

Mashing Up the Grid: Web 2.0, GIS, and the Humanities Grid

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One of the most interesting developments in recent years has been the use of Web 2.0 technologies by communities of non-expert users to create new information and new applications. Wikis, mash-ups, social networking tools, and other user-contributed information have caused scholars to re-think traditional conceptions of how knowledge is created. In geography, for example, there is a growing recognition that volunteered spatial information can add significantly to data development as well as analysis and interpretation, benefiting both scholars and non-expert users alike. Humanities scholars have been slow to embrace the potential for a new kind of scholarship that links native and expert knowledge through the use of Web 2.0 and Grid-based tools. Public humanists, that is, humanists employed in museums, libraries, and other non-academic institutions, have not been so reluctant to use these tools or to exploit the potential of networked communities to advance their aims. In part, the difference is explained by the different mission of the two groups: scholars focus their work on other scholars; public humanists seek to engage non-expert users. The growing divide between these two groups poses problems for the relevance of the humanities generally and especially raises the possibility that traditional scholarship will increasingly be viewed as arcane and not useful by a wider public. This paper explores the barriers to the adoption of Grid-based and Web 2.0 tools in traditional humanities disciplines and proposes strategies for using them effectively. It focuses on lessons learned in the spatial sciences, especially through the use of spatial technologies such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Not only does a growing body of literature exist in geography that points to the integrity and reliability of non-expert or volunteered information, but a spatial or location-based approach to knowledge offers key advantages to humanists who seek to take advantage of Web 2.0 and Grid technologies. The paper also will draw on work being undertaken by the Virtual Center for Humanities GIS, a collaboratory among West Virginia University, Florida State University, and IUPUI, to demonstrate the power of Grid-based Web 2.0 tools and methods for humanities research.