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The Playful Epistemology of Digital Representation

Johanna Drucker's 2009 monograph *Speclab*, subtitled *Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing,* makes a theoretically well-grounded argument for the use of digital research technology in the humanities in way that resists a silent takeover of scholarship by analytical philosophy and formal logic. Drucker promotes the speculative engagement of humanists with computing as an alternative to the pragmatism that she argues has become characteristic of digital humanities: "As one of my digital humanities colleagues used to remark, we would go into the technical discussions as deconstructed relativists and come out as empirically oriented pragmatists (xiv)." Drucker mobilizes the philosophical resources of critical theory and deconstruction in a pleasantly playful way. The patron of her endeavour is the 'Patacritical Demon (based on 'pataphysics, the "science of exceptions and of imaginary solutions", as sketched by Alfred Jarry), a subversive entity embodying the central deconstructionist idea of reading as a performance that creates text in a situated interplay of reader subjectivity, material literary document, and discourse. The demon is meant to remind humanists to resist digital technology's alluring offer to simply "display" literary documents in their seeming self-identity, and instead of adopting information science approaches to computing, strive to create genuinely humanistic alternatives. Drucker's own background in visual arts/graphic design becomes apparent in her sustained emphasis on the potential of visual aesthetic expression as a guiding principle of epistemology. Drucker introduces the concept of *aesthesis* as an alternative to *aesthetics*. While aesthetics tends to develop systematic theories of finite aesthetic objects, aesthesis is about the generative role of aesthetic objects - which encompass also the visual elements of digital interfaces − in the process of knowledge creation. Aesthesis, she argues, can be a way of consciously levering the material mediation of subjective perception in the creation of knowledge, rather than bending experience according to pre-established notions.

Drucker exemplifies her tenets by narrating the development of a variety of specific projects undertaken at the University of Virginia's Speclab. There is, for example, the project Temporal Modeling, which aimed to develop a graphical language to express the subjective perception of time as experienced by individuals. The idea was to adopt an approach that does not start from readily marked up XML[1], e.g. literary documents unfolding a narrative over time, and then looks for ways the temporal information contained in those documents can be displayed. Instead, the project team's first step was to conceptualize means for the graphic representation of subjective perceptions of time *before* developing a data structure. The team came up with features such as a now-slider, the idea of timelines literally warped by feelings of anticipation or anxiety, and a range of visual markers to denote emotional inflection of time. While not all of these features proved to be implementable in the actual application prototype, it is characteristic of the spirit of SpecLab that participants were given ample opportunity to experiment. Another Speclab project, Ivanhoe, is a game that has the idea of reading as a meaning-generating performance hard-wired into its conceptual framework. Starting with a given literary document (originally, Walter Scott's novel of the same name), the game allows players to assume the role of fictional personae, appearing in a literary work or invented on the fly, and speak in their right. Game-play is divided into moves: players can "call" further documents (textual, visual, or audio) and use them to elaborate the role they assumed. This might lead to situations in which the persona Mary Margaret, a zealous student, challenges the textual integrity of a poem by Lord Byron, which in turn was called by the persona Girl poet after subjecting Byron's text to a Feminist re-writing. The result of the game is an enactment of the emergent production of text through the social activity of readers. The conceptual difference between SpecLab's approach and the kinds of data services provided by large digital humanities infrastructure projects is striking.

While overall well-received, some aspects of Drucker's book have drawn (moderate) criticism. For one, Drucker's apparent unawareness of the state-of-the-art in Artificial Intelligence and Natural Language Processing[2]. Recent achievements in these fields apparently provide digital means to preserve much of the complexity of the phenomena that humanists study, thus mitigating some of Drucker's claims about the normalizing pressure of computational disambiguation. On this notion it should be remembered, however, that Drucker does not locate the 'villain' in the principle of formal logic or computational protocols per se, but in the power that justifies decisions about administration and management of cultural and imaginative life on "presumptions of objectivity (5)." It is not computational technology, then, that imposes a certain philosophical approach to

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[1] Extensible markup language. A set of rules of how to encode documents in machine-readable form, recommended by the World Wide Web Consortium.
[2] Roque, "Book review: Johanna Drucker's SpecLab: Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing."

represetation, but it is the administrative and managerial context that inscribes and constrains the ways computational technology is used. Probably not least because of its reputation and financial means, Speclab at the University of Virginia seems to provide a relatively safe space for humanists to speculatively engage with digital technology – something that might well be considered a luxury in many less well-endowed projects. Another reviewer has pointed out Drucker's choice not to touch on the implications of social media for reading/writing in digital spaces[3]. In this regard, the narrowly circumscribed institutional framework in which SpecLab projects are undertaken may indeed provide a perhaps overly ideal situation. It would for example be interesting to hear Drucker's take on how to preserve the partial, situated, experimental, emergent approach to knowledge representation in the context of e-science's emphasis on distributed collaboration and data sharing.

In summary, Drucker provides an inspiring account of the way digital technology in the humanities can be used to formulate and answer "new" research questions. This way is strikingly different from how the "newness" of digitally enhanced scholarship is usually construed, namely, as the application of statistical methods on a very large empirical scale. The biggest achievement of Drucker's work, however, may be to promote an experimental approach to organizing work at the intersection of literary theory and computing, an approach that acknowledges the possibility of failure for the sake of reducing the constraints on the projected output of digital scholarship.

Works Cited

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[3] Engberg, "Speculative Aesthetics: Whereto the Humanities?"