

# Digital Humanities 1981–2021: A personal timeline

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Future generations of Humanists will likely have no clue of how the Digital Humanities developed so key recollections are here set out in a personal timeline that perhaps can serve as a reference in the future for historiography as experienced by an art and architectural historian. This consideration is made in the light of teaching and trying to explain why it was not a foregone conclusion that Renaissance would 'succeed' Gothic, or why Renaissance 'ought' to be adopted in preference to Gothic. In the 1990s, this issue was approached by telling the tale of Betamax versus VHS.

In 1974 Sony's prototype videotape recording system called 'Beta' was shown to other electronics manufacturers, who were expected to back this single format. But JVC decided to go with its own format. The rest is history. The VHS open (non-proprietary) format defeated the Betamax format, and at the same time became a classic marketing case study because VHS spent much more on advertising, despite its much poorer technical quality. Sony's attempt to dictate an industry standard thus backfired. This example was used to suggest the analogy of why Venice did not adopt Renaissance style until much later than other cities: it had a perfectly good Gothic stylistic tradition which it preferred.

Since 2010 the choice of an example had to change as students in the last decade do not really know anything much about Beta and VHS. The new example used, unsurprisingly is Apple's iPhone versus Android, and why some people prefer to acquire one, and others the competition's product. It may seem a somewhat silly analogy, yet, using a contemporary example does jump start students thinking about the issue.

**1983** my last year at school and my father, a civil servant and economist, has purchased an IBM personal computer (first released in late 1981), on which I learn to type up and print out my final essays, as well as save them onto an 8-inch floppy disk (later to be reduced to 5¼ and 3½ inches).

**1985** in a student flat going to Melbourne University, without parental computer, fortunately the Student Union had created a student computing centre with 10 computers (10! For 17,000 students) on which one could type up essays. Those were the years of typing up an entire essay and trying to save it without success: back to the drawing board, so to speak, lesson learnt: save every five minutes back then (no auto-save).

**1987** hired two days a week working in the George Paton Gallery, part of the Student Union at the University of Melbourne, hanging artworks, but also as Editorial Assistant of the new contemporary art magazine being launched by the Director: *Agenda*, very cleverly combining her agenda with her gender wars. The first issues were finished in analogue, cutting and pasting typeset so that it could be published. Some months later a miracle appeared in the form of Quark, a digital publishing program, and suddenly we had begun: digital design for publication. (QuarkXPress is a [desktop publishing](#) software for creating and editing complex page layouts in a [WYSIWYG](#) (What You See Is What You Get) environment. It runs on [macOS](#) and [Windows](#). It was first released by [Quark, Inc.](#) in 1987 and is still owned and published by them).

**1988** a heavenly internship at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice which, in theory, ought to have involved selling tickets and attending the bag deposit, as well as guarding the paintings from overly curious visitors who always wanted to stick their fingers onto the Salvador Dali. The director comes up from his basement office and asks if anybody knows how to use an IBM computer because the annual report needs to be prepared. All the posh New Yorkers have vacant looks, so the kangaroo from Melbourne says yes and gets to work in the office for three months, preparing a multimedia annual report, something probably never before seen by the trustees of the museum.

**1990** last year of degree, which has taken far too long, hired to be a researcher at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (now RMIT University). Task is to create a database for cataloguing architectural drawings. All of us understand that this is the way forward, but none of us know what we are doing. Two years are spent deciding on and working up the individual criteria and, if I remember rightly, two or perhaps three drawings are catalogued, before we realise it would take a million years to catalogue drawings in such detail and, in any case, we would never have all the answers to all the criteria. Project abandoned.

**1992** head off in the second part of the year to do a PhD at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. Time-travel into the past. No computers, no databases, no anything. Supreme card catalogues of photographs and books, entirely up-to-date. Armed with first Mac, dark grey with an external floppy-disk drive, pumping in research information day-by-day, in the North Library of the old British Library, where scholars such as Jennifer Montagu FBA would look at us younger researchers and our computers with bewilderment.

**1993** for a year now, every Sunday evening, I have spent two to three hours saving and backing-up my thesis onto a series of floppy disks. As they fill up, there is a whirring and gurgling and then they are spat out, at which point a new one needs to be inserted, all the while holding one's breath that it will take up where the previous one left off. No way of knowing or checking. There was the weekly back-up, the monthly back-up, and – God Forbid – the old back-up, which would have meant retyping way too much.

**1994** at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome: no sign of digital anything. Card catalogues, books on shelves, photographs: the state of the art back in 1995 when I handed in my doctorate, and now it's completely changed. I was the last minder of Richard Krautheimer (1897–1994) who was still dictating texts to his secretary up until the last weeks before he died.

**1995** can any millennial even begin to understand how difficult it was to print, front and back, the pages of a PhD thesis in 1995? It took me the best part of a week in the basement of the Courtauld with a stack of floppies on one of the two computers provided for students. Colour illustrations had to be printed separately at a copy shop, where they cost one pound a page in 1995, so I was stuck with a bill for 90 pounds just for these, for the three copies of the thesis I had to have printed.

**1996** begin working as a junior lecturer at the Mackintosh School of Architecture, part of the Glasgow School of art: computer laboratories abound, printers galore, and even my first ever email (in hindsight, thank goodness neither email or cell phones existed – at least in the academic world – when I was doing my PhD: I have no idea how today's candidates manage). I had written a couple of book reviews for the *Sixteenth Century Journal* while a PhD student: printed up and sent via snail mail, page proofs duly returned, corrected and sent back (four to six months in total). Then my first opportunity to send a review as a file attached to an email. Being not a dinosaur, but not understanding in the least how such a thing could be possible, the review was duly sent and within four days page proofs arrived by return email. This is when I learned to do line corrections within an email.

**1998** appointed assistant director of the British School at Rome, one of the foreign research institutes of the British Academy. Enthusiastic bursar asks me what I require, and I reply: a state-of-the-art computer. The over-the-top tech guy orders something fabulously expensive and wonderful, except that it is IBM compatible and I have to time travel back fifteen years to re-learn all those function numbers and buttons etc.

**1999** those were the years when IT experts came into your office and updated your computer, not like the DIY (Ryanair model) of today. He managed to delete my address book with over 500 useful contacts in it. Work is now by email, but research still not. First web-site established for the BSR: very clunky and very soon out of date, like most sites. Much time over the next three years will be dedicated to trying to progress this, or at least to survive not sink.

**2000** first book published by Cambridge University Press, one of their last that was not done with a PDF. Final corrections done by fax! BSR, with Mellon money digitises all its early, mid- and late-nineteenth-century glass plate negatives, in a pioneering initiative. There are many doubts about scholars still wanting to inspect the originals but in 22 years nobody has so far made such a request. It takes about

one year to collect photographic prints and get written permission for my book with CUP.

**2001** first publication proofs arrive as PDFs: we have entered the digital world of publishing. They still have to be printed and corrected by hand.

**2002** join *Burlington Magazine* in London as editor: on the cusp of digital but still a lot of analogue contributors. Handwritten submissions by Michael Hearst that the secretary has to type up. Some colour images come in as fotocolors with grey and colour scales included, others start coming in as digital files with no scale and no way of working out what was correct, nor how to correct them by upping/lowering yellow/blue/green/red scales. A major digital step is taken for the Humanities: I sign the contract with Jstor of the Mellon Foundation, for the digitisation of the entire run of the *Burlington*, from 1901 to the present, with a moveable embargo on the last five years. Negotiated entirely by my predecessor, Caroline Elam, *Burlington* becomes the first art history journal to sign up to this game-changing digital initiative. The *Burlington* used to make £10,000 a year on photocopying articles and sending them out in the post to people: this paid for the secretary. And so everyone involved was a bit nervous: should we go on this J store thing, but what exactly will it be and will it work? What helped, and what is interesting in the context of institutions facing mass digitisation, was that, in this instance, JSTOR had acquired an entire run of the *Burlington* from the first issue to the last, had had it all disbound. They had literally taken it apart page by page, and they had scanned it all for us because they realised there were only three people in editorial at the *Burlington* and it has to come out every month. So, they presented the *Burlington* with this gift, which was fantastic, and the whole thing was scanned and went online. And, in fact, we started earning more money from it being on JSTOR because most people only knew about fairly recent articles. But if you were going to work on Cezanne, let's say, you put his name into JSTOR and it came up with articles from the *Burlington* from 1904, from 1906, by people like Roger Fry. And so suddenly we got many, many more clicks and downloads and ended up making quite a lot of money from it. But it also made the *Burlington*, which was looking old fashioned, suddenly look rather innovative. And to realise the depth of what it had published over 100 years. And the other great thing that was important, and I think absolutely farsighted, was that the entire issue was scanned, including all the advertisements. So, every painting that was ever advertised in the *Burlington* for sale by Christie's or Sotheby's or anybody else was included together with price estimates and attributions, many of which have obviously changed over time. But this was 20 years ago and yet they created the right infrastructure, and it still works today in 2022.

**2003** at I Tatti, Harvard University's Renaissance study centre, bequeathed to them by Bernard Berenson upon his death in 1959. Library catalogues are, of course, digital, but the fototeca remains stubbornly analogue: at least in this case with a reason: all of Berenson's annotations are in pencil on the reverse and so need to be seen in person.

**2004** at I Tatti, now preparing to start teaching in the Italian university system in the fall. Possessor of 3000 glass-plated slides from my Glasgow years, I offer them to all and sundry, but nobody wants them. Then I say: 'I'll bin them' only to hear 'Oh no but you mustn't'. Two more weeks where they sit in the bin for all to see but nobody wants them. Finally, they have been disposed of and a generous Canadian colleague gives me several lessons in how to make powerpoint presentations for my forthcoming classes.

**2009** returning to Glasgow for a conference on Art Historiography organised by Richard Woodfield, I am invited to be part of the founding editorial board. The journal will be published twice yearly online, exclusively digital, without costs for contributors and fully indexed and open access. A two-month fellowship towards the end of the year at CASVA, the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, at the National Gallery of Washington: amazing views of the Capitol from our I.M. Pei designed offices, books delivered from the Library of Congress, but not much evidence of digital initiatives. The main research project of the Director, Elisabeth Cropper, together with Lorenzo Pericolo, was a critical edition of Carlo Cesare Malvasia's *Felsina Pittrice: The Lives of the Bolognese Painters*. So far, the five volumes issues between 2012 and 2022 have a total cost of €1,210, have over 3,356 pages and goodness knows what total weight and shipping cost. Compared to our digital initiative, I was somewhat astonished by how old-fashioned this project appeared to be.

**2008** Academia.edu is founded and, in the decade that follows, slowly but surely, I deposit all of my published chapters and articles there. I can refer my students to it. It is, however, deeply problematical because, despite its .edu domain, it is instead a for profit site. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academia.edu>).

**2013** enjoyed a lovely fellowship at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, but found it easier to download *Burlington* articles on JSTOR in my office, with its gorgeous views out to the sea, rather than 'trekking' 300 metres to the originals in the stacks. The Getty was in the full throws of a plethora of exciting digital initiatives, leading the field.

**2016** Upload all my publications onto the Italian Ministry of the University website where they become part of a national repository of all published research by academics working in Italy.

**2020** Begin teaching my classes online from home as a response to the pandemic.

**2022** Japan declares 'War' on floppy disks  
(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/01/japan-digital-minister-declares-war-on-floppy-discs>)

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