Flying to the moon, or flying too close to the sun: failure in the Digital Humanities

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Launching rockets to the moon was always known and acknowledged to be hugely risky. The rocket might not launch, it might launch and then burst into flames, bits might fall off and that is just the beginning of a series of serious risks to do with flight into outer space. Icarus is too ambitious and flies too close to the sun, with the well-known result. Why is it then that pioneering work in the Digital Humanities (DH) – being equally high risk as a rocket launch, and (mostly in hindsight) equally over ambitious as Icarus – is hushed up by actors and institutions when it fails? It is surprising how difficult it is to share hard-won wisdom regarding DH, even in the context of scholarly and academic institutions, when it involves failure. Yet this cone of silence and evasion impedes progress, without question, yet it is not clear at all what can be done about this issue if institutional figures feel they cannot talk about it.

While scrambling to realise the potential of the truly impressive technical advances and affordances of the digital, and looking forward with excitement to the next big thing – Artificial Intelligence? – that will make current projects obsolete, the awkwardness, the clumsiness, of the process, and progress persist. One might have oversight of a digital endeavour, but the fact is that all too often, one never has control of it – nor is it clear who does have control, either de facto or on paper, in an institutional setting. Art historians of the pre-digital generation in the USA were unaccustomed to the collaboration so necessary for the digital. Support for collaborative research projects, which are still more prevalent in academic structures in Europe than in America, is, however, now changing mindsets in the USA. But until only a few years ago, digital was uncharted territory for most art historians. Those who were being trained in this new field tended to learn in, and operate in, their separate realms, speaking a different language which often endowed familiar words with new meanings. Digital collaborators produced – had been taught to produce – plans that appeared to be impressively well organised. The figure of the project manager was introduced, initially inspiring confidence. But often the plans barely corresponded to anything in real life. Responsibilities were dispersed across a team. The project manager was not a leader. Who was really in charge of the project? Who was accountable for making it work? Were decisions mindfully made and carried out – as the meticulous plans suggested – or did things just happen with solutions improvised on the fly in response? Was that what was meant by the often-used term "iterative"? When things fell apart, why? Was nobody responsible? How could it have been made to work better? Is it just a juggernaut with a veneer of organisation? Fundamental questions were at play. Should institutional priority be

tools or research? Should digital technology serve the field's current needs, or should it expand potential and research goals?

How often has it been said that, to make progress, risks must be taken and failure might be the outcome? Despite this brave declaration, who was genuinely willing to admit the setbacks and failures of digital projects and learn from them? Assessments were rarely carried out. In numerous scholarly and academic institutions, very expensive, labour-intensive failures were "managed", often transformed into lowered expectations. Disappointing deliverables were quietly scaled down or repackaged. Projects were brazened out or waited out for so long that people simply stopped expecting promised results. Projects were institutionally forgotten about as leadership changed.

Cultural challenge was experienced often by members of boards for international collaborative projects, especially those born on paper in an analogue age, then converted into a database in the 1980s, and in the early twenty-first century aiming at bringing a project into the digital age. IT firms were invited to present plans for badly needed digital revamping. Clearly anticipating admiring reception, they bristled when board members pushed back. When a senior scholar objected to changes that would no longer allow searches that were relevant for their research, the smart, articulate lead IT developer brushed these concerns aside, arrogantly explaining that the structure of the database should guide queries, as if the researcher's own questions were the wrong ones. There would be no bending of the data structure or user interface to pander to the desires of content experts. It was shocking to witness IT experts, drawing their power from a knowledge base inaccessible to the art historians, bullying their clients, putting the scholars, for whom a database was a black box, on the back foot. Despite everyone sharing good faith and the desire for the project to succeed, mistrust clouded the room. The encounter was a sharp warning about the cultural imbalance in the process.

Discontinuity in institutional leadership was often an issue, resulting in the failure of DH projects. The establishment of pioneering institutes and projects whose mission was to apply computing to art history, characterised early endeavours of the 1980s and 1990s, only to be disbanded a decade or so later because new directors had other ideas. In 2011, the Kress Foundation commissioned a report, *Digital Art History, a Community Assessment*, which concluded that the field was lagging behind. Prominent funders and institutions quickly responded to this embarrassing judgment with heavy investments in the digital with mixed results. Even as dozens of small and large digital projects unfolded across the field, some highly touted and expensive endeavours quietly melted away.

Yet again, it was leadership, rather than technology, that caused unhelpful disruption to projects, here illustrated by a specific case, as recounted by Richard Woodfield:

> When I was made our School's research professor back in 1999, my first act was to create a School Research website documenting the various activities of its staff. I employed an ex- fine art student who was a very talented designer (Graham CopeKoga), and his website actually won a national prize

> for innovation and appeal (Heist award). We then got a new VC, who decided that the university needed a new corporate image. Our website was wiped out by the university's IT people. All that innovation gone. Needless to say, I retired early.[1]

Another example of leadership, rather than technology, causing unhelpful disruption to projects, for example, is when an institution would decide to consolidate and centralise digital operations. Consolidation would, in theory, eliminate the notable inefficiencies, duplications, and lack of coordination of such an arrangement. By centralising all developers, digitization specialists, UX designers, project managers etc., rather than having their own dedicated IT staff for projects, different departments effectively became *clients* of central IT services, requesting these for each project. One could analyse at length the theoretical advantages of such centralisation, but it is fair to say that in practice it engendered extensive negative repercussions and unintended consequences. Major projects could be halted in mid-air for a couple of years while the central services tried to work out the kinks. Projects thus were interrupted or considerably slowed down, as was the development of open-source software platform. Successful collaborative teams were disbanded. Talented developers left and it proved difficult to fill the many vacant positions quickly. Such restructuring and subsequent disruption to whole organisations was widespread and similar situations unfolded in many similar institutions. It is not easy to implement a coherent digital strategy, to carry out projects or to integrate technical units into existing bureaucracies. When problems of efficiency, communication, cost, morale etc. have arisen with the digital, when developers, scholars, editors, and publishers blame each other for slow or poor results, institutions frequently try to solve the problem by changing leadership and reorganising. Sometimes this has led to improvement, but in many cases not. When leadership changed, promises were forgotten, projects were stalled or shelved, no longer supported, and staffing, funding and accountability became complicated. New leaders tended to prioritise new projects with which they were identified, while existing projects lost momentum, ended in frustration, came to nothing. To recognise this as a common pattern is, perhaps, to begin to understand how to manage digital integration differently and more effectively over time.

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[1] Graham CopeKoga is an author, publisher, and University lecturer who lives in England. He graduated with honours in Fine Art from the Nottingham Trent School of Art and Design. He specialises in new media production with a strong focus on website accessibility. Graham worked as a web site designer at the Nottingham Trent University. In 2004, he moved to Japan. On his return to the United Kingdom, Graham founded Wabi Sabi Press, and currently works at the University of Cambridge, he is also a visiting Professor at Fukuoka University in Japan, where he teaches website design in the Faculty of Economics. Visit his website at grahamcopekoga.com.