

Kristina Williams
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Digital Zombies: An Investigation in the Pairing of Digital Tools and Online Pedagogy

Introduction

An often overlooked component of digital humanities scholarship is understanding the relationship between digital tools and teaching and instruction. Given that the work of digital humanities is largely taking place in academic institutions, it seems like a natural fit. In particular, the advent of online education has changed the way faculty and administrators are thinking about how to incorporate technology and the application of digital literacy skills in the classroom. Given these considerations, the University of California, Riverside's project, *Digital Zombies*, is a useful introspective into how some educational systems are pairing digital tools and online pedagogy together.

As an amalgamation of tools, approaches, and platforms, *Digital Zombies* packages the development of digital literacies to accompany college-level instruction in new and interesting ways. As described by its creator Juliette Levy, *Digital Zombies (DZ)* is "a game, a teaching tool and an ongoing digital project that combines research methods, digital literacy tools and critical thinking."¹ By examining what this project does there are a number of takeaways about the project's narrative, design and infrastructure that is worth examining in greater detail. To begin, consider Jesse Stommel's observation from the Digital Pedagogy Lab: "Digital pedagogy is not a

¹ Juliette Levy, "Welcome," juliettelevy.org, 2016, accessed 14 December 2016, <https://juliettelevy.org>.

path through the woods. It's a compass.”² Although tempting to think of the digital pedagogy as being wholly new and unique, pedagogy and *online* pedagogy are both seeking the same ends, but using explicitly distinct means. By providing students with the tools and skills necessary to orient themselves and navigate as they choose, then they are able to make their own path. The work of online pedagogy, therefore provides an additional layer of explicitness about where learning can take and how maximize learning environments to the best of their ability. This is not unlike work that has been done in the areas of classroom management, interpersonal communication, and educational policy.

Just as much has been written on pedagogy in the face-to-face classroom, and we are beginning to see an emergence of literature on the virtual classroom. However, relatively little has been written on the efforts of individual faculty and instructors to develop online teaching tools. Or perhaps more pointedly, current scholarship gravitate around tools that are predominantly proprietary, developed by the education technology (ed-tech) industry, and deployed widely across college campuses for mass consumption. While this review is not an argument against these platforms, *per se*, more attention should be provided to independent endeavors like *DZ* in which instructors and faculty are actively designing and developing tools that provide an alternative experience for online and hybrid students.

One way to think of these tools is as niche modes of engagement—highly customizable to the expertise of the faculty and capable of being tailored to the needs of specific classrooms, all to the benefit of creating a more robust learning experience for students. Further, a basic premise underlines these assertions: When students see faculty geek out and get excited over a

² Jesse Stommel, "Decoding Digital Pedagogy, Pt 2: Unmapping the Terrain," *Hybrid Pedagogy* (2013).

new tool, it's infectious. And likewise, the opposite is true: when instructors fumble with technology or approach it with lackluster enthusiasm, students internalize those tensions. Over time, students learn to see technology in the classroom (virtual or non-) as an unproductive but necessary burden on their studies. Given that many students enter a classroom thinking they already know how to navigate the online, *DZ* challenges student assumptions about critical search and content discovery while broadening their skillsets for interacting in the online ecosystem of data.³

Why Digital Zombies?

Digital Zombies is a Web-based platform for teaching history in an online and hybrid style class environments. The brainchild of history faculty, Juliette Levy, the project was collaboratively conceived and developed. Having the time and space to work through the project's concept was critical to the project getting off the ground. Levy's participation in the 2014 Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DSHI) provided the groundwork for *DZ*. Coming into DSHI, Levy originally thought that the key to innovative technology deployment in instructional design was to compile a compelling digital collection with which students would engage. As a result, Levy moved her attention away from curating digital collections and instead began brainstorming potential mechanisms that might encourage students to seek out digital collections in the first place: "The key [to] teaching with games is not necessary to create a

³ To learn more about the theory of information ecosystems, please see Tara Susman-Peña's literature review in *Embracing Change: The Critical Role of Information*. <https://innovation.internews.org/sites/default/files/research/InfoEco%20Theoretical%20Lit%20Synthesis%20FINAL%204-19-14.docx>.

game, but to use the logic of games to create engagement with the material.”⁴ With this in mind, Levy began to look for ways to connect the learning outcomes of a traditional history course with compelling modes of online engagement.

Levy’s attention to learning outcomes may have something to do, in part, with the source of the funding for *DZ*. In addition to support from the DZ community, multiple funding sources made this course possible. The initial grant for developing the course was awarded by a funding from the Innovative Learning Technology Initiative, a program sponsored by the Office of the President at the University of California. Awarded biannually, funding is awarded directly to faculty for the purpose of developing innovative online courses that will be taught for multiple semesters. The grant is competitive, any faculty from any of the University of California’s ten campuses may submit. Fifteen courses were awarded funding during the grant cycle in which Levy initially received funding, in which the average award was approximately \$55,000 per course.⁵ Additional funding was secured in the form of a faculty instructional innovation grant and travel funding, both from the Riverside campus. The immense financial support provided to Levy reveals the faith in which the University of California has in its faculty and its commitment to supporting the integration of online learning into the standard activities and investments of the University of California brand. An additional requirement for funding is that the course was required to be listed in the Cross-Campus Enrollment Systems, is the University of California’s

⁴ Juliette Levy and Steve Anderson, “Bringing DH into the library: pedagogy, games and online education” (presentation abstract, Digital Humanities Summer Institute 2015 Colloquium, Victoria, British Columbia, June 4-8, 2015).

⁵ Innovative Learning Technology Initiative, “RFP 2/Window 2 Awarded Proposals.” University of California, January 2014, accessed 14 December 2016. <http://www.ucop.edu/innovative-learning-technology-initiative/proposals/awarded-proposals/ilti-awarded-proposals-rfp2-window2.html>.

central enrollment system that allows UC students to search for and electronically enroll in any online courses offered on other University of California campuses. Meaning any University of California campus would be able to register and participate.

From funding proposal to course incarnate

The online presence of *Digital Zombies* represents the proverbial tip of the iceberg in terms of what was encompassed in designing Levy's version of "The Historian's Workshop, HIST 19WV." The web presence presented during seminar is only one element of an immersive online environment in which the theme of

"digital zombies" is woven throughout. In the catalog, the course description sounds like a typical general history class: "Includes historical sources, methods of analysis, and various approaches to historical narrative.

Discusses historical research, analysis, and writing through study of historical works and

thorough practice with original historical sources."⁶ The only book students must purchase in Max Brooks' "World War Z: an oral history of the zombie war." In her syllabus, she commits herself to the unlikely pairing of popular literature and historical scholarship: "Is it a history book? No. Is it a great way to see how historical methods produce great stories? Yes. This class

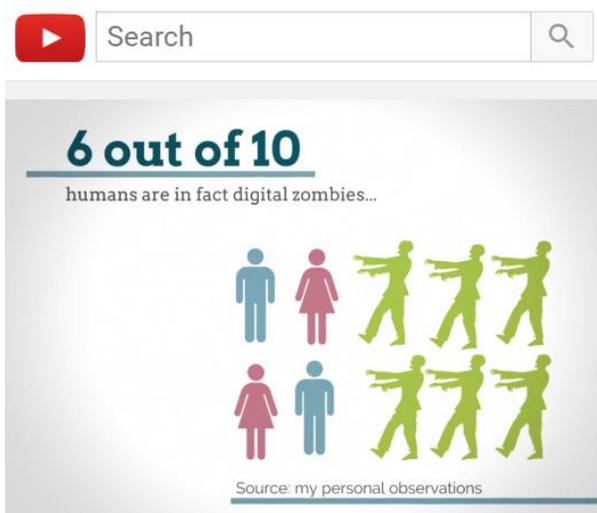


Figure 1: Screenshot of the promotional course video

⁶ "Course Description: The Historian's Workshop, HIST 19WV." University of California, 2016, accessed 14 December 2016. https://crossenrollcourses.universityofcalifornia.edu/view/3006?title=HIST+19WV+The+Historian%E2%80%99s+Workshop&home_campus_id=10.

will also introduce you to the concept of ‘digital zombies’, and will teach you how to avoid becoming one.”⁷ This complements the course video, listed alongside the course description that provides a more in-depth description of digital zombies: “A digital zombie has never used JSTOR. A digital zombie has never spoken to a librarian. A digital zombie does not know what a VPN is.”⁸ By combining the definition of digital zombie to that of the yet-to-be-trained undergraduate, creates clear conditions for success in this class. Levy’s ability to integrate the topics of history, zombies, and research methods are in part what makes this appeal for successful.

The website itself is only one means by which Levy expects her students to interact with course content. Lecture, discussion, and assignment submissions take place through the University of California’s Canvas site. To supplement, students are provided with Twitter handles and hashtags, Piazza, Storify, Zaption, Videoscribe and Zoom. If all else absolutely fails, then students are instructed to use email, but only after exhausting other methods. The shotgun approach to online communication, Levy argues, is to cater to the different ways in which students themselves use communication technologies. Not every student learns the same way and the more options are available to students, the less likely someone will fall through the cracks.⁹ I

⁷ Juliette Levy, “19WV The Historian’s Workshop: How to tell fact from fiction using the clues of history (also Zombies!)” (course syllabus, University of California, Riverside, 2016), 2. <https://s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/searchable-database/course-syllabus/19WVSAMPLEsyllabus-051322016161959.pdf>.

⁸ Juliette Levy, University of California Online Program, *UCOP Online Hist 19WV Juliette Levy RD2V1*, video, 1:35, August 11, 2016, <https://youtu.be/JUVAe0uLtuc>.

⁹ Juliette Levy, “Spreadable Apps for Engagement in Digital Literacy : Student engagement, sticky apps and zombies,” *UC eNGAGE* (conference panel, 2014), <http://ucengage2014.ucop.edu/pdfs/Session-3-Online-Tools-Apps-Focus-on-UC-Innovations-Engaging-UC-Students-Is-There-an-App-for-That-Panel.pdf>

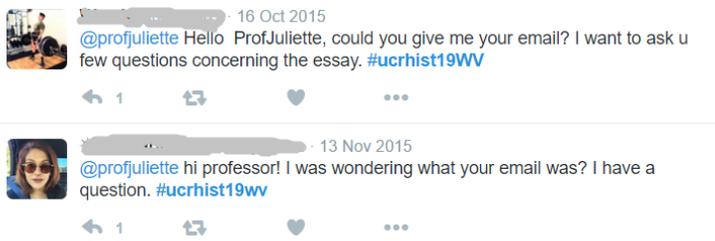
also suspect that the multiplicity of channels is also strategic on Levy's part. Given that this was the course's first iteration, it is possible she was interested in taking a "throw-everything-at-the-wall-and-see-what-sticks" approach.

Although the syllabus strongly encourages using Twitter for asking her questions about assignments and the class. Unfortunately, the call for students to authentically engage on Twitter

was not met. A fraction of the 100+ students enrolled in the class during

its initial offering used the hashtag,

and of those about half of the tweets



were requests for how to get in touch off Twitter (via email).¹⁰ This is an indication that although students may be using social media and other tools to connect with peers and the general public, there are preconceived notions about how students and instructors should be communicating online. Whenever students are "highly encouraged" to register and participate with third party applications with no formal affiliation to the course or university, one also has to ask about whether privacy, content ownership and copyright concerns have also been taken fully into account when course policies were being formalized. Whether the lack of student engagement on Twitter was an issue of means, privacy or some third unknown factor, student preferred email to Twitter, despite the dissolution of boundaries between traditional and non-traditional modes of engagement found elsewhere in course development.

¹⁰ wesng_, October 16, 2015, "Hello ProfJuliette" (screenshot), *Twitter*, <https://twitter.com/hashtag/ucrhist19WV>.

Iterations of course content, now and in the future

In sticking with the zombie theme, Levy assigned students with “missions” instead of assignments. These missions revolve around themes of information literacy, critical thinking, and familiarizing one’s self with the campus resources available to students, both in the sense of objects of study (i.e. library collections) and services. In addition, students are expected to learn basic principles and practices of information gathering and writing as a historian. In order to receive full credit, students were expected to attend a minimum of three writers workshops sponsored by the writing studies programs and resource centers of each of the ten University of California campuses. As a part of their research missions, students visited their campus library and relied on a variety of sources both internal and external to the campus’ library collections. Digital collections unaffiliated to the university are interspersed alongside official university sanctioned resources such as libguides. In this sense, Levy uses the website as a starting point for students to begin their search. These resources, carefully curated depending on the assignment, provide students with direction but ultimately allow them to make their own choices about where they decide to take their research.

The final Mission, “Lie to Me,” is multi-week project in which students must apply the skills they have learned about critical thinking and sound research. Students are instructed to invent a primary source that they must then use to convince the class of a theory of explanation for something that happened in the past. Students must, “think like a digital zombie” to explain a

historic event, using unverified primary sources.¹¹ The students must not only present their findings, but also present their primary (digital) source to the class for inspection. For example, you cannot “undo” the disappearance of America Earhart, but one “lie” you could tell is that Earhart, tired of a lifetime in the spotlight, changed course after take-off and flew to South America start a new life in Columbia. As evidence, you could present a letter written by Earhart after his disappearance with a return address of Columbia.

The University of California has done a pretty good job on ensuring this course will stick around for some time. Given this support, there are two recommendations that could support this course’s continued success over time—a critical assessment of who must be involved to make decisions about how the course is run and a periodical updating of course material and policies to reflect that best ways to encourage digital literacy. *DZ* is a wholly interdisciplinary endeavor. The inspiration for the course, *World War Z*, is a piece of popular fiction that has since been adapted for film and video games. Therefore, it can be expected that students will, in addition to thinking about the text in the context of alternative histories and “digital zombies” produce constructive conversations about film and media as well.

Although students focus on methods firmly planted in history, their missions are not limited to a specific genre of history, unlike many more advanced undergraduate history courses. Instead, students take these methods of historical research and apply them to other fields of study. During their second week, students must identify and review a painting from a digital collection. The following week, students must find historical newspaper articles on public health crises (Medicine and Health is the second largest major at Riverside, second only to Business).

¹¹ Juliette Levy, “Missions,” *Digital Zombies* (2014), <http://www.zombies.digital/missions>.

As a result, *DZ* exposes how historical methods thread through multiple disciplines, weaving together narratives that otherwise seem unrelated. Digital tools (and digital collections) makes those transitions more seamless and the connections across disciplines more evident.

As a professor trained in historical methods and archival research, Levy is able to develop assignments that lean upon what she already knows. However, Levy also employs the expertise of graduate students and university staff to support the course. Co-author, Steve Andersen was a PhD student in Library & Information Science and is largely responsible for developing the technical infrastructure of the project—including the website’s design and implementation. Two other PhD students directly supported the project as TAs (known within the *DZ* realm as “game masters”). In addition to supporting the general maintenance of the course that can be expected of typical teaching assistants (grading, office hours, etc.), they also provided research expertise on new media, gamification, and technology.

As mentioned previously, Levy spends a lot of time cultivating “the object of study” as a way to tease out more subtle ideas and concepts. Levy is especially skilled at taking known objects of study and molding them to meet the needs of the course. For example, the fourth mission of the semester is entitled, “Digital Zombie crowd-sourcing & Wikipedia”. This is by far the most savvy of all course missions, given how heavily college students rely upon Wikipedia for basic research. Students are asked to evaluate the validity of Wikipedia articles and to compare how certain topics are covered on Wikipedia compared to scholarly sources. This interrogation encourages students to draw their own conclusions about Wikipedia. By looking for what students discover based on their own research, Levy creates an assignment that is focuses on furthering the students’ critical thinking skills. Student learn by doing and as a result they gain a more holistic understanding of the online information gathering process. If anything,

Levy could have taken this assignment a step further and asked students to not only read Wikipedia, but to also edit specific entries. Teaching students how to edit Wikipedia for themselves is not only empowering them to contribute to an online community of knowledge production, it gets them thinking about how authority is constructed in an online context.

Lastly, Levy identifies librarians as underrepresented resources in course development and instruction resources.¹² However, Levy's tendency to treat everything as an "object of study" occasionally overreaches. For Mission #2, Levy instructs students to go to the library and "take a selfie" with a librarian. This innocuous request could be met with some antagonism if librarians are not informed that students will be requesting their photograph.¹³ This is not unlike the frustration expressed by academic librarians in which well-meaning faculty will assign scavenger hunts in the library, only to have students learn little about how to effectively engage with library resources.¹⁴ Basically, faculty should make sure to communicate with librarians, especially at large institutions, if they are planning some sort of interactive component in the library for their students. This is especially true for courses that span multiple campuses in which making sure everyone is on the same page may be difficult. That being said, Levy does a fine job of celebrating libraries and librarians as a dynamic and critical elements to student success, active learning and information literacy. Over the course of learning about this project, Levy's

¹² Juliette Levy and Steve Anderson, "Bringing DH into the library: pedagogy, games and online education" (presentation abstract, Digital Humanities Summer Institute 2015 Colloquium, Victoria, British Columbia, June 4-8, 2015). <http://thelifedhsi.org/tag/digital-zombies/>.

¹³ Whether UC librarians were aware of this mission ahead of time was unknown.

¹⁴ Rugan, Elizabeth G. and Nero, Muriel D. (2013) "Library Scavenger Hunts: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 61: 3.

sustained engagement with library and information science students, librarians, and library collections allude to the diversifying role of librarianship in higher education.

Conclusion

The relationship of the project to the larger mission of instruction at the project's host, the University of California at Riverside will continue to play an important role in shape the future of *DZ*. Does it remain a pet project of its creator, and if so, what are the benefits of staying “underground”? What are the drawbacks? How do issues of scalability impact the adaptation of such a project to be revised for a wider audience? If so, what are the challenges? What are the opportunities? This brings us to a broader question—how can we gauge the success of digital tools that challenge the assumptions of instructional decorum and standard means of achieving the stated learning outcomes? All of these questions can't be addressed to the fullest extent in this paper, but they do provide a jumping off point for future work. In that sense, perhaps *Digital Zombies* could serve as a case study for creating other projects of similar scope at institutions with similar makeup as those at Riverside and the University of California system more broadly.

Kristina —

This review gives a rich and detailed account of its subject — even tracing the history of student interactions on Twitter, for instance. But it's also, even more importantly, good at setting the project it's describing in a series of larger contexts. (The ed-tech industry, for instance, or similar “scavenger hunts” designed by faculty.) As a result, the review becomes something more interesting than a simple project description; it really casts light on the contemporary state of digital pedagogy at large.

Project grade: A +

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