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Abstract

This article examines the state of Atlantic Canadian digital history. As Canadian granting agencies increasingly favour applications deemed relevant to business interests, it is difficult to secure funding to present Atlantic Canadian digital history. In order to secure the funding necessary to do so, interdisciplinary team research strategies must be adopted, as Canadian granting agencies display greater willingness to support broad, multi-institutional collaborations. Moreover, such institutional partnerships will hopefully revitalize Atlantic Canadian digital history – which thus far has simply replicated the print paradigm – by encouraging historical presentation in novel and engaging ways, such as through educational gaming.

Keywords

Atlantic Canada; Digital history; Institutional partnerships; Educational gaming

For a long time, Atlantic Canadian regional history – the history of Canada’s four easternmost provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador – was, both literally and figuratively, on the outskirts of Canada’s national histories. In a national narrative that emphasized western expansion and nation-building, the history of Canada’s earliest settled region – a region that only begrudgingly entered Confederation – seemed out of place. This oversight was somewhat explained by Frank Underhill’s (1964) mordant yet largely unchallenged 1964 statement that in the Maritimes “nothing much ever happens down there” (pp. 62–64).

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This claim was, of course, largely unfounded; as David Frank (2000) has suggested, the problem in the Maritimes was more a dearth of historiography than of history. By the late 1960s, the problem of a lack of regional historiography was beginning to wane. The general expansion of Canadian universities to accommodate the baby boom generation led to an increase in regional history offerings at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in Maritime post-secondary institutions. However, the expansion of the region's history offerings ran headstrong into preconceived notions of the region's importance. Scholars of the Maritimes found it difficult to get their research published in traditional venues such as the *Canadian Historical Review*, whose University of Toronto-centred board steadfastly maintained their commitment to publish articles they deemed of national importance. This meant that research dealing with regional, provincial, or social history found it much more difficult to find an outlet than did work of a political nature.¹ In an effort to remedy this, the history department at the University of New Brunswick founded the journal *Acadiensis* in 1971.²

With the launch of *Acadiensis* — and the subsequent publication of such noteworthy regional monographs as E.R. Forbes' *The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919–1927: A Study in Canadian Regionalism* (1979), Colin Howell's *Northern Sandlots: A Social History of Maritime Baseball* (1995), and Margaret Conrad and James Hiller's *Atlantic Canada: A History* (2010) — the place of the Atlantic region was gradually reclaimed in Canadian historiography. For example, whereas before the 1970s Maritime opposition to Confederation was largely considered a byproduct of an inherent regional conservatism and lack of nationalistic foresight, today one would be hard-pressed to find a survey of Canadian history that did not include a nuanced portrayal of the many cogent reasons why Maritime politicians were lukewarm to the union.³ However, although the region has increasingly been reintegrated into the print medium, the recent “digital turn” in humanities research has once again placed Atlantic Canada in a precarious position. Although the digital humanities movement, with its democratizing nature, promised to further integrate Atlantic Canada into the national framework, this promise is not being fulfilled and Atlantic Canadian regional history is once again in danger of being subsumed into the broader, national story online.

In my mind, this digital marginalization of Atlantic Canadian history stems largely from two factors. The first issue may be unique to the Canadian context, and deals with actions undertaken by Canadian granting agencies. The Conservative federal government has instructed the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) — the primary Canadian granting agency for those of us engaged in the humanities — to favour applications deemed relevant to business interests. With this shift in governmental priorities, funding for research on the history of Canada has become scarcer, and it seems likely that national stories that serve a political purpose will be preferred by granting agencies over the history of the Atlantic region. The second issue, however, pertains more to the state of digital history itself; how do we present the history of Atlantic Canada (or history more generally) digitally? Much Atlantic Canadian digital history has replicated past conventions online. For example, online image archives — websites featuring digitized primary source documents and supplementary secondary texts — are reflective of the bulk of the region's digital history. While these sorts of projects are useful, they do not use the digital medium to its fullest. As this article reveals, the advent of new technologies, the rise of social

media, and the promise of educational gaming all present opportunities for digital historians to transcend the limitations of the written word.

The recent economic downturn, combined with a Canadian federal government that has placed a premium on business-oriented research (at the expense of humanistic studies), has had a detrimental effect on many Canadian scholars. Many university endowments have shrunk, and administration has responded by cutting costs where they can. This means that many departments are not only seeing hiring freezes and the slashing of their library budgets, but also increased difficulties to secure internal funding for projects. This is especially problematic for junior scholars interested in the digital humanities, for much of the costs of our research are taken up by the purchasing of infrastructure. For example, I am interested in setting up a digitization lab in order to undertake a project that will digitize and present a number of diaries written by Nova Scotian women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In terms of computing infrastructure, this requires, at a minimum, a large format scanning back digital camera, a copy stand for the camera, computers to run the scanning software, image processing software, and the text encoding software, not to mention the costs associated with securing dedicated space on campus in which to house this gear. Thus, a minimum initial investment of approximately \$20,000 is required to begin this project — an amount my institution is reluctant, and likely unable, to provide.

This means that the funds necessary to conduct this project will have to come from external sources. This is somewhat problematic, as this project in no way has any business applications, and therefore is not prioritized by some of the SSHRC programs. However, there are other SSHRC grants this project can qualify for. Indeed, the very nature of this project lends itself well to securing such external funding. That is because these diaries are not held at one repository. Instead, they are scattered at archives throughout the region and in private collections. As a result, this project is ideally suited for SSHRC's Partnership Grant or a Partnership Development Grant.⁴ These grants are designed to foster both inter-university cooperation and cooperation between the academy and public organizations. Thus, a grant can be put together between Mount Saint Vincent University (my host institution), the University of New Brunswick (the leading Atlantic Canadian university for digital humanities projects), and the archival repositories at which the diaries are housed. Moreover, one of the areas that SSHRC is especially interested in is the digital humanities, making Partnership Grants or Partnership Development Grants attractive possibilities.

However, despite their utility in allowing digital humanists to secure the funds necessary to undertake projects, the means by which these grants are administered are not without their problems. In particular, these grants are designed to foster linkages between institutions or organizations. The way that this is accomplished is through the devolution of work flow. This means that the work of the project is shared between the various partners and the digital infrastructure must be allocated to different sites. This system of project devolution can punish smaller institutions that do not have the means to support the required infrastructure. Moreover, it creates an ongoing problem in that the partner institutions do not have the necessary infrastructure to undertake future projects independently. In this manner, these Partnership Grants and Partnership Development Grants have the potential to create an ongoing and

unbalanced system, where smaller institutions remain dependent upon one another. To be fair, this system of interdependency could happen to any institution regardless of size or geographic location. However, to my mind it seems that the larger and wealthier Canadian universities — which tend not to be located in Atlantic Canada — are better equipped to deal with this system of imbalance. Still, a system of grants that may or may not promote interdependency when conducting projects is certainly better than no grants at all, with the attendant risk of no projects. It is hoped that institutions that receive Partnership Grants and Partnership Development Grants can gradually develop full independence in developing digital projects, and in this manner avoid the threat of interdependence contained in this granting system.

Yet even if an institution is successful in seeking out such grants — and avoids falling into a system of interdependency — that only solves half of the problem of creating digital history in Atlantic Canada. The other half of the problem is related to how Atlantic Canadian historians can use the digital medium in order to effectively and engagingly present their region's past. And this is an area where the region's historians have not fully exploited the potential of the digital humanities. Most of the digital history projects that have been undertaken on Atlantic Canada and Atlantic Canadian topics — and I include my proposed project on diaries and diarists amongst this group — have simply replicated the conventions of the print medium. Perhaps this is to be expected — as scholars we are most familiar with the print medium and we may seek to replicate it in our digital endeavours because we are comfortable with it. As Michael Best (2006) has observed, there is a tendency among academics “generally to be safe, to progress through accepted and understood channels” (p. 2). However, even those Canadian digital history projects that more fully utilize the possibilities of the Web were not developed by Atlantic Canadian scholars and are thus rather light on Atlantic Canadian content.

A look at the Great Unsolved Mysteries website (<http://canadianmysteries.ca>) is instructive. Developed in partnership between the Canadian Department of Heritage and the University of Victoria, this website uses the digital medium to teach students historical methodology in a fun and interactive manner. By making available a number of primary documents in digitized form, this site encourages students to piece together what happened — to become historians — and solve a variety of mysteries. However, while this site is definitely of value and can serve as a model of how to bridge the gap between the traditional historical practice and digital history, content-wise it is skewed toward central and western Canada. Of the twelve mysteries available to be solved, only two examine Atlantic Canadian topics: one on the Norse settlement of Vinland and one on an amnesiac found on a Nova Scotia beach.

The geographic bias of the Great Unsolved Mysteries website is to be expected. After all, it was developed by scholars at the University of Victoria and it only makes sense that they would be more familiar with the historiography of western Canada. Viewed in this light, the inclusion of two Atlantic Canadian topics is to be praised. However, this leads to another of the challenges of forming digital history in Atlantic Canada. That is, most of the history departments that are actively engaged in digital history are located outside the Atlantic region. For example, arguably the foremost Canadian universities engaged in digital history are the University of Victoria, the University of Alberta, the University of

Western Ontario, Brock University, Carleton University, and the University of Montréal — all of which are located from Québec onwards west. That the Atlantic region is absent from this list presents a problem, for these central and western Canadian institutions will continue to push the digital history envelope and leave Atlantic Canadian institutions behind. It seems telling that in a 2009 article examining the state of digital humanities in Canada, John Bonnett and Kevin Kee pointed to Acadia University, the University of New Brunswick, Dalhousie University, and Memorial University of Newfoundland as the only four universities in Atlantic Canada — a region with approximately 20 post-secondary institutions — that were making a significant contribution to Canadian digital humanities. Moreover, only two of the four Atlantic institutions highlighted were making their mark through their history departments. In this manner, it seems to me that as the central and western Canadian schools become more recognized as the leading centres for digital history in Canada, it will be tougher and tougher for other institutions to attract students and scholars to what may be viewed as fledgling programs, thereby further exacerbating this regional divide.

This regional imbalance did not always exist. Indeed, a few years ago we may have been able to include the University of New Brunswick on that list, thereby guaranteeing Atlantic Canadian representation. From the early to mid-2000s, the University of New Brunswick was at the forefront of digital history in Canada. It was during this period that Margaret Conrad, UNB's Tier One Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Canada Studies, and the UNB Electronic Text Centre developed the Atlantic Canada Portal (<http://atlanticportal.hil.unb.ca>). This website was designed to provide scholars of Atlantic Canada with “one stop shopping” for resources pertaining to the region. Launched in 2003, the Atlantic Canada Portal hosts a searchable bibliography of works published on the region, an EPrint repository, and a wide selection of annotated links to websites on Atlantic Canada. In addition, the portal hosts the Atlantic Canada Virtual Archives (ACVA), a digital archive of historical documents pertaining to the Atlantic Provinces. This site was very well received, and Conrad was awarded the 2011 Society for Digital Humanities/Société pour l'étude des Media Interactifs Award for Outstanding Achievement in Computing in the Arts and Humanities.

Unfortunately, by the time Conrad received the award in 2011, the Atlantic Canada Portal had entered a period of decline in currency and usability, which was directly related to difficulties in securing funding. Corey Slumkoski, Margaret Conrad, and Lisa Charlong warned about this issue as early as 2008 (Slumkoski, Conrad, & Charlong, 2008). Granting agencies have proven to be much more willing to fund the creation of digital projects than to provide the monies required to maintain existing ones. As a result, much of the support for the ongoing operation of the Atlantic Canada Portal came from funds granted through Conrad's Tier 1 Canada Research Chair. With her 2009 retirement, this source of support dried up and the funds required to employ the students that maintained the site disappeared. Given these financial limitations, it is understandable that UNB's Electronic Text Centre — the centre that helped to develop and that currently maintains and hosts the Portal — redesigned the site so that it requires less time and maintenance. Unfortunately, these changes had a negative impact on the site's usability. The Portal once housed an impressive array of course syllabi on Atlantic Canada, a collection of electronic documents written by regional scholars, and a searchable and up-to-date bibliography; now it is limited to a few

collections of primary documents, a newsfeed on Atlantic Canadian studies, a website directory, and a non-searchable bibliography that has not been updated in a few years. Though once an essential online resource for Atlantic Canada's scholars and students, the Portal has now become a largely outdated repository of news items of interest to scholars of Atlantic Canada. It is sincerely hoped that these alterations are just a temporary response to the financial difficulties occasioned by Conrad's departure. And there may be reason to be optimistic about the Portal's revitalization. UNB has recently replaced Conrad with another Tier 1 Canada Research Chair (CRC) in Atlantic Canada Studies. Perhaps the newly appointed CRC will reinvigorate the Portal, thereby providing Atlantic Canadian graduate students with important training in the digital humanities, while making the Portal once again a valuable online scholarly resource.

A relaunch of the Atlantic Canada Portal would be quite timely, as emerging technologies allow for a fuller integration of the digital humanities into historical practice. Any new (or newly relaunched) scholarly website should exploit the potential of portable computing devices, such as tablets and smartphones, along with the subsequent development of "apps" or small computer programs designed to run on these portable platforms. These devices facilitate computing mobility and new ways of accessing and interpreting the past. For example, the Historypin app uses the GPS and camera capabilities of these platforms to superimpose historical photographs over images of the present, thereby allowing users to visualize their environment as it appeared in the past. While not concerned with Atlantic Canada, Carleton University historian Shawn Graham revealed the potential of connecting portable computing with history when he had his graduate class in the digital humanities develop a portable app for smartphones that historicizes a walking tour of downtown Ottawa.⁵ A similar app could be developed for the Atlantic Canadian cities of Halifax, St. John's, Charlottetown, or Saint John. One thing seems certain — Atlantic Canada's digital historians should increasingly strive to incorporate the potential of mobile computing and interactive historical apps in their online projects.

Yet perhaps the most dynamic and engaging way for Atlantic Canada's digital historians to present the past is to move away from the text-based environment entirely, and to enter the world of historical gaming. While the Great Mysteries of Canada website mentioned above is a tremendous resource for teaching students historical methodology, and does so in a fun, almost game-like manner, it still is contingent upon site visitors reading and interpreting documents. Maybe we can take this potential game-based instruction and expand on it. Students entering university today have been reared in an age when computer gaming has been a major part of many of their lives. Indeed, in my first year classes, students — both male and female — are certainly more familiar with playing computer games than they are with using online databases or image archives.⁶

Computer gaming is a massive industry. Video gaming — hardware, software, and accessories — was a \$18.6 billion industry worldwide in 2011 and is expected to grow as more and more Chinese people get into gaming (Gallegos, 2012). In addition, two of the top ten games sold in the United States that year. In the US this could be described as historical (or pseudo-historical) for computer games [L.A. Noire and Call of Duty: Black Ops] (Morris, 2011). L.A. Noire is a first-person shooter game that takes place in

1940s Los Angeles, while *Call of Duty: Black Ops* is a first-person shooter game where players take part in various covert operations. While these games offer the potential of teaching players various lessons about fighting crime in middle decades of the twentieth century, or fighting terrorism at the turn of the twenty-first century, to a historian they have one major shortcoming. Their dependence upon player input to effect wildly differing results means they — and indeed most video games — are wildly ahistorical. One example will have to suffice: one of the most popular “historical” video game franchises is Sid Meyer’s *Civilization* series. In these games players try to build empires “that stand the test of time.” Yet the outcome is not premised on any historical reality. For example, the Aztecs can create a global empire just as easily as the British. And this is, I think, part of the appeal of these games: that we can, through our actions, elicit different results than what actually happened.

Would it not be nice, however, to be able to create a game where the end result is what we know occurred according to the historical record? As Niall Ferguson (2006) has suggested, historical gaming is “an attempt to revitalize history with the kind of technology that kids have pioneered. And why not? After all, the Game Boy generation is growing up. And, as they seek a deeper understanding of the world we live in, they may not turn first to the bookshelves. They may demand to play — or rather replay — the great game of history for themselves” (paragraph 29). The blending of history and gaming is something that digital historians, and Atlantic digital historians in particular, could exploit. For example, we could develop a game based on the Loyalist diaspora. We know that New York was the staging area for many Loyalists forced to leave the newly minted United States. A strategy game where students play the role of a Loyalist could be very instructive. Players would begin in New York where they would have to gather their families and make arrangements for passage to Nova Scotia, to Britain, or to one of the British holdings in the Caribbean. Once they arrived at their destination, the player/student would have to make arrangements to secure supplies and to build a homestead. Their experience would be different depending on where they went, whether they played as a man or a woman, or whether they played as a Black Loyalist or a White Loyalist. Such a game could teach the player/student a great deal about the struggles faced by the Loyalists in the wake of the American Revolution, and the ways that socio-economic class, race, and gender could affect that experience. As Entertainment Software Association president Doug Lowenstein suggested in 2006, “we would be crazy not to seek ways to exploit interactive games to teach our children.” (Feller, 2006a, paragraph 16).

If we as historians took a more active role in this sort of development, we could ensure that the learning results were as we desired them to be. But to do so would require greater collaboration between the academy and game designers, and that may be difficult to secure. Game design, as mentioned above, is a massive industry, and it seems unlikely that gaming companies will be willing to risk their profit margins for the sake of historical accuracy. Simply put, good history is secondary to profit in historical gaming. This discrepancy between scholarly rigour and game design is likely what led Harry Kelly, president of the Federation of American Scientists, to note that “This is the kind of thing where the federal government has always acted in the past, to underwrite basic research that you need to drive an important movement forward” (Feller, 2006b, paragraph 10). Indeed, the involvement of the government and the

academy is needed since the gaming industry long ago recognized that educational games do not make money. Moreover, the development of historical gaming will require a shift in the prevalent attitudes amongst academic historians. As historian Raphael Samuel (1994) has observed, historians “give a privileged place to the written world ... hold the visual (and the verbal) in comparatively low esteem, and ... regard imagery as a kind of trap” (p. 259). Still, as time goes on, I think we will see increasing recognition that computers, and computer gaming, can become an important piece of the instructional process. Although I doubt that historians will ever move past granting the written record (and the written word) primacy in their research and instruction (nor do I think they should), it seems to me that the future of historical instruction will necessitate a blending of the traditional print paradigm with emerging digital history areas such as video and video gaming.

Yet this potential blending of traditional and digital historical practice leads us back once again to what is likely the greatest impediment to digital humanists: the lack of stable and ongoing funding. In order to fully realize the potential held by the integration of traditional and digital historical practice, it is necessary to secure the funding that is required to continue to develop and maintain digital projects. Although I suspect it is more pronounced for Atlantic Canadians, this is a difficulty that is by no means confined to practitioners of the digital humanities in Canada’s Atlantic region. What is more, increased funding will allow for more detailed, interactive, and impressive projects. This may help to “prime the pump” for future funding. If we can secure more funding to develop useful and innovative online projects, I believe that even the most conservative of granting agencies (and academics) will come to recognize the utility and the necessity of digital history.

What then are the problems and the prospects for Atlantic Canadian history in the digital age? They seem to me to be the problems and the prospects for digital humanists in any field of historical inquiry, regardless of geographic or regional orientation. That is, the greatest problem is rooted in trying to secure the funding necessary to undertake our work. If we can secure such support, then Atlantic Canadian digital history can hold great prospects; with growing recognition of the digital turn, we can be at the forefront of blending the traditional text-based historical practice with the potentials offered by the digital realm.

Notes

1. In some ways, this was a precursor to the Canadian “history wars” of the 1990s, that saw national historians and regional and social historians debate the merits of each other’s approaches in a variety of books and articles. For more on the history wars see Granatstein(1998), McKillop (1999), and Palmer (1999), as in the References section below.
2. This period also saw the formation of a number of more specialized historical journals, such as the *Journal of Canadian Studies* (1966), *Histoire sociale/Social History* (1968), *BC. Studies* (1968), *Canadian Ethnic Studies* (1969), *Atlantis* (1975), and *Labour/Le Travail* (1976).
3. For a detailed historiographical examination of this subject see Buckner (1990).

4. For more information on these programs visit the Partnership Grant website and the Partnership Development Grant website.
5. Historypin is a joint initiative of Google, the “We Are What We Do” organization, and such partner institutions as the Museum of the City of New York. See the website Picture the Past: Historypin Mashs Up Archived Photos with the Present. As of this writing, there is no comparable app for an Atlantic Canadian city.
6. For a thorough discussion of history and gaming see Kee, Graham, Dunae, Lutz, Large, Blondeau, & Clare (2009).

Websites

Great Unsolved Mysteries. URL: <http://canadianmysteries.ca>

Partnership Development Grant. URL: http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programmes-programmes/partnership_development_grants-bourses_partenariat_developpement-eng.aspx

Partnership Grant. URL: http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programmes-programmes/partnership_grants_loi-bourses_partenariat_li-eng.aspx

Picture the Past: Historypin Mashs Up Archived Photos with the Present. URL: <http://www.good.is/post/historypin-app-uses-augmented-reality-to-visualize-the-past>

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