

Rebecca Ciota
Discovery & Integrated Systems Librarian
Script accompanying presentation

The Digital Potential:
Making Digital Objects More Than a TIFF Image and a MODS Record

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Slide 1

Hello, I'm Rebecca Ciota and I am the Discovery & Integrated Systems Librarian at Grinnell College, in Iowa. Today I will be presenting on "The Digital Potential: Making Digital Objects More Than a TIFF Image and a MODS Record." I'll be talking about the ways that our digital resources can be objects in their own right, and not a surrogate for an analog object. In other words, how libraries can make greater use of their homegrown electronic resources through collaborations between scholars, students, and the larger community?

Slide 2

All right, so you will probably want some background. Even if you don't, it's coming.

So Grinnell College Libraries has a digital assets system called Digital Grinnell. It's built using the open-source software Islandora and holds our institutional repository as well as digitized copies of materials held by the Grinnell College Libraries, by the College's art gallery, by various academic departments at the College, and by the local community's museum and library. We have a lot of stuff in Digital Grinnell, and these collections are only growing. We have one full-time applications developer working on the system, as well as many other stakeholders such as our digital humanists, our data science librarian, our Special Collections and Archives faculty and staff, and myself the systems librarian.

I help oversee the technical aspects of Digital Grinnell. And I'm a librarian – I believe in the whole preserving intellectual and cultural heritage thing. So, of course, I'm biased and say that Digital Grinnell is worth all the work we put into it. But I began to wonder: are the majority of the objects in Digital Grinnell just preservation copies? Are they just substitutes for our physical collections when the Special Collections and Archives are closed, or our patrons are off-campus, or when a print copy is inconvenient?

Slide 3

In Digital Grinnell, our objects look something of this nature. This is a pectopteris fossil from Mazon Creek, Illinois that Grinnell College's geology department holds. The Libraries, one of the geology faculty, and a geology student collaborated to take photos of this fossil – and our others – and create metadata for each fossil. The end result looks like this. We have a high-quality TIFF and a MODS record.

My question continues. This is pretty cool. To me at least. But isn't it just a TIFF image and a MODS record? It seems like just a tool for discovery. The patron would be better served discovering the fossil here and then going to see the physical fossil, right?

Well, maybe and maybe not.

My presentation today will look at the potential for digital objects created by libraries and their surrounding communities. These digital objects have the potential to be useful beyond simply being surrogates. So, let's start talking about that.

Slide 4

One way to maximize on a digital object's potential is to use it in the classroom, in conjunction with its physical counterpart.

My friend Mattie Taormina gives an instructional example in *Using Primary Sources*. Her exercise "Engage Those Senses! Surrogates Are Not Enough" is a 45 minute one-shot instructional session for librarians to give to students in various disciplines, who need experience working in-depth with primary resources. In her exercise, she has students view a digital surrogate for a physical object in the collections. The students are then asked to describe the original object – what it feels like, smells like, its size, etc. – using only the digital object as reference. Then, the students are shown the physical object; then the students compare the physical to the digital. The exercise is rounded out with further sensory exploration of more physical objects. In Taormina's exercise, we see that the digital and physical objects are not identical. The students learn different things from the different objects.

Other faculty have also developed similar exercises to prove that digital resources are distinct from their physical counterparts. At Oberlin College, I was lucky enough to participate in Professor of Japanese Ann Sherif's course on the book history of East Asia. Sherif had us study a digitized version of *Kiho Gafu* hosted on the Five Colleges of Ohio Digital Collections site. We were to determine out of what material the original object was made – that was reasonably easy because you could see the mulberry fiber in the digitized copy. It became harder when we were asked to note how many pages the original had, its binding, whether any of the illustrations were in color. Once we had written an essay describing what the digital copy, we had to study the physical object. I soon realized most of my guesses from studying the digital object were wrong. After studying both the digital and the physical copies, I realized that the digital was its own book – similar in some ways but very different and separate from the original.

At Grinnell College, Monessa Cummins, an Associate Professor in our Classics department, uses Digital Grinnell in conjunction with our Special Collections' physical materials to focus on the materiality of physical objects. Cummins has her students study the digital object, including the associated MODS record, alongside the physical one. The digital object allowed for access at hours when Special Collections was closed; and the MODS record provided details that might not be apparent to undergraduates, like the weight or time period. But the undergraduates found the physical objects more impactful in studying how Ancient Romans interacted with the coins.

In all these examples, the instructor is trying to highlight the importance of the physicality of the original object. But in emphasizing the materiality of the physical object, they also demonstrate how the digital object exists – in some ways – on its own. For example, this Republican Denarius is a flat object where you can see two images; and the accompanying metadata is an interpretation of both that flat object and the physical object. In some ways, this digital object is not a replica of the original but an object in its own right.

Slide 5

Another way digital items can become more than a TIFF image and a MODS record is through community outreach and crowdsourcing. Grinnell College's Special Collections and Archives

and the Drake Community Library of Grinnell, Iowa collaborate on the Poweshiek History Preservation Project (PHPP), which digitizes and makes available archival collections related to the history of Poweshiek County in Iowa. We house the digital collection in our digital management software Digital Grinnell. Digital Grinnell has the functionality to allow the public to annotate the image. This increases the information the archives have about their collections; and this also engages the community. We see here that for this image, a community member Marilyn Norris Holmes has corrected our metadata; she says this is of a 1925 fire, not 1918. Through this crowdsourcing, this annotation feature, the digital resources in PHPP aren't simply surrogates but a way of interacting with the larger community.

Slide 6

A third avenue for maxing out the potential of digitized objects is to incorporate them into a larger digital projects. For example, at Grinnell, we are encouraging faculty members interested in digital projects to utilize Digital Grinnell as source material. These most often result in online exhibitions, curated by undergraduate students.

We are also looking to create an interactive map using one of our collections. We are currently ingesting several hundred historic postcards. When they are fully ingested, we hope to make a map detailing the locations from which these historical postcards came. Here, I have a mockup of what it might look like. We will use the cartographic coordinates included in the metadata to place a pin on a map. And when you click on the pin on the map, you'll get a popup of the postcard and its metadata. So, that is another larger project in which we can incorporate our digital objects, making them more than just a TIFF and a MODS record.

Slide 7

So, that is the end of my presentation. Before we get to questions, I would like to thank two of my colleagues – Monessa Cummins, Associate Professor at Grinnell College, and Ann Sherif, Professor of Japanese at Oberlin College – for allowing me to use their assignments as examples. And also a thanks to Mark McFate, Grinnell College's Digital Library Applications Developer, for helping me find some of the best examples to show you.

Slide 8

Questions

References

Taormina, M. (2014). Engage Those Senses! Surrogates Are Not Enough. In *Using Primary Sources* (pp. 144-148). Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC.