

## **Acts of Translation: Digital Humanities and the Archive Interface**

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From the successes of Project Bamboo to the formation of an Office for Digital Humanities at the National Endowment for the Humanities, myriad institutions, humanists and technologists have recently come together to develop standards for collaborating in digital spaces. This shared commitment across multiple disciplines has led many to describe Digital Humanities as a discipline in its own right, encompassing aspects of the library sciences, computer sciences and, of course, the humanities.<sup>1</sup>

Yet notably underrepresented within the field are the standards and practices of visual design. As Johanna Drucker has observed,

Many of the digital humanists I've encountered treat graphic design as a kind of accessorizing exercise, a dressing-up of information for public presentation after the real work of analysis has been put into the content model, data structure, or processing algorithm. (Drucker online)

Drucker traces this attitude to the “long-standing tensions between images and text-based forms of knowledge production” within Western philosophy (Drucker online) – a tension iterated in the concept of code and platform as mere containers for, rather than co-producers of, meaning. On a practical level, these boundaries are inscribed onto a division of labor between humanists – “scholars” who produce intellectual content but have few, if any, programming skills – and technologists who encode content without, it is presumed, participating in its production. Although most developers have some

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Lisa Spiro's blog posts on “Digital Humanities in 2008” (<http://digitalscholarship.wordpress.com/2009/02/07/digital-humanities-in-2008-part-i/>),

training in visual design, their skills are often subordinate to the scholar's desired functionalities.

Despite these institutional biases, design<sup>2</sup> – the process of transforming text, images, documents or digital objects into a coherent, useable interface – is an immensely constitutive force within the medium that Digital Humanities operates. As Lev Manovich writes, the human-computer interface (HCI) functions through metaphors of manipulation within a “grammar of meaningful actions that the user can perform on it” (Manovich 69), perhaps best understood as Lakoffian “conceptual metaphors” that transfer the source domain of physical movement onto the virtual space of the screen (see Lakoff Johnson). These conceptual metaphors are established in HCI through design, such that haptic movement in conjunction with visual cues construct a narrative around an underlying data structure. As Jerome McGann points out,

No database can function without a user interface, and in the case of cultural materials the interface is an especially crucial element of these kinds of digital instruments. Interface embeds, implicitly and explicitly, many kinds of hierarchical and narrativized organizations. (McGann 1588)

More than simply organizing materials on a screen, the user interface (UI) transfers meaning between the grammar of HCI and the database or markup language. These mediations -- what we are calling *acts of translation* -- both open and foreclose interpretive possibilities, influencing the way scholars and students relate to the materials they study.

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as well as HASTAC's “Q&A with Brett Boley” (<http://www.hastac.org/node/1934>).

<sup>2</sup> We use the term “design” and “visual epistemology” to mean the organized relationships between the visual components of the page on the screen and their possibilities for interaction to refer to the visible expression within the ontological mode of visual epistemology, a term which we use to indicate ways of knowing that are shaped by visual, as opposed to textual, representation.

At this formative moment in the field of Digital Humanities, this paper seeks to intervene with the question: *how does visual epistemology inform and influence the ways of accessing artifacts (broadly construed) in a digital space?* As Research Assistants for MIT's Hyperstudio, we have helped to design, plan and implement Digital Humanities projects; as scholars and students of art, literature and media, we have used digital archives in our own research. Drawing on these experiences, we explore the ways in which three recent web-based Digital Humanities projects draw on visual conventions and interface design to translate user interactions into archival access. We term these moments of analysis *scenes* -- that is, moments of action within a full-scale play of motivations and actions -- in order to indicate their ability to act as a metonym for the values and goals of the larger project. However, we readily acknowledge the gaps that such a process of analysis produces, particularly within such a small sampling. Each project we mention is different in scope, budget and intent, to name only the most obvious of attributes. Still, by raising, if briefly, specific scenes within a range of projects, we hope to illuminate the broader themes and commonalities that confront visual epistemology in Digital Humanities.

We begin with *NINES*, the *Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-century Electronic Scholarship*, investigating how design facilitates (or precludes) audience accessibility, ease of use and user-generated content. Turning to the Center for History and New Media's *Object of History*, we consider the difficult but important task of aligning visual epistemology with a project's purpose and content. Finally, we conclude with *SFMOMA ArtScope*, created by the firm Stamen Design. As we argue, *SFMOMA ArtScope* takes an innovative approach to visual browsing, thereby reinvigorating the

potential expressive affordances of design in a digital space.

### **Scene 1: The Search Function of *NINES***

To begin, let us explore one of the largest and most prominent Digital Humanities project recently created, *NINES*, the *Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-century Electronic Scholarship*. Funded with over two million dollars from the Mellon Foundation, *NINES* describes itself as having three explicit goals: 1) “to serve as a peer-reviewing body for digital work in the long 19th-century (1770-1920), British and American”; 2) “to support scholars’ priorities and best practices in the creation of digital research materials”; and 3) “to develop software tools for new and traditional forms of research and critical analysis” (*NINES* online).

Toward these ends, the project uses Collex, a tool designed by the Applied Research in ‘Patacritism Group at University of Virginia. Collex cross-searches multiple databases, collecting metadata and digital “objects” (as *NINES* calls them) related to the user’s query in one location. Thus upon entering *NINES*, the user is presented with a single search box in the center of the page and prompted to type her keyword. For this scene, we entered the word ‘DICKENS’.

Collex then returns a list of digital entries, called objects, each accompanied by a thumbnail image (if available) and short-form metadata running down the center of the screen below the phrase “SEARCH RESULTS: 2,969 OBJECTS FOUND.” Through collapsible and expandable dark red facets along the left sidebar -- the only prominent color on the page -- the user can browse her results by “Collections,” “Journals,” “Library Catalogs,” “Presses,” “Projects,” or the relevant subheadings under each of these

categories, such as databases, journal titles, presses or projects. The user can also browse by genre, limit the search to “Free Culture Only” items, or add and subtract additional search terms from the results list. Thus by clicking linked text, the user can drill down into a variety of metadata for Dickens-related scholarly articles in JSTOR, find letters from Matthew Arnold that mention Dickens, or view portraits of Dickens stored in *The Rossetti Archive*.

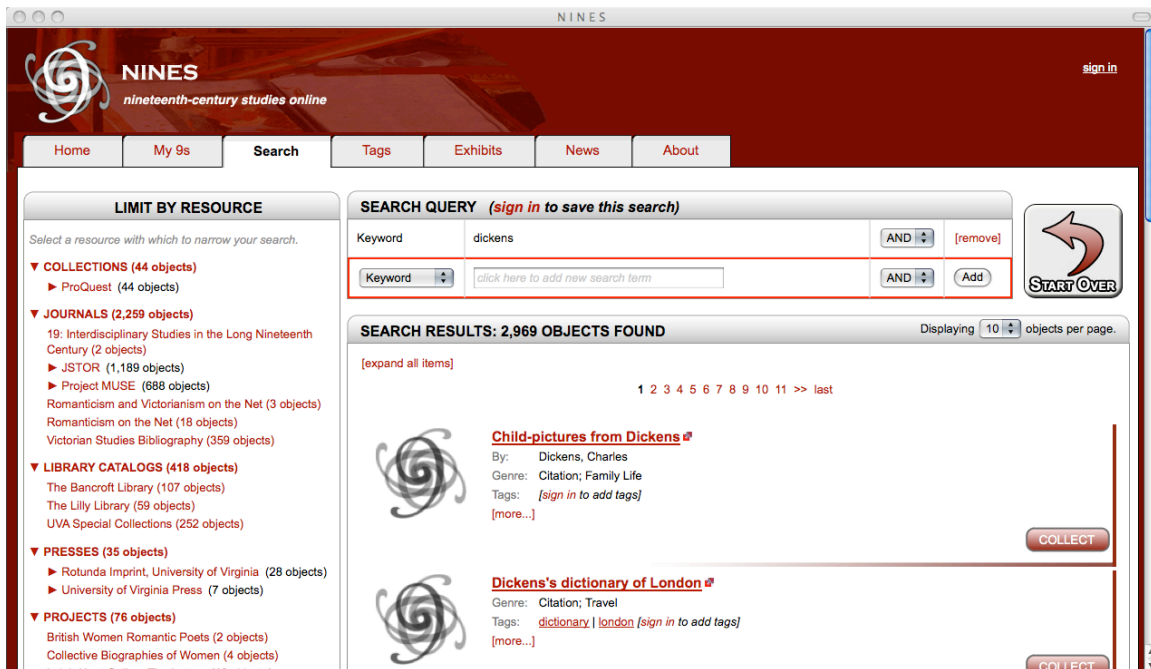


Figure 1: Search results for 'DICKENS' on NINES.org. April 16, 2009.

Although certain aspects of Collex are unique, such as its ability to call materials from multiple, disconnected digital archives, its interface relies on traditional web browsing conventions, including static, tabbed navigation paired with dynamic content. More specifically, Collex’s results page, search categories, faceted browsing and use of short-form metadata mirror the layout and search standards of a typical online library catalog, visually tagging *NINES* as a resource first and foremost for scholars. Indeed, non-scholars would most likely be put off by *NINES*’ text-heavy design and acronyms like JSTOR and Project Muse. In this way, *NINES*’ design decisions reflect its stated goal

of “support[ing] scholars’ priorities and best practices,” accommodating its visual rhetoric to the typical research process of a humanities scholar.

Yet NINES has also chosen to break certain scholarly search conventions. For instance, by calling its results “objects” -- a word repeated at least 77 times on the results page for our ‘DICKENS’ search -- Collex ascribes tangibility and depth to its returns, implying that its collections are digital artifacts to be “collected” and “exhibited” by the user. Yet, in reality, the information that NINES aggregates is quite shallow, most of it only metadata, or information about information. In our ‘DICKENS’ keyword search, over 26% of the total results and 90% of the resources supposed to be only “freely available in their full form” were mere citations; by our count, only around 31 of the 2,969 results, or slightly more than 1%, were what a researcher might expect to be called “objects,” such as digital images, manuscript facsimiles, or full texts. Thus, on the one hand, the use of the term ‘object’, unconventional for a library search, suggests that NINES is more than an online catalogue, connecting it to the practices of museums, physical archives and projects such as Objects of History (explored below). On the other hand, the entire design of NINES’ search page indicates that it’s nothing *but* a catalogue, offering no functionalities beyond browsing, searching and retrieving metadata and hyperlinks. In fact, the ‘objects’ culled by Collex remain roughly as (in)accessible as those in a typical university library, with access granted only to those with institutional privileges.<sup>3</sup> This mistranslation between the perceived intention and the visual

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<sup>3</sup> *NINES* is not unaware of this rather serious problem. To the contrary, the entire project describes its goal as “provid[ing] an open-source and open-content alternative to the commercial databases that currently exist” by “bring[ing] together some of the best [and free] existing resources on the Web,” such as the *Blake Archive*, the *Dickinson Electronic Archives*, and the *Rossetti Archive* (Felluga 314-15). Thus, while NINES includes

epistemology of Collex's search interface may prevent scholars from adopting *NINES*, since it promises more but offers only as much as their university libraries.

## **Scene 2: The Authoring Function of *NINES***

For the more technologically savvy researcher, *NINES* has constructed an alternative mirror design that utilizes user-generated content. From the search results page, logged-in users can tag any object, thereby contributing to a collective description of the materials, which can then be browsed through a filterable tag cloud. This tag cloud is accessed through a separate tab that isolates it from the more traditional search page, with which it has no interaction; in fact, clicking on a tag in the metadata on the search results page takes the user to the "Tags" tab. Users may also privately annotate objects, add them to their personal collections, and create a public (or private) presentation or "exhibit" of their objects by embedding them in linked webpages. Each page must fit one of seven fairly restrictive design templates, navigable through a pop-up outline: "Header;" "Text;" "Illustration then Text;" "Text then Illustration;" "Row of Illustrations;" "Illustration," "Text," "Illustration;" "Text, Illustration," "Text."

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commercial databases such as JSTOR, we presume it intends, as more content becomes available through other projects, to eventually overwhelm them with freely available alternatives. Nonetheless, this tipping point is clearly a long way off.

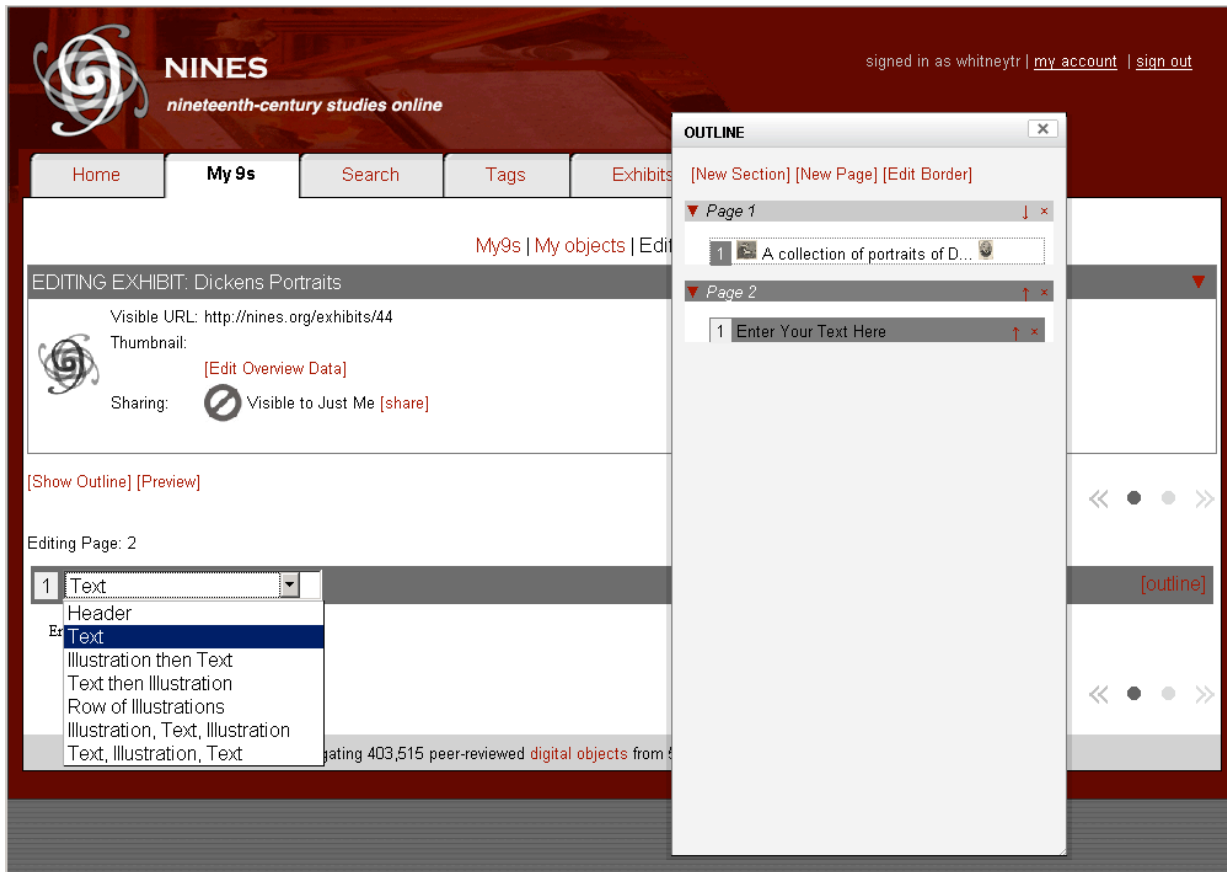


Figure 2: Interface for building an exhibit within NINES.org. April 16, 2009.

Unlike its traditional search page or even its tag cloud, the exhibiting function of Collex is a relatively new feature for scholarly sites; as such, no ready design standards exist within the field. However, many sites outside of the field of Digital Humanities, such as commercial websites, offer usable models for interactive authoring interfaces. For instance, Etsy.com, a popular site for buying and selling handmade items, allows buyers to “curate” exhibits of their favorite items for sale, then implements a form of peer review by color-coding those exhibits with the most page views and comments. Although Etsy’s exhibits are simpler than those in Collex, centered entirely on item images, they are also much easier to use, lowering the barrier of access. Indeed, unlike the physically enclosed (and sometimes barricaded) space of an archive, Digital Humanities sites such as *NINES* exist in a similar space to Etsy.com, sharing the same browser window. As the



humanities move online, we must take advantage of the potential interactions with non-academic publics and the ability to overcome traditional institutional barriers. Sites like *NINES*, for example, are available not only to scholars using Collex for their teaching and research but also to students and fans who, for instance, may simply want to collect and exhibit images of their favorite Victorian authors and texts. Rather than polluting the scholarly function of *NINES*, commercial design conventions can help scholars and non-scholars alike more easily access and create content, opening up more spaces for users to interact with each other and digital material.

From within the field of Digital Humanities, several projects are beginning to create sustainable models for user-generated multimedia content, such as the *US-Iran Relations Project (UIR)* at MIT's HyperStudio.<sup>4</sup> Much like *NINES*, the *US-Iran Relations Project* allows users (mostly a closed scholarly community) to search, annotate and exhibit a wide variety of materials related to a broad theme. In *UIR*'s case, the material centers around the historic diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran. Also like *NINES*, *UIR* uses tabbed navigation and faceted browsing to search and display material conventionally, while also providing a simple timeline visualization for nonconventional browsing. Yet, unlike *NINES*, which allows users to construct "pages" navigated through a cumbersome "outline" (see Figure 2 above) -- linear structures more suited to the medium of the printed page -- *UIR* users may edit event and people entries as wikis, or link these entries to their own narrative interpretation of a particular history that itself is composed within a flexible wiki interface. Though not unique to *UIR* hyperlinks, distinguished visually by color within a wiki entry, signal depth and

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<sup>4</sup> Both authors have worked on this project as Research Assistants.

interconnectedness within the archive. In this way, UIR draws on conventions of now standard web-editing interfaces and the cues of visual epistemology to bring new functionality to humanistic inquiry without compromising the traditional scholarly methods of research, composition and peer-review.

### **Scene 3: Objects in *Object of History***

*Object of History*, created by George Mason University's Center of History and New Media (CHNM), is a project consisting of over 90 individual web-pages and whose intended purpose is "to find a low cost way for students and teachers of U.S. History to have access to the [Smithsonian National Museum of American History]'s collections and the expertise of the curators." (Object online)

As a continuation of this endeavor, the *Object of History* project also developed an open-source software package, Omeka, which is available for download on the CHNM homepage as well as the Object of History homepage. The software allows any user, such as an archivist or museum administrator at a small institution, 1) to create a similar Digital Humanities project based on CHNM's database structure and site architecture 2\_ to develop "a guide to creating object lessons," the explicitly pedagogical component of *Object of History*. Omeka has been created as a shell that will structure any kind of content. For the purposes of this paper, we will not discuss Omeka specifically as a project, but it is important to keep in mind that the *Object of History* project serves as a formula that has and continues to be adopted by Digital Humanists. For this reason, it is all the more crucial to examine how *Object of History* structures its experience.

Upon opening the homepage, a user sees an array of possible links to further

action. Like the table of contents in a book, a user is provided with an overview of the constituent elements and possible paths to pursue. A title on the top left announces the project, “The Object of History: Behind the Scenes with the Curators of the National Museum of American History.” (Object Online) A navigation area on the upper right offers five links, “Guide,” “Objects,” “Forum” and “Activity.” Below and emphasized in larger text is a link to “Teacher Materials and Resources.” Although it is not made evident, the project is divided into two mirror sites with one site created specifically for teachers and another not for teachers, presumably for students.

On either site – student or teacher-- the user’s eye is drawn to the center of the page, where six stylized images are placed side by side. Below each of these cartoon-style images is a text describing what they are. There is a desk, a gold nugget, a dress, a voting machine, a lunch counter, and a short-handled hoe. Below this set of images are four individual shaded text boxes directing the user. Perhaps the most-eye catching element of the page, large numbers direct the order of actions:

1. Browse the GUIDE to doing history with objects.
2. Explore the OBJECTS and their place in our history.
3. Listen to experts DISCUSS the objects.
4. Do the ACTIVITY by curating your own virtual exhibit.

The homepage becomes very much like table of contents to the extent that the possible actions are ordered sequentially. Although one can choose any of these links or the others represented on the page, there a clear indication of a beginning and ending of the experience provided by the project. For this analysis, we will focus on a scene in which the user explores one of the specific objects, in this instance, the Jefferson Desk.

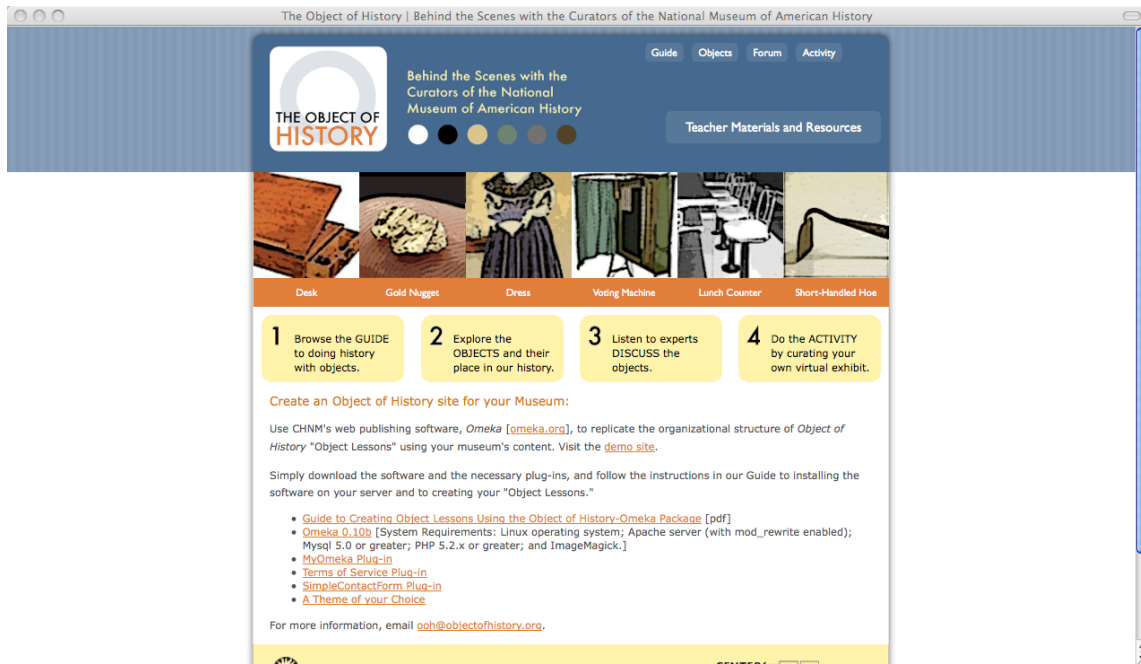


Figure 3: Homepage for Object of History. April 16, 2009.

By clicking on the stylized image of the desk, the user is presented with the Introduction page. On the top right, tabbed navigation indicates the other pages for the object: “Explore,” “Tour,” and “Resources.” The Introduction page itself is composed of two sub-pages; in the first, a brief text on the left side of the page provides information on the object and on the right side, a narrated video introduces the user to the object through accessible language and lively cartoon-animated images of artifacts related to the desk. The second sub-page, titled the “Virtual Object,” consists only of a text with instructions and a three-dimensional model of the desk, suspended in white space, which the user can manipulate 180 degrees by dragging the mouse. There is no visual context to indicate scale. From a visual epistemological view, the empty white space removes and isolates the object from any historical context.

On the other pages of the object, “Explore,” “Tour” and “Resources,” the user may learn more deeply about the object by accessing annotated primary texts, videos,

illustrations or other material artifacts from the museum's collection. The Explore page (and its three sub-pages) provides a series of stylized thumbnails on the right side of the page that when clicked expand to large annotated images of related objects. To the left, a short explanatory text accompanies each series of thumbnails. The Tour page provides a curated selection of these annotated objects, and the Resources page provides short descriptions and hyperlinks in list format to other online resources related to the object or the historical period during which it was created.

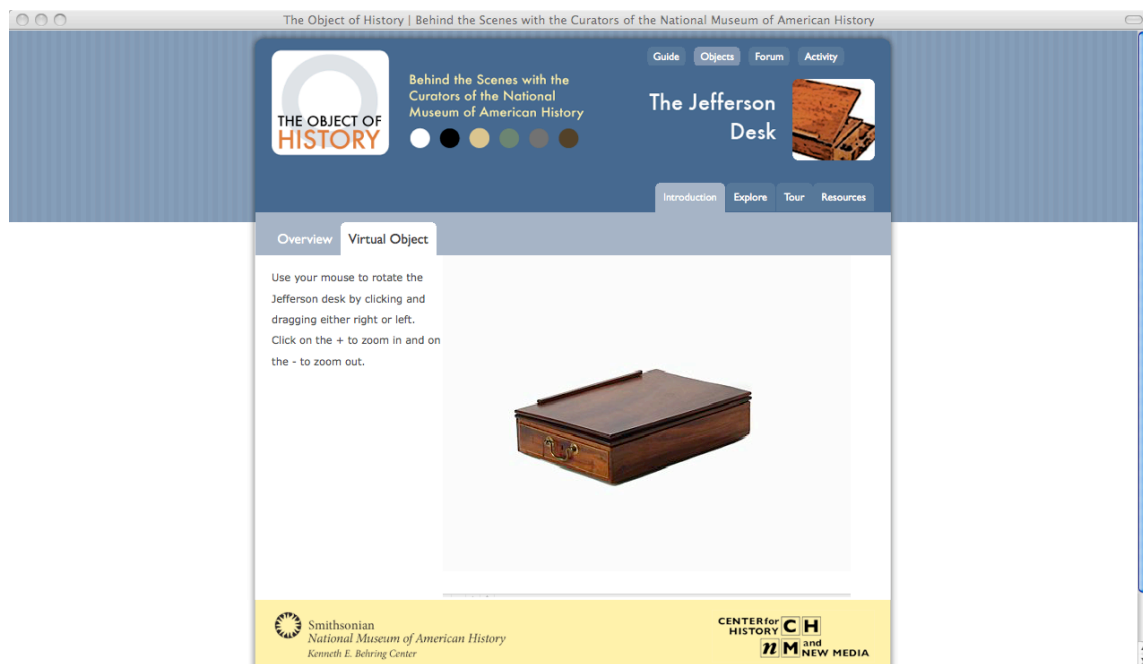


Figure 4: Object page exhibiting the Virtual Object of the Jefferson Desk. April 16, 2009.

Explicitly different from NINES, Object of History has a specific story to tell; in the words of Steven Lubar and Kathleen Kendrick, the authors of the Guide text,

When museums choose not to enshrine and isolate an artifact but instead open it up to new interpretations and different points of view, they provide opportunities to challenge and enhance our understanding of the past ... consider each artifact with its many stories as holding diverse meanings for different people, past and present. Think of them as bits of contested history. (Object online)

The text and videos provided by the site surely provide the user with the information to complete this approach to studying history. However, the design lacks this commitment of purpose. It reflects neither the specificity of the museum nor the historical periods in which the objects are situated. Moreover, the sense that each object exists in a larger collection is obscured by the extensive sub-pages, accessed only by generic tabbed navigation distanced from the content.

Thus, although the text indicates and indeed emphasizes that these objects exist in a specific context, this fact is not expressed in the visual epistemology provided by the design. This is not to suggest that every Digital Humanities project must create an interface that directly corresponds to its form in the physical world. However, to the extent that the visual epistemology provided by the site design does not echo the pedagogical content, this project has not fully taken advantage of the ways in which design may contribute to and influence a user's interpretation and experience of digital objects.

In a recent paper, "User Interface Design Principles for Interaction Design" published in the one of the leading design journals, *Design Issues*, Adream Blair-Early and Mike Zender outline a set of current "best practices" in UI design. Among their conclusions, Blair-Early and Zender point out, "The most apt visual form is one that reflects the nature of the content in a stimulating way" (Blair-Early 103). In discussing the aspects where intellectual and textual foci misalign with design, we are not seeking to criticize or belittle the work that has been done. Our goal, as fellow scholars and creators of Digital Humanities projects, is to point out the possible spaces for innovation, to point out where the modes of old media are still dominating and restricting new media.

#### **Scene 4: Images in *SFMOMA ArtScope***

Finally, we conclude with the discussion of a more unusual Digital Humanities project, *SFMOMA ArtScope* which was designed in collaboration with the for-profit firm, Stamen Design. In our opinion, this project provides one way to take advantage of the affordances of visual epistemology in online digital media.

*SFMOMA ArtScope* was developed as part of a larger initiative at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Explore Modern Art Project, which focused on redesigning the online experience of the museum. Funded by a Museums for America grant from the IMLS and launched in 2008, the Explore Modern Art Project was “designed to encourage greater engagement with modern and contemporary art and with SFMOMA.”<sup>6</sup> Specifically, *SFMOMA ArtScope* is described as

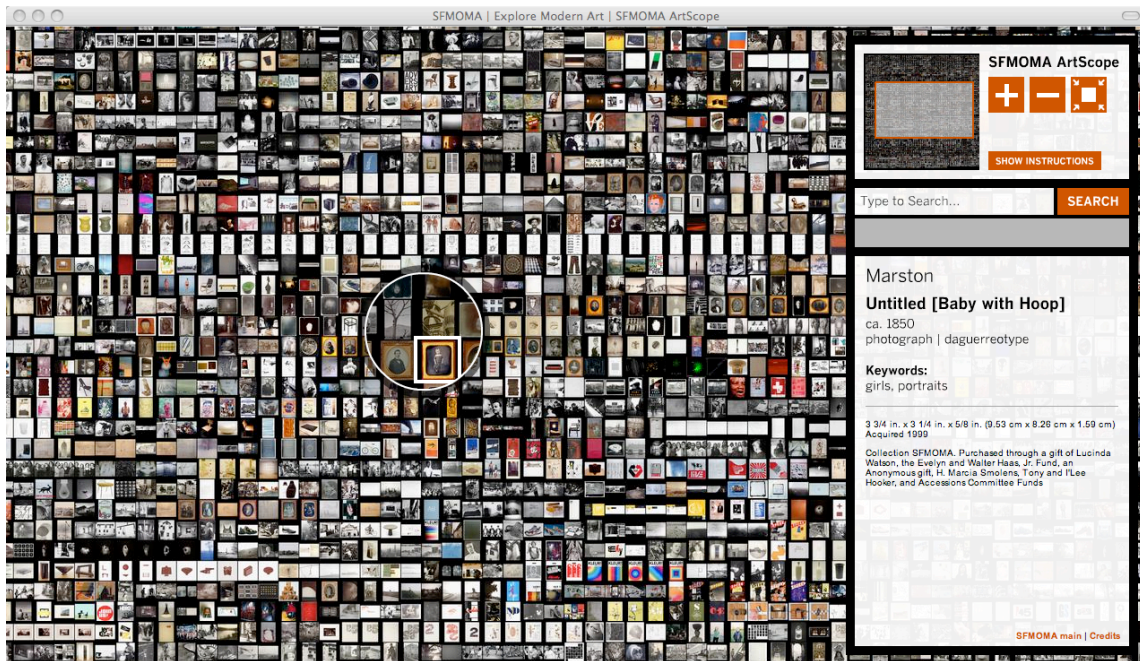
A dynamic alternative to traditional search-based collection databases ... This new tool enables web visitors to browse thumbnail images or artworks in our collection and filter them by artist, date, medium, and keyword and encourages independent exploration and discovery. (SFMOMA online)

The *SFMOMA ArtScope* project exists as one webpage and access to the digital objects contained within the project occurs through one consistent UI. Upon opening the page, the user sees an expanse of small thumbnail images. The tiled images seem to extend off the edges of the browser window, giving a sense that one is in the midst of a larger collection. Indeed, a graphic appears as the page loads with text stating, “Loading the collection / Loading page 1 of 5” etc. until the images all appear. In contrast to the mainly black, white and red color palette, five light blue text boxes with black font

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appear and offer guidance in navigating the page. Arrows and text indicate to the user where and how to perform actions, display information and navigate. In the center of the window a small circle acts as a magnifying glass, enlarging and focusing on one specific thumbnail.



*Figure5: Interface for visually browsing SFMOMA's collection. April 16, 2009.*

On the right side of the screen a navigation pane is absolutely positioned over the image collection and is semi-translucent; the user can still see slightly the images behind the navigation pane. In the top-right a title announces the project “SFMOMA ArtScope.” Action links, such as zooming in and out, instructions, and search, are emphasized through relatively large, simple, red and white buttons. The upper-third of the navigation pane is devoted to these action links. A miniature navigation map allows the user to see how what is currently represented on the screen relates to the entire collection. Below this is a search field that, upon first opening the page, reads “Type to Search.” Below this a



larger text box dominates the navigation pane. When initially viewed, the text reads, “Welcome to the SFMOMA ArtScope, a visual browsing tool that allows you to explore more than 3,500 artworks in our collection. To begin, just click on an image or enter a term into the search box.” (SFMOMA online)

The space created by the tiled images is complex and intriguing, and the user is likely to begin by experimenting with the novel interface, pointing and clicking on an image, rather than using the standard keyword search. After beginning to browse or initiating a search, a portion of the navigation pane displays metadata about the image currently being viewed. The metadata includes the artist, title, year, medium, keywords, dimensions, credit line, and photography credit. Certain metadata fields, including the artist, year, medium and keywords, employ standard metadata categories and a user can click on one of these metadata tags resulting in a collection within the collection corresponding to the selected metadata. The user navigates through this collection by pressing a forward or backward button located in the middle of the navigation pane. At any time, the user can clear the metadata designated collection by pressing a large red and white button that reads “clear” or one can alter the collection by clicking on a different metadata tag. However, a collection can only be compiled using one metadata tag. That is, one cannot search for “photograph” and “1932” in order to display photographs created in 1932.

In the very bottom right corner of the navigation pane are two links, one to the SFMOMA home page and the other, labeled only as “Credits,” leads to simple page with a one-paragraph project description,

The SFMOMA ArtScope is designed for wandering, for the chance discovery of

artworks you might not have encountered before. This visual browsing tool features more than 3,500 objects from our collection, arranged in a continuous, map-like grid. Zoom in on an eye-catching image, search by keyword or artist, or just have a look around. In any case, we suspect you'll see our collection in a different light.<sup>5</sup>

Recall that unless one explicitly clicks on this de-emphasized vaguely titled link, the only textual information a user receives about the project is the one sentence description that appears in the navigation pane at the very beginning of the experience.

In its evocative design and accessibility, *SFMOMA ArtScope* creates a compelling and unique digital experience. However, the project offers only a limited set of actions; a user can search using metadata tags or browse spatially by navigating the tiled expanse of image thumbnails. In addition, the experience of navigating the collection is contextualized visually and viscerally, but not intellectually. In what manner the objects are organized is not disclosed. In fact, the only place we could find an explanation was written on Stamen Design's project page, which explains that the images are organized according to the acquisition date by the museum. Because juxtaposition and immediate context is far from inconsequential in constructing meaning, we found this mode of organization confusing and believe more transparency of the reasoning behind design decisions would have alleviated this confusion.

One of the most interesting aspects of *SFMOMA ArtScope* is the visual representation of navigation in a large archive. By focusing the "lens" on one image but maintaining its position in the larger tiled background, a user never forgets that each object is only one within an entire, large collection. The simple text box that displays the information of each object allows a user quickly to explore specific details. Moreover, the user directs the search with a mouse click, thus a physical movement is tied to parallel

movement on screen. The lens moves just as it would in physical space; it does not jump to the point where the mouse was clicked, it must traverse the images in between. These small details in design result in a rich interactive experience where the user effectively explores a collection of objects not only as individual objects but also the experience of very sense of an entire collection.

On a basic level, as a website with images of the museum's collection, *SFMOMA ArtScope* provides access to materials online that users may not have the ability to see in the physical world. In addition, the project provides this access rapidly; a user need not sift through introductory pages or texts or hunt down all the different pages where content might be scattered. The images are central, immediately located and in the same place. Keyword and metadata search functions enable a user to quickly find specific objects, if she so chooses. Moreover, information on how to use the site is easily accessible and clearly explained. Indeed, the UI adheres to many of the current "best practices" in UI design as identified by the design researchers Blair-Early and Zender, such as designing an obvious start and clear exit, providing tangible responses to user actions and designing interfaces that minimizes interface and maximizes content.

We end with *SFMOMA ArtScope* not as a suggestion that all Digital Humanities projects must look and treat their objects similarly. Rather, we end with what we see as an inspiring project, one that demands we configure how we think about the possibilities of design for Digital Humanities. While we have made some suggestions for improvement during our discussions of *NINES*, *Object of History* and *SFMOMA ArtsScope*, this paper is intended to provide a provocation rather than a prescription,

pointing to areas of possibility and potential growth as informed by a common goal of Digital Humanities: to provide compelling and useful access to humanist resources in digital form.

Even as the ideal of unmediated access to information and artifacts is challenged by post-modern theory, an immediate and undeniable act of mediation occurs through the computer. This constituent role of mediation, and the necessary acts of translation that must occur between modes of representation, is crucial to consider as scholars turn increasingly to digital resources. UI design is, in one sense, the cumulative expression of the acts of translation required to transform physical artifacts to digital objects. Indeed, Mathew Kirschenbaum points out that the

interface presents a number of interesting and unique problems for the digital humanist. Understandably driven by pragmatic and utilitarian needs, the interface is also where representation and its attendant ideologies are most conspicuous to our critical eyes. .... Too often put together as the final phase of a project under a tight deadline and an even tighter budget, the interface becomes the first and in most respects the exclusive experience of the project for its end users. (Kirschenbaum online)

By speaking about visual epistemology and its expression through design as a constituent element of the experience and interaction enabled through Digital Humanities projects, we hope to illuminate what has too often been overlooked. Moreover, we hope to provide an entry point into discussing the affordances and expressive potential of digital media. To bring Drucker into the conversation once again, “we [Digital Humanists] have to show that digital approaches don't simply provide objects of study in new formats, but shift the critical ground on which we conceptualize our activity.”

(Drucker online) As Digital Humanities is forming itself as a discipline, we need to think

less about digitization and more about the expressive potential of digital form. Digital documents are distinct from their physical counterparts. How can Digital Humanities go beyond a kind of mirror representation and take advantage of what is different, new and possible?

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