**Pale Males 2.0:**
Revisiting a Traditional American Studies Project Using Digital Humanities Tools

by Stephanie Margolin

**EDITOR’S SUMMARY**

Though research papers have traditionally been presented as text, digital humanities tools bring new capabilities that can transform a presentation. Moving from a familiar written format to a digital multimedia work can be daunting, involving an unfamiliar work process. Technology options and support are available through a variety of sources, including universities, the American Studies Association’s Digital Humanities Caucus and the Alliance for Digital Humanities Organizations. Choosing a presentation tool that supports desired features, such as interactive conversation, is key. While the process of developing a digital presentation can be initially challenging for an author, reproducing a traditional thesis in a dynamic format makes it more lively and engaging, collaborative and available for broader use.

**KEYWORDS**

humanities, digital audio files, scholarly publishing, information technology, multimedia, dissertations, digital video files

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This paper considers how one might use digital humanities tools to re-think an American studies project. With these tools, we can transform a traditional, text-based thesis into a multimedia presentation, which can then be used to generate further thought, discussion and opinions. The original project, titled *Pale Males Gone Pell Mell: James Dean, Axl Rose and Adolescent Male Rebellion*, was my master’s thesis written in 1992 [1]. The paper examined James Dean as “Jim Stark” in the film *Rebel Without a Cause* and Axl Rose of the band Guns’n’Roses through the lens of men’s studies. While the central thesis relied heavily on the visual, the format was limited to a written analysis. Using the currently available digital humanities tools, we can add a much-needed visual component to this thesis. At the same time, readers who took a passive role in the past might now be invited to interact with the material, draw their own conclusions and expand their experience.

**Getting Started**

For American studies scholars interested in adding a digital humanities component to their repertoire, the American Studies Association now includes a Digital Humanities Caucus in which they might participate (www.theasa.net/caucus_digital_humanities/P5). The Alliance for Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO) (digitalhumanities.org) also offers resources and support for these endeavors. However, the first place to seek help or mentoring might well be on one’s own campus as a growing number of colleges and universities house digital humanities programs. Often these programs offer support that includes development of homegrown technology solutions or customization of extant open source options to meet the particular
needs of scholars and projects. When a digital humanities program is not available, ADHO’s wiki of digital research tools (called DiRT) has been a useful place to go to learn more [2]. Tools discussed below were selected from that site in December 2011. However, the wiki is no longer being updated and is being replaced by Project Bamboo’s site, “Bamboo DiRT” [3].

Moving from a traditional academic presentation such as a written thesis to a presentation using digital humanities tools can transform telling to showing, thus enriching the audience’s experience. Consider the video essay, which has proven itself more effective than mere written analysis. In film critic Jim Emerson’s video essay, “In the cut, Part I: Shots in the Dark (Knight)” Emerson pastes together the key scenes that comprise his thesis about an action sequence in the film that he finds unsatisfactory. He then narrates his argument via voice-over [4]. Already used in cinema studies, such an essay seems an ideal strategy for Pale Males and other American studies projects and possibly also a powerful choice for audio and/or video projects in art history, performance studies and/or media studies.

While digital humanities tools provide unique ways with which to interact with material, the work process is often unfamiliar to traditional scholars and can be complex. How, for example, does one construct a video essay? Jim Groom and Alan Levine have created an excellent guide in their “Video Essay Tutorial” as part of their online digital storytelling course. This guide, written in an easy-to-follow, conversational style, provides step-by-step guidance through the process of creating a video essay. The process is complicated and includes finding the desired clips, “ripping” the clips and putting the whole thing together with narration. Groom and Levine’s guide recommends tools for each step of the process, presenting tools available for both PC and Mac, and many of their recommended tools are free [5].

Once the video essay has been created (or at least outlined), the scholar must choose the most appropriate presentation tool, aligned with the stated project goals. For our Pale Males project, in addition to adding the multimedia component, we hope to invite reader feedback, in order to make the project more interactive and perhaps build some kind of community around the project. Therefore, we are looking for a presentation platform that can engage the viewers and accommodate feedback and other user interactions.

Selecting the Right Tools

As discussed earlier, we might find – or build – an effective presentation platform with the help of our own institution’s digital humanities program. Without such a program, or while searching for a ready-made solution, consider one of the tools mentioned below. As outlined here, each option offers a distinct benefit, but further research and testing is needed to determine the best tool for transforming Pale Males into an interactive presentation.

First, we consider Sophie (tagline: “redefines the notion of a book to include rich media, reader feedback & conversation within a networked environment”), which was developed by the Future of the Book project and has been adopted by the Institute for Multimedia Literacy (IML) in the School of Cinematic Studies at the University of Southern California (www.sophieproject.org). In promising to combine rich media and reader conversation, Sophie appears to meet two key goals we’ve set for the Pale Males project. However, Sophie can be challenging for viewers to use. They must download the (free) Sophie reader tool in order to view a Sophie project (analogous to, but more complicated than, reading an Adobe PDF file, for example). Authoring appears to be complex, too. While the features are exciting there appears to be a significant learning curve to working with Sophie.

Pachyderm (tagline: “multimedia authoring for peanuts”) is somewhat less complex: visitors can view projects directly without downloading additional tools. “Pachyderm pieces are interactive, Flash-based presentations that can include images, sounds, video, and text” [6]. The software was originally developed by the New Media Consortium (NMC). While the group no longer supports Pachyderm, the open-source code is available through SourceForge (sourceforge.net/projects/pachyderm/?source=directory). Projects in the Pachyderm gallery on the NMC site appear somewhat lackluster. There is little evidence of interactivity or space for user comments, begging the question: Is this tool robust enough for the interactive video essay presentation envisioned for Pale Males?

VoiceThread (tagline: “conversations in the cloud”) is the final option we will consider (http://voicethread.com). Essentially a slide show with additional features, VoiceThread focuses on collaborative conversations,
allowing participants to comment by text or via recorded audio or video. One limitation of note is that VoiceThread (both the free version and the paid version) has file size restrictions: 25 MB and 100 MB, respectively. While VoiceThread does not have the production value of the other two tools, it is the most user-friendly. VoiceThread might be the quickest and easiest way to prototype a project of this sort.

It is exciting to think of how our Pale Males project might be adapted and expanded using digital humanities tools. Becoming comfortable with the new digital humanities technology and new work processes will be a significant challenge, though one that also promises rich intellectual rewards. While creating a simple prototype video essay will not be simple, doing so will breathe new life into the project and greatly advance its relevance, inviting the audience to actively see the material and form their own opinions of it.

With the ability to present the evidence such as the film and video clips directly to the audience, there are new possibilities for Pale Males. The completed project might be used as a learning module or online lesson in an American studies class where students are invited to share their own thoughts or contribute an essay of their own. Or the project might launch an online collaboration among a community of scholars addressing the material collaboratively. Each of these is far removed from the fate of the first version of Pale Males back in 1992.

Resources Mentioned in the Article