

The Graceful Degradation Survey: Managing Digital Humanities Projects Through Times of Transition and Decline

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Transition and decline are pressing issues for scholars in the digital humanities, as our projects tend to be both collaborative and open-ended. Project staff relocate, reestablish themselves in new areas, or retire, even as funding and institutional support comes and goes. How are projects to be designed so that they can be maintained, or maintain themselves, through periods of change? How might projects be designed in a way that takes periods of transition and possible decline into account from the very start?

These are some of the issues we sought to explore in undertaking "Graceful Degradation: Managing Digital Projects in Times of Transition and Decline," a wide-ranging survey of the digital humanities community, in the summer of 2009. Our intent was to investigate how the community currently deals with these problems and, using our survey data – which also included some demographic information and measures of perceived levels of support and impact of various kinds of change – to make recommendations on how we, as a community, might improve the current approach.

This presentation will provide a detailed look at the outcomes of the "Graceful Degradation" survey, and propose some initial recommendations. (Full recommendations will be published in a separate article.)

The survey was designed in consultation with statistical analysis staff at the Scholars' Lab, University of Virginia Library and unveiled

at Digital Humanities 2009 in College Park, Maryland and at Digital Resources for the Humanities and Arts (DRHA 2009) in Belfast, Northern Ireland. It was conducted online between July and September 2009. There were 102 completed surveys, representing 114 discrete projects. Some of our findings are presented below.

The vast majority (76%) of Graceful Degradation respondents come from "large universities with a research emphasis," but teaching colleges, cultural heritage institutions, and commercial ventures were also represented. Most respondents have worked in project management or digital research and development efforts in the humanities for 2-10 years, but 35% of respondents have been engaged in this activity for more than a decade.

Respondents were asked to rate perceived levels of support for the digital humanities at their home institutions, including (as separate queries) general support, support for collaborative activities, local funding and cost-share opportunities, support by higher administration, department-level or local support, and support for project management and grant-writing.

64% of respondents had experienced the decline of a project or had weathered a period of difficult transition. 29% of respondents indicated a sense that digital humanities projects are more likely to decline or suffer these difficult transitions at their institutions than at others.

Participants were asked to respond in detail regarding their experiences with a particular project that suffered decline or a difficult transition. The following percentages apply to the primary or to the single project which survey participants addressed. 37% of respondents identified themselves as project lead or principal investigator (PI) for the project they discussed in depth. 29% of respondents self-identified as project managers, and other respondents fell into categories such as "dedicated, project-specific support staff," "support staff on loan from other units," "graduate or undergraduate research staff," "post-docs or faculty collaborators."

38% of projects discussed fell into the category of "content creation, digitization, and archive-building," but other categories (including

software development, online community-building activities, online journals and other publications, and creation of support infrastructure for digital scholarship) were also represented. Predominant disciplines and time periods addressed were literary and textual studies and digital history, from the modern or early modern era. More projects (31% and 24% respectively) identified an academic department and a library or museum as their primary institutional home, with 23% primarily housed in a digital humanities center.

Of projects that had experienced decline or difficult transition, most were identified as still "ongoing and active" (51%), with 26% abandoned or dormant, and 15% and 8% either complete or "just getting started," respectively.

Participants were asked about funding sources for these projects (generally via institutional support or "external public funding") and understood length of funding or support. Projects treated were generally funded for 2-3 years, with no possibility of renewal, but often (in 21% of cases) the length of funding or support was "unclear." That said, 75% of respondents considered their project's funding to be "reliable and clear in scope."

Most respondents undertook the treated project with clear plans for supporting it beyond an initial funding period, but most projects also ultimately "differed in scope or definition from early plans." In 68% of cases, participants had identified both short-term and long-term goals for their projects, but conscious use of "specific project management techniques or tools" and "risk management strategies" was a rarity. Anecdotal responses treated the impact of varying levels of planning or lack of planning on digital projects.

The majority of projects (55%) experienced no negative impact due to staff overturn whatsoever. For projects that did, we asked participants to rate the negative impact of overturn of six different categories of staff members and collaborators. Survey participants also rated the broad impact of their projects in a dozen areas, such as "scholarly inquiry in a particular field," "my own pedagogical practice," and "the professional advancement of my collaborators."

Participants were additionally given the opportunity to respond to several prose prompts, and to add more contextual information to many of the questions for which we had devised statistical measures. They summarized the reasons for the project decline or difficult transitions they experienced, and offered formulae for their successes. Some respondents identified nuanced issues with intellectual property and open source as contributing factors. We plan to summarize these rich responses and reveal the results of qualitative data analysis at the conference.

67% of respondents indicated that their personal views and practices have evolved as a result of experiencing a period of difficult transition or the decline of digital humanities project, but in only 32% of cases did they feel that the views or practices of their local institutions or the larger academic community have evolved in response to such experiences like these.

67% of respondents also indicated that they had experienced what they would consider a "phase of successful transition" in their digital projects, and offered anecdotal advice as to what made that possible.

At Digital Humanities 2010, we will summarize and offer some visualizations and analysis of these findings and others, and we will address the extensive qualitative data that were collected from participants in free-form text responses. (Several participants granted us permission to quote their responses directly. We will anonymize and summarize responses from others.) We will also draw conclusions about avenues for future research and – more importantly – identify areas for future action on the part of institutions supporting digital humanities projects and professional societies representing the digital humanities community.

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