

DIY DATABASES: TWINE AS PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

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Introduction

Twine is a free online storytelling platform, most commonly used to create innovative and interactive stories in digital formats. Here, however, I suggest the platform might also be repurposed as a resource for creating digital essays and study aids. These projects offer students a way to engage with old and new organizational structures in the forms of narrative and database. Taking up a DIY component, in line with a larger hacker ethic, these digital databases allow students to organize class notes, construct multimodal writing projects, and establish new connections in their scholarship. This poster highlights several such Twine projects, featuring both by my undergraduate students' work as well as my own as a graduate student at Stony Brook University. Ultimately, I aim to illustrate the ways in which Twine's interactive interface allows users to better understand database structures while creating digital projects of their own. This dual aim both encourages greater digital literacy and proliferates opportunities for new narratives to take shape.

Twine

On Twine, a project is called a "story." In creating a new story, a user simply adds a passage of text and then connects that passage to another. The result is a web of connected passages as seen in the screenshots featured on this poster.

As noted on Twine's website, "You don't need to write any code to create a simple story with Twine, but you can extend your stories with variables, conditional logic, images, CSS, and JavaScript when you're ready." In this way, Twine presents itself both as an easily-learned tool and as one that lends itself to further tinkering (embodying a hacker ethic philosophy).

Database & Narrative

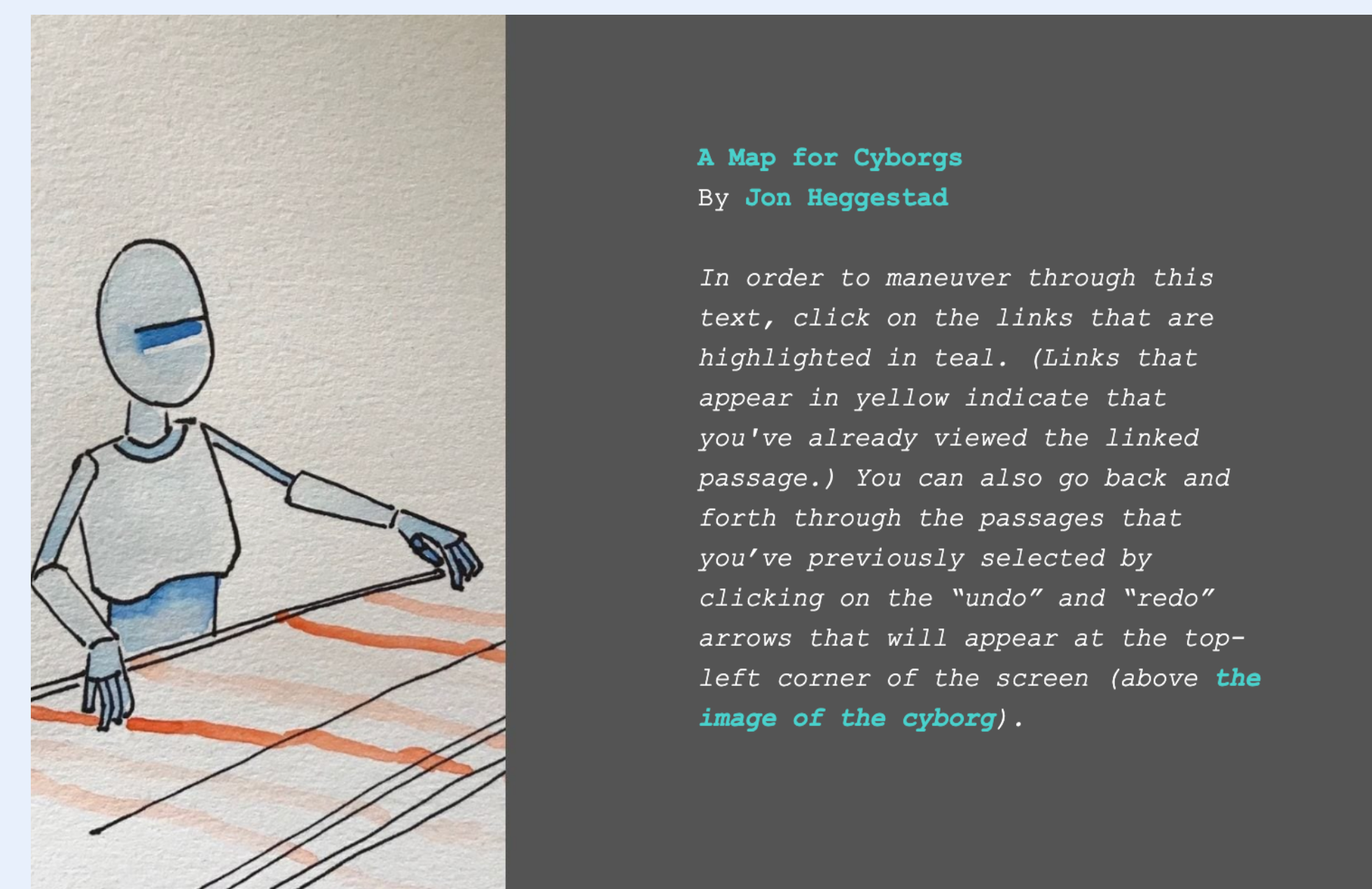
Databases were originally framed in opposition to narratives. Early scholarship from Ed Folsom and Lev Manovich regarded this relationship through metaphors of imposition and contention; in *The Language of New Media* (2002), for example, Manovich characterizes the two as "natural enemies" (228). Responding to metaphors like this, N. Katherine Hayles suggests that narratives and databases actually benefit one another, altering Manovich's claim to depict the two not as "natural enemies" but instead as "natural symbionts." Narratives are not consumed by databases, but organized by them, and databases—in turn—give rise to new narratives. To expand, narratives tend to construct one linear and authoritative story (as in most codex novels and traditional films) while databases might be thought of as held together loosely, requiring the intervention of users or readers to make sense of them. Yet, new stories form through a user's active navigation of a database's moving pieces. Databases, organized rhizomatically (i.e., in disjointed and dispersive ways), provide readers with a variety of stories, rather than a solitary and static one.

Conclusions

In addition to helping us organize our own work, databases offer us the option of incorporating and celebrating a greater number of narratives *in* our work, but we still must choose whether to take advantage of this affordance. Asking students to create databases of their own encourages them to develop this literacy.

Digital Essays

As "playable" academic works, Twine projects can be used to (re)construct more traditional essays, adding multimedia components and restructuring organization to allow for caveats and footnotes that can often lead into their own trajectories.



A screenshot of "A Map for Cyborgs," displaying the front-end interface of this Twine project. This project has tinkered with both the CSS and JavaScript files in order to personalize features like colors, fonts, images, etc. Note that the teal text above identifies the links to other passages that users/readers might follow.

"A Map for Cyborgs"

As an example of a digital essay composed using Twine, "A Map for Cyborgs" actually began as a final project for the DHSI 2018 course "Queer DH" after participants of the course discussed the extremely influential but consistently difficult Donna Haraway text, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs." I continued to develop this project for a doctoral seminar the following academic year in a course titled "Feminist Theories." The images above come from the most recent prototype of the project, which allows users to navigate and explore distinct but connected areas of interest pertaining Haraway's writing; these include a breakdown of terms and concepts, an overview of the essay's critical reception, and even a brief rationale expounding on the ways in which this Twine project embodies its own cyborgian qualities.

Literature Cited

Haraway, Donna. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs." *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Norton Reader*, edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan David Gubar, W.W. Norton, 2007, pp. 584–601.
Hayles, N. Katherine. "Narrative and Database: Natural Symbionts." *PMLA*, vol. 122, no. 5, Oct. 2007, pp. 1603–1608.
Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. MIT Press, 2001.
Twine. <http://twinery.org/>. Accessed 18 May 2020.

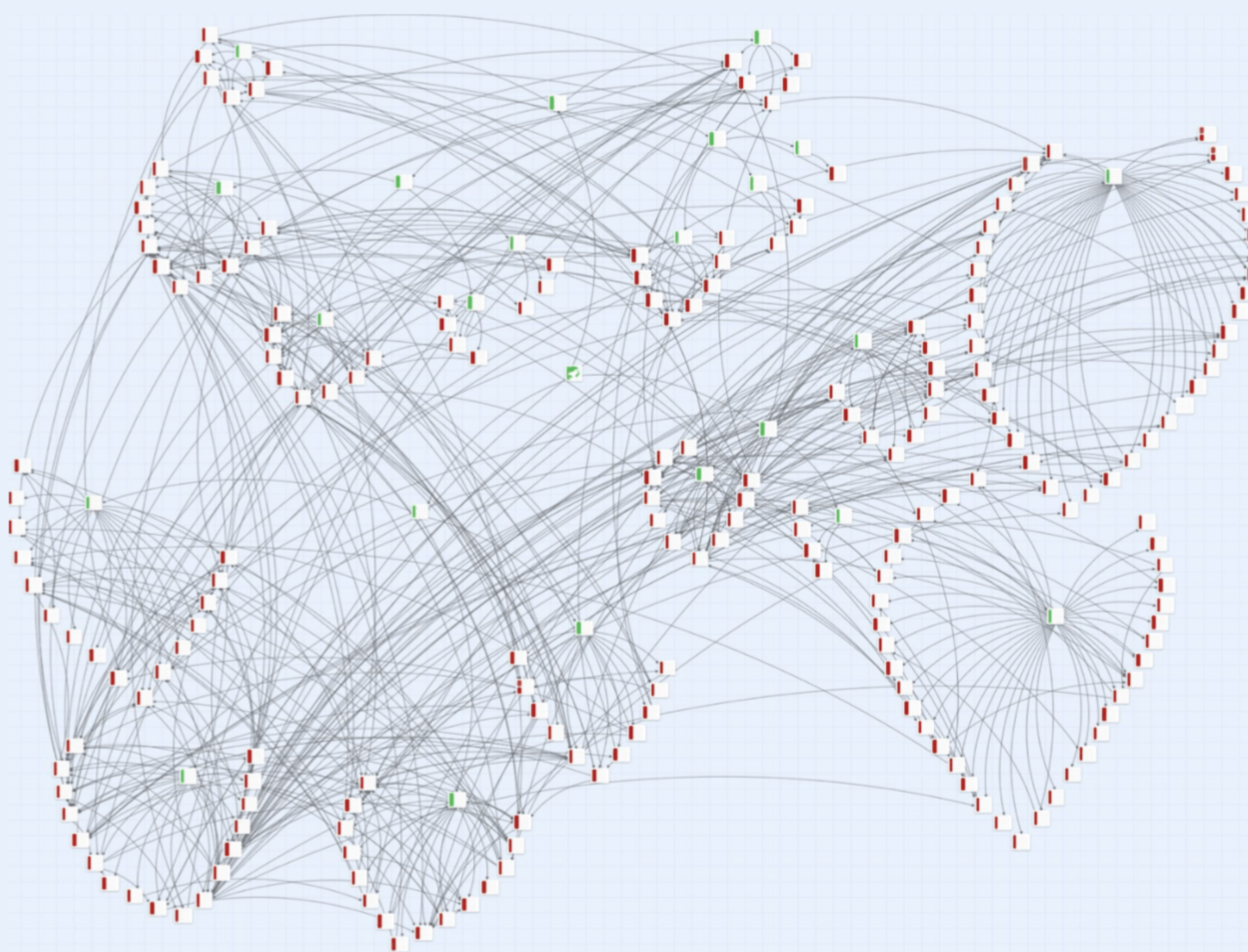


You can play "A Map for Cyborgs" at <https://tinyurl.com/yddd6t2mb> or by scanning the QR code.

Digital Study Aids

During DHSI's "Queer DH" course, a fellow participant (Marisa Hicks-Alcaraz, Claremont Graduate School) suggested "queering" the way we use Twine. Rather than looking to the (front-) end product created by Twine, she suggested we employ a queer method that focused instead on the networked display of the platform's back-end. As Hicks-Alcaraz and I were both about to begin preparing for our oral exams, we used this new method to keep track of our expansive notes on our list readings.

As seen in the image below, the connections I ultimately made between my 100+ readings were many. Twine not only allowed me to keep track of these connections, it also provided a bird's-eye view of my exam prep that, in turn, allowed me to engage with the readings in new ways. For example, I saw through the sheer number of lines (or edges) connected to one particular node that Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" would play a pivotal role in forming a narrative for my readings.



A back-end screenshot of the Twine database I created for my oral exams. Each red node represents a single text from my reading lists; green nodes indicate organization structure (i.e., categories around which I organized my lists: new media studies, data visualizations, etc.). Each black line (or edge) marks a connection I made between texts.

Digital Storytelling

Developing a greater literacy around database and narrative structures was one of my goals in bringing DIY Twine databases into an undergraduate literature course last fall. In addition, I wanted students to engage with their writing in new and creative ways. Accordingly, one option for this course's final assignment invited students to rework one of the more traditional narratives from the course (one presented in a codex book) through a database structure and to then reflect on the process. The result was a new host of interweaving narratives.



The project pictured here offers a preview of one student's work. Nearing the end of the course, which focused on the bildungsroman, this student noted that the narratives that had made it into the canon and that we had paid attention to in class offered a limited and often disappointing perspective on the future, especially for the young readers who often gravitate to these texts. Reworking the scenarios she had discovered in the course's readings, this student decided to create new trajectories by including more redemptive narratives alongside those discussed in class. The result is an effective database filled with positive outlooks on the future.

Student Feedback

Below, I include the reflections from students in an "Introduction to Digital Humanities" course taught at Stony Brook University in Summer 2019. This feedback responds to a module on Twine literature and database/narrative structure.

"[R]esearchers can reshape what is gained from the archive by revising knowledge based upon incorrect and biased narratives."

"As digital humanists, we have the [ability] to access significantly more information and perspectives than those that wrote the narratives of history did. Reassessing old facts/narratives is an important and even vital task and every so often we find our ideas to have been completely off the mark."

"[T]he past is a collection of different voices, not only the colonial planters but also the slaves and third parties and the only way to absorb this knowledge is to accept history as a collection of flexible entities."

"[T]here is more depth to the previously supplied information when we contribute metadata and other sources to the topic pool."

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Jason Boyd, Jamie Howell, the DHSI 2018 "Queer DH" cohort, and especially Marisa Hicks-Alcaraz for coming up with (and sharing) the idea of using Twine as a means to organize one's scholarly notes.

Further information

Jon Heggstad is an English doctoral candidate at Stony Brook University, where he has also received advanced graduate certificates in Women's & Gender Studies and in Teaching Writing. He can be reached @jonheggstad on Twitter, and he is eager to hear how others have made scholarly affordances of Twine.