2012 American Historical Association Annual Meeting
Discussion/Roundtable-Panel: "Digital History: State of the Field"
Chair: William G. Thomas, U. of Nebraska
Panelists: Jon Christensen, Stanford U.; Jo Guldi, U. of Chicago; Andrew Torget, U. of North Texas

Digital History as a field emerged with the explosion of the World Wide Web, since 1994, the dominant means of information access, knowledge acquisition, and communication for the public and increasingly for the scholarly community. Because the medium is so new and the technology so quickly changing, we have only just begun to explore the new forms that historical scholarship might take. We need well-defined examples of digital scholarship, established best practices, and, especially, clear standards of review for tenure. We know that time has not solved the problem; indeed, recent studies show that scholars in history and other humanities disciplines are as wedded as ever to traditional forms of communication. Young humanities scholars, especially in history, are not experimenting in the digital medium in large part because the wider professional culture has been slow to change. A whole range of social and cultural barriers confront scholars who consider digital scholarship. Their departmental colleagues know little about digital technologies, practices, or methods, and their promotion and tenure committees, outside reviewers, and upper administrations often consider peer-reviewed monographs the sole basis for advancement.

The current problem is multifaceted—administration leaders often seek to promote digital technologies in teaching or research, yet department tenure committees often rank digital work below a published monograph; libraries have taken the lead in creating digital research platforms for faculty, yet university presses and scholarly journals remain the gold standard for tenure and promotion; senior faculty often feel liberated to embrace experimentation, yet junior faculty often prudently avoid risks. The growth of digital history, it should be stated, has been given shape and encouragement most directly by the leading professional associations and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The *American Historical Review* offered a pioneering set of peer-reviewed digital articles, the *Journal of American History* has reviewed leading history web sites, and the NEH has funded important history projects, from The Valley of the Shadow to Zotero*,* and created a portal for leading digital sites (Edsitement). These steps have provided absolutely critical opportunity for scholars to work in the digital medium.

The problem historians face now is institutional, structural, and social, and this panel discussion by a slate of researchers actively pursuing digital forms of scholarship is aimed at discovering and lowering these barriers in the discipline of history.