac SE computers. I don't know how disruptive that finally is, but they seem to think it's pretty special.