Reviews in Digital Humanities • Vol. 2, No. 5

Review: Visualizing Objects, Places, and Spaces

Brandon Walsh¹

¹University of Virginia

Published on: May 10, 2021

DOI: 10.21428/3e88f64f.bf2d3fa7

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Project

Visualizing Objects, Places, and Spaces: A Digital Project Handbook

Project Directors

[Beth Fischer](#), Williams College

[Hannah Jacobs](#), Duke University

Project URL

<https://handbook.pubpub.org/>

Project Reviewer

[Brandon Walsh](#), University of Virginia

Project Overview**Beth Fischer and Hannah Jacobs**

As the digital humanities have grown in practice, training materials for experienced practitioners have become readily available. Yet, as the authors found during their work at the [National Humanities Center’s Summer Institute on Objects, Places, and the Digital Humanities](#), there remains a need for resources that introduce core methodological considerations necessary for scholars and practitioners with any level of prior knowledge to plan and execute a digital project. This gap between theory and tools is especially apparent in fields dealing with visual materials and physical spaces where projects often require adapting and combining multiple tools, including moving between commercial/proprietary and open-source resources.

Visualizing Objects, Places, and Spaces: A Digital Project Handbook blends high-level project-planning principles with tool-specific examples to address that gap. It answers questions about workflow, resources, and computational principles common to many visually-oriented digital projects but does not provide step-by-step instructions for specific tasks. The handbook also addresses issues inherent to work with visual and historical materials, including those of data incompleteness and uncertainty, critical approaches to data structures, and ethics of use and representation. Sections (“project types”) describe methods common in visual studies: archival, temporal, spatial, quantitative, narrative, dimensional, and networked. Each project type is broken into project management topics (“project stages”), from initial scoping and budgeting to creating workflows and planning long-term maintenance. Case studies and

assignments contributed by external authors show how these principles can be applied. Readers can explore by project stage or type, and each section is exportable as a PDF to create a customized handbook.

Beth Fischer and Hannah Jacobs are the handbook's co-editors. Fischer is the Digital Humanities Postdoctoral Fellow at the Williams College Museum of Art, where she advises faculty, students, and museum audiences on the use of digital tools and digital resources while conducting her own research on medieval art. Jacobs is the Digital Humanities Specialist for the Wired! Lab at Duke University. She consults on and contributes to faculty and student projects, researches and teaches digital humanities methods, and works with a network of colleagues to build up digital humanities capacities on campus and beyond.

The handbook models sustainable best practices through its use of an open-source hosting platform with exportable content and minimal long-term maintenance requirements.¹ Fischer and Jacobs prepare the project types and stages, which undergo open review by external reviewers before publication. Fischer and Jacobs edit the case studies and assignments before publication. We encourage contributions from graduate students, independent scholars, and practitioners working outside the U.S. and Europe. All authors and peer reviewers receive full attribution. PubPub allows us to incorporate ORCID references and assign individual DOIs so that contributors can reference their publications directly. We publish under Creative Commons licenses. To date, over half of the planned project stages has been published, and future updates to existing content are planned. We have presented the handbook at conferences,

including DH2020, the Global Digital Humanities Symposium, and the Digital Humanities Collaborative Institute.

Project Review

Brandon Walsh

Visualizing Objects, Places, and Spaces: A Digital Project Handbook (VOPS), a project overseen by Beth Fischer and Hannah Jacobs, aims to provide a compendium of resources for all stages of digital project development. Published on the PubPub platform,² VOPS builds upon other resources like DevDH³ by collecting discussions of project development lifecycles into four interconnected categories: the developmental phase appropriate to it, project types, case studies, and assignments.

The resources provided by VOPS and categorized as “project types” are organized by methodology: archival, dimensional, narrative, networked, quantitative, spatial, and temporal. The “project stages” refer to broad categories familiar to digital project development: planning; prototyping and wireframing; timelines and workflows; tools and resources; teams and expertise; budgets and funding; documentation; and updates, maintenance, and sustainability. As they are contributed through the site’s peer review process, resources in the digital assignments and case studies categories do not follow such a strict ontology. Contributions to these categories are linked to a type and a stage, but because they are user contributed, not all types or stages are fully connected to a case study or assignment at this time. For example, the “narrative” project type provides examples of narrative case studies and assignments, but the “network” project type does not possess similar materials yet. While any one of these collections would be useful, VOPS is novel for the way in which its reading interface connects all of its components: a resource on project beginnings might connect to planning units specific to temporal projects, while a discussion of archival funding might direct users to project case studies or classroom assignments that make specific use of digital archives.

VOPS is not only an exceptional digital resource but also a publication platform. The project regularly solicits new case studies to add to its network of materials. This format offers an interesting opportunity for project directors to reflect on their work’s funding, development, and more as part of a public-facing and professionally legible narrative. VOPS also answers the call of the #citepedagogy⁴ movement by offering a platform for teachers to publish and reflect on digital assignments. Most opportunities

for publishing on teaching and pedagogy tend to be in venues specifically for those topics; in VOPS, such materials are published as part of a broader network of research projects and resources. This allows VOPS to make a case for both the intellectual rigor of pedagogical materials as well as their deep ties to the research process.

VOPS takes important steps towards democratizing access to digital expertise by presenting its materials on an open access platform. The capaciousness of VOPS will prove particularly invaluable for students and early-career scholars who may not otherwise have easy access to local resources for project guidance. VOPS will also prove useful for librarians and staff in similar consultancy positions looking for cross-cutting, method-specific resources to share with their communities. Future developments that VOPS might address relate to navigation and guided tours. While the cross-connections between the four types of components are useful to those with deep digital humanities knowledge, the resultant, non-linear set of resources can be a bit difficult to navigate. Early-career visitors might especially benefit from a few suggested paths in and through the resources. Nonetheless, these improvements are minor as this flexibility also stands as one of the project's greatest strengths, allowing visitors to chart their own path through the work most relevant to their needs.

Footnotes

1. The *Handbook* is hosted on MIT's PubPub, a platform within MIT's Knowledge Futures Group, a group "committed to providing PubPub for free forever, releasing open-source code, and operating under non-profit, sustainable, researcher-friendly business models" (<https://www.pubpub.org/>, accessed October 13, 2019). ↵
2. <https://www.pubpub.org/> ↵
3. Appleford, Simon, and Jennifer Guiliano. "DevDH: Development for the Digital Humanities." *DevDH.org*, 2013. <http://devdh.org>. ↵
4. <https://blog.mkgold.net/tag/citepedagogy/> ↵