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Review: Immersive Scholar

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Project
Immersive Scholar

Project Team

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Project URL
https://www.immersivescholar.org/

Project Reviewer

Angel David Nieves, San Diego State University

Project Overview

Micah Vandegrift, Shelby Hallman, and Walt Gurley

Immersive Scholar addresses the utilization and impact of visualization environments and visualization scholarship by developing extensible models and programs for the creation and sharing of digital scholarship in large-scale and immersive visualization environments. Funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, this project complicates digitally humanistic scholarship in that it is multilayered (project, products, principles), multi-institutional, and multi-faceted in its intended reception. The locus of the project, or the 'text' itself, exists between the data and documentation, the code and context of the works, all inside the project frame. We present this work for review because of these complexities and the opportunity to stretch boundaries, definitions, and norms.

Intentionality is a core principle of this work. Due to visualization's dependence on technical expertise and innovation, the project team and cohort maintain a sense of process as product. NC State enacted this by recruiting "creative residents" through a competitive proposal process,reviewed on open source extensibility, use of FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) data, responsive and universal design, and cognizance of diversity and inclusion. The humanistic aspects of this project are evident in the residency outputs, aesthetic commentaries on human/data representations, engaging with issues like food and housing insecurity, social technology and agency, and awareness of human connections with a rapidly shifting environment.

The PI's chose to utilize two methods to illuminate invisible labor and value individual contributions. First, the choice of the Open Science Framework (OSF) as the documentation hub provided the ability and flexibility to indicate contributions at different project levels. Secondly, this project is developing and piloting a "contributorship data model", referencing the Taxonomy of Digital Research Activities in the Humanities (TaDiRAH), Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT), and schema.org. Version 0.1 of the contributorship data model is attached to *Coded Glass* as a markdown file. The final year of the grant will expand and apply this data model across the other component projects, as well as produce a machine readable version. Our intentionality is documented in the project wiki, to inform and affect the value assigned across the project outputs.

We are addressing the evaluation and validation of new forms of scholarship through the following:

1. assessment framework for reviewing technical aspects of a visualization (https://osf.io/7hmcy/);
2. reference document to use as a tool in describing new forms of scholarship in promotion and tenure (https://osf.io/kbj7d/); and,
3. best practices summary for promotion committees reviewing new forms of research products (https://osf.io/nk7w4/).

These documents are tangential, but central to the work of the project. We consulted disciplinary codes of evaluation (Modern Language Association, American Historical Association, College Art Association, etc.) and several university guidelines in drafting these. It's our hope that these documents will provide value beyond this project, as models for how addressing structural challenges in and throughout a digital humanities project, by being intentional and laying foundations on the documentary impulse that this kind of scholarship requires.

Project Review

Angel David Nieves

Despite all our best efforts in digital scholarship over the past decade, we still do not have a wide array of websites or available resources that address the importance of process as a significant, and critical part of our intellectual work. Through Immersive Scholar, project co-PIs Micah Vandegrift, Shelby Hallman, and Walt Gurley offer an important and noteworthy model for documenting process. Immersive Scholar is an online hub, funded by a $414,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, to assist with "the creation and sharing of digital scholarship in large-scale and immersive visualization environments." The grant, awarded in 2017, brings together an array of institutions to address the sorts of challenges that exist for the preservation of digital scholarship for large-scale

visual environments. The project's institutional cohort includes NCSU, Brown, Indiana, UC-Berkeley, UI-Urbana-Champaign, and Virginia Commonwealth, all of whom provide immersive visualization environments in their library buildings or elsewhere on campus.

The project features the multi-year efforts of each partner institution by bringing together their best practices and collaborative frameworks for comparison and further reflection. The project overall seeks to break down existing silos that emerge with the adoption of new technologies at institutions of higher education. Irrespective of their institutional status (faculty, librarians, technologists, etc.), peer collaborators willing to experiment and solve problems while developing new shared infrastructure models often find it difficult to disseminate their efforts as they work to foster new knowledge communities. Digital scholarship using large-scale visualization today still requires the support of a community of practice that recognizes some of the difficulties and obstacles when promoting this kind of collaborative scholarship. Practitioners also must find balance between process (the making and doing) and final product outcomes. Immersive Scholar helps build and promote communities of practice that bring together administrators, librarians, technologists, students, and the wider public while addressing these issues.

The project website is a multi-layered support infrastructure that includes access to sample projects, research resources, an assessment framework, a methodology that embraces contributors, and a summary of best practices for tenure and promotion committees charged with evaluating immersive digital scholarship. An array of richly detailed planning documents on OSF (Open Science Framework) makes clear the important role of "process as scholarship" in the creation of networks often at the cutting-edge of innovation and technological experimentation. Additionally useful resources on the project's website include Abigail Mann's essay, "Supporting New Scholarship: Why and How," which outlines the intellectual labor required to develop new tools and ways of incorporating those tools (and their methods) into classroom teaching. The project also demonstrates strong connections to the American Library Association (ALA), The Library and Information Technology Association (LITA), The College Art Association (CAA), The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), and The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Digital Scholarship Centers Interest Group throughout the its documents and links.

North Carolina State University (NCSU) Libraries' implementation of Immersive Scholar demonstrates the value of the project. NCSU Libraries support the use of tools and techniques for sharing large-scale, visualization technologies for research. A multi-disciplinary series of lead projects, including Faculty Clusters, Recreating Historical Environments, *Listen to Wikipedia*, Visiting Artists, and Code+Art, highlight the scholarly potential of large-scale visualizations. Additionally, the NCSU Libraries Scholars-in-Residence Program seeks to create open source, data-driven art and visualizations that bring together a clear set of practices based on an interaction framework and

eventual content delivery. Through a combination of workshops, mid-level project grants, and a residency program, the project fosters those communities of practice around visualization spaces to help develop their social and technical framework for wider use among academic libraries and institutions.

Immersive Scholar, however, raises a broader issue around the evaluation mechanisms necessary for sustaining digital scholarship: their development, while important, does not necessarily translate into community usage and implementation. This perennial problem is seen, for example, in the fact that guidelines for evaluating digital scholarship produced by professional organizations like the Modern Language Association, American Historical Association, and College Art Association have not solved the problem of valuing contributions to digital scholarship.

Although project funding concludes in April 2020, with assessment currently underway, collaborating institutions will continue to develop their immersive visualization environments and promote continued scholarly community-building. As the co-PIs undertake this work, greater attention to the dissemination and implementation of the project, particularly its evaluation mechanisms, will be of great value to digital humanities communities. Immersive Scholar's model of providing project partners and new users with a wide array of resources, project examples, workflows, and technical guidelines as well as an established community of users is an important contribution, and its broader circulation and use is positioned to strengthen digital humanities knowledge infrastructures.