The Collaboration Station
Mark Hayward (Wilfred Laurier University, Canada)
& Ted Striphas (Indiana University, USA)
(Two-Page Synopsis)

In our understanding of the term, the "digital humanities" refers less to an object, methodology, or field than to a range of ways for approaching the creation, circulation, curation, and criticism of cultural artifacts. By adopting such a position, we believe that the digital humanities is neither a radical break from established traditions of humanistic scholarship, which we take to include both traditional humanities disciplines and elements of the social sciences, nor is it simply the addition of new technology to existing forms of scholarship.

In order to clarify the nature of the complex and at times contradictory practices that are bound together under the banner of the digital humanities, we see four principal modes of working that might be identified as such. These include:

> 1. The digitization of existing artwork, literature, and other existing/analog forms of humanistic endeavor including scholarship and criticism, for purposes of creating content-rich end-user and/or archival experiences; examples would include a variety of different repositories such as archive.org or ubuweb, which offer large online collections of pre-digital material, and cutting-edge digital journals like Culture Machine, Dark Matter, Liminalities, or Vectors.

> 2. The design and implementation of digital platforms meant to facilitate the production of artistic and/or scholarly work; examples might range from social network style sites like academia.edu to tools for notation like CommentPress.

> 3. The use of computational means and methods for purposes of criticism and commentary, and in ways that highlight the relationship between data collection and contemporary social and cultural relations; among the most compelling scholarly accounts of this type of work is to be found in Stephen Ramsay's *Reading Machines: Towards an Algorithmic Criticism* (University of Illinois Press, 2011)

> 4. Social-theoretical (i.e., "critical") accounts of the relationship between digital technologies and culture, the latter of which should be taken to include forms of aesthetic and intellectual expression, in addition to the taken-for-granted repertoires of specific groups of people.

We locate our project—or rather projects—squarely within traditions two and four. Over the course of the eighteen month fellowship period we have produced, either individually or collaboratively, three scholarly essays on issues pertaining to collaborative research and academic publishing in the digital age as well as making substantial progress towards a digital "collaboration station," whose goal is to provide humanities scholars with a suite of tools for engaging in collective writing projects.

All three essays, though different in important respects, nonetheless address a common theme: the processes by which humanities scholars craft their published research. In essence we used historical methods to raise questions about the norms of scholarly communication prevalent today, a majority of which arose closely in tandem with the emergence of print culture. These include the privileging of the single author, especially in the humanities; the prioritizing of textual

content over its social relations of production; and the subordination of in-process material and other forms of "gray literature" to traditionally peer-reviewed finished products. The point was to understand better how these values and practices came about in response to specific problems, or geo-historical contexts, of scholarly communication and in turn to consider how digital technologies have affected – even altered – those contexts.

The content of these essays and, equally important, the process of composing them, provided the inspiration for our digital collaboration station. The piece we authored jointly, "[Working Papers in Cultural Studies, or, the Virtues of Gray Literature]()," underscored for us the importance of infrastructures dedicated to the nurturance of scholarly work *while is still in process,* i.e., prior to formal peer review. This was both an historical and practical lesson: historical insofar as we came to appreciate how the field of cultural studies "arrived" in the 1970s thanks in part to its embrace of a host of quasi-scholarly publications, where faculty and students could circulate drafts of and thus incubate their research; and practical insofar as we ourselves needed to develop ways to do exactly that for our project, albeit in a different historical and technological moment.

After several frustrating, if ultimately instructive, false starts we discovered Open Atrium, which is an implementation of the open source content management system Drupal. Open Atrium is described as an "intranet in a box" whose express purpose is to facilitate team communication and collaboration. We should emphasize that it is not designed as a scholarly instrument per se, and as such we needed to perform a fair amount of customization to make it useful for academic purposes.

Open Atrium allows groups to create private, online work spaces dedicated to specific projects – in our case, to the composition, revision, and fine-tuning of scholarly essays. It also provides more or less robust tools for project and task management; file sharing; video conferencing; short and long form messaging; version tracking; and textual annotation. We had used these types of tools over the course of writing the "Working Papers" essay, but because we had not yet discovered Open Atrium we were forced to hop back and forth between Microsoft Word, Google Docs, our respective email clients, Dropbox, Skype, and more. Open Atrium allowed us to put these types of software resources under one roof, as it were, and thus to spend less trying figuring out how to collaborate and more time focusing on the substance of the collaboration.

One of the main attractions of Open Atrium was the way in which it seemed to uniquely blend the best aspects of social networking and content management. It was neither too document-centric (a drawback of most blogging platform), nor was it so socially inclined that documents receded into the background of human connection (a drawback of services like Facebook). We also appreciated the fact that Open Atrium projects could be closed to anyone except invited participants, thereby allowing only the most trusted members of one's scholarly community to weigh in on research and writing at its earliest, and arguably most vulnerable, stages.

Finally, we wanted to create a digital resources that did not already exist for humanities scholars. We had intended to create something along the lines of a multimedia academic journal but were quickly disabused of the notion, once we had confronted the myriad of such journals already operating online and our own limited facility with code. More to the point, the process by which we arrived at, and ultimately implemented, our collaboration station allowed us to think more deliberately about what the humanities might bring to digital technology and culture rather than simply using digital tools to perform humanities work.