

Honors in Multimedia Scholarship Project Parameters

As we begin to bring multimedia production into the classroom, perhaps one of the biggest challenges is in grading. The academic essay enjoys a relatively stable form: in grading, educators look for a convincing thesis, support and evidence, as well as a structure appropriate to the essay's goals. Multimedia projects do not share either the longevity that allows for such consensus, nor the stability of form that allows easy and shared recognition of the strengths and weaknesses of the project. Similarly, students often experience a degree of trepidation – what does the instructor expect? What is an "A" project?

The following parameters were developed to offer all involved in multimedia scholarship a set of guidelines with which to gauge the effectiveness of a student project.

- Conceptual Core
 - Is the project's thesis clearly articulated?
 - Is the project productively aligned with one or more of the multimedia genres outlined in the IML program?
 - Does the project effectively engage with the primary issues raised in the project's research?
- Research Competence
 - Does the project display evidence of substantial research and thoughtful engagement with its subject?
 - Does the project use a variety of types of sources (i.e., not just Web sites)?
 - Does the project deploy more than one approach to its topic?
- Form and Content
 - Do structural and formal elements of the project reinforce the conceptual core in a productive way?
 - Are design decisions deliberate and controlled?
 - Is the effectiveness of the project uncompromised by technical problems?
- Creative Realization
 - Does the project approach its subject in creative or innovative ways?
 - Does the project use media and design principles effectively?
 - Does this project achieve significant goals that could not have been realized on paper?

In addition to this grid of parameters, we also offer a set of concrete guidelines developed by the IML for further considering scholarly multimedia projects. Indeed, while these projects may take many forms and involve many types of media, we have found that within the university context and with respect to our mandate to nurture multimedia scholars in the creation of critical, argumentative projects, there are certain characteristics common to successful examples of scholarly multimedia. Below, a synopsis of these characteristics:

- **Coherence:** First and foremost, academic multimedia projects should be *coherent*, effectively spanning the gap between "tradition" (text) and "innovation" (multimedia) and ultimately *balancing* their components. A successful multimedia project, in other words, would clearly suffer if translated into a traditional essay, or, conversely, into a "purely" multimedia experience with little or no connection to the broader field within which it participates. The strong multimedia project is not merely a well-written paper with multimedia elements "pasted in"; neither is it merely a good multimedia project with more familiar textual elements "tacked on." Coherence, then, refers to the graceful balance of familiar scholarly gestures and multimedia expression which mobilizes the scholarship in new ways.

- **Self-reflexivity:** A second quality accounts for the authorial understanding of the production choices made in constructing the project. Because these may be difficult or impossible to discern by engaging with the project, we advocate post-production reflection, offering students the opportunity to reflect on and to justify the choices and decisions made during the creation of the project. We also recognize that in many instances it may be more significant for students to reckon with the process of production rather than an end product; again, reflexivity through reflection helps manifest the evolution, and gives instructors a means for gauging learning.
- **Control:** By control, we mean the extent to which a project demonstrates authorial intention by providing the user with a carefully planned structure, often made manifest through a navigation scheme and a design suited to the project's argument and content. Control has to do with authorial tone / voice / cuing as well as with the quality of the project's interactivity if it calls for user interaction. If, for example, it is the student's intention to confuse a user, it is perfectly appropriate to build that confusion into the project's navigation scheme; such choices, however, must always be justified in the project's self-reflexivity.
- **Cogency:** Cogency refers to the quality of the project's argument and its reflection of a conceptual core. Cogency is not a function of an argument's "rightness" or "wrongness." With most assignments, students are free to take any position they like; cogency is reflected in the way the argument is made, not in what the argument is.
- **Evidence:** What is the quality of the data used to support the project's argument? Is it suited to the argument? Further, the project should reflect fundamental research competency as understood and dictated by evolving standards of multimedia research and expression.
- **Complexity:** Multimedia projects often suffer in being considered somehow outside a larger discourse or context. Complexity refers to the ways in which the project acknowledges its broader context, contributes to a larger discussion and generally participates in an academic community.
- **Technique:** Strong scholarly multimedia projects should exhibit an understanding of the affordances of the tools used to create the project.
- **Documentation:** Finally, with a nod toward the dramatic technological shifts that characterize contemporary media practices and the fact that formats come and go with alarming rapidity, we advocate a documentation process that describes the project, its formal structure and thematic concerns, with attention to the project's attributes and the particular needs required for either the student's own archival process, or those of an instructor, program, or other entity. This, too, offers another stage for assessment, inviting students to consider their work within a larger context, and offering instructors a site for understanding the learning that has occurred.