Today I am going to:

* Give some background to the practical part of my research

* Explain the title – in particular the elf

* Talk about method

* Go through some of the themes that will be central to the thesis in the end
CFP - oral history archive, dedicated to collecting stories of everyday life in Cork city & county.
The focus of my digital PRACTICE during this research

• Pilot project – a trial of Omeka and Neatline, created just by me but using interviews from a subcollection within the CFP archive, based on a project about North and South Main Streets
• That was tested with CFP stakeholders and we decided to create a new Cork Memory Map using the same software and interface Launched at OHNI conference in October
• Also have worked on a series of guidelines with Laura Murphy at the CFP

• That’s the practical side.
• Now working on writing up.

Which brings me to my title....
ELF-
• Typo - demonstrates what stage I am “at”
• Writing up - getting my thesis finished is the goal

ELF-
• What might be expected of traditional folklore research
• My work on digital resource use doesn’t appear to fit at first glance
• But the focus of many folklorists’ everyday activities

E.G.
• International Society for Ethnologists and Folklorists (SIEF) biennial congress, increasingly common to have panels about digital

SIEF 2015, 3 panel explicitly about “digital” out of 111 (plus, 2 sessions in the archives panels were also about digital)
SIEF 2013, 2 panel session about “digital” out of 58
SIEF 2011, 1 panel session about digital/virtual out of 86

ELF –
• Corrected typo should have read “felt”
• “I felt” illustrating that my work is qualitative
My background before I started this PhD was almost exclusively quantitative. I have had to “learn” qualitative analysis.

Article from a few years ago (2013) in the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* follows 2 quantitative researchers (a microbiologist and an engineer) as they start qualitative research – it analyses how they feel as they learn new methods, and how they feel it has changed their approaches to their work.

One of the researchers, the microbiologist, happens to be Irish and moved to Canada a few decades before. – and that sense of having to learn a new culture and how to fit in is what she compares the experience to a sense of acculturation – something that demands patience and time.

Why do this?

### Mullaghattin F3, S8 (15E0375) Weeds

<table>
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<th>Family</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Indeterminate weeds</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>30</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Mint family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flax family</td>
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<td>Pea family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cabbage family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knotweed family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pink family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goosefoot family</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buttercup family</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Possible barley grains (cf. Hordeum vulgare)
WHERE ARE THE SOCIAL STUDIES OF DIGITAL HUMANITIES?

“Why is no one following digital humanities scholars around to understand their practices, in the way that scientists have been studied for the last several decades?” (Borgman 2009)

Qualitative analyses one way of taking up Borgman’s challenge to develop a form of “social studies” of DH - or at least, using a method that is also used in social studies...

Borgman’s questions and challenges are framed as a call to action for humanists, DH in particular. Idea of following scientists around, since 1970s is sociology, eg. Latour and Woolgar, Laboratory Life, looking at the ways "in which the daily activities of working scientists lead to the construction of scientific facts" (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laboratory_Life, accessed 6 Feb 2017) by following scientists working in a lab around

While I’m not doing a social science study, I am using a common social science methodology, that is – ethnography – to gather data. * Collecting data by compiling an ethnographic diary (notebooks and private blog) * User studies – recorded sessions, transcribed, with transcripts being cited extensively in some sections of my thesis * Short interviews about aspects of oral history and digital practice with oral historians

BUT
• I am the ethnographer
• I am also the digital humanist
• So this is ethnography that is describing a lot of my own work and experience
AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY?

- “autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, 740)

- Autoethnographic writing is usually autobiographical – using the “I”

- It is about the researcher and their participation and interactions with the research subjects, and how this forms part of the research process

I have tossed this word auto-ethnography backwards and forwards a lot over the past few months, investigating whether this is what I am doing as I write.

One of the problems is that different writers and practitioners seem to characterise autoethnography in different ways - in 2000 Ellis and Bochner wrote that various different ethnographers chose to use the term autoethnography to describe their work although the emphasis could be quite different – on the self, the I, the research process or on culture.

But a definite characteristic is the use of “I” - I am certainly using “I” and to some traditional researchers this would indicate an autoethnography.

Increasingly, however, autoethnography has come to represent work where the self of the researcher is very much at the forefront – e.g. the work of Carolyn Ellis The Ethnographic I – emerging notion that this is a term that focuses very much on personal experience

My research is more general – I am not the actual site of the research, but instead an integral part of the research process, even a tool in that research. And some of the reflections are about my own responses to the situations that arise.
I'm using a more general ethnographic approach
“My task was to enter the behind-the-scenes world of the Science Museum, to find out how it works, what kinds of passions and ideas motivate practice, and whether and how this percolates into the science that it put on public display.”
(Macdonald 2002, 5)

I am leaning heavily on the kind of approach taken by Sharon Macdonald, who did an ethnographic study of the production of knowledge in the Science Museum in London in the late 80s.

“My task was to enter the behind-the-scenes world of the Science Museum, to find out how it works, what kinds of passions and ideas motivate practice, and whether and how this percolates into the science that it put on public display.”
(Macdonald 2002, 5)

The appeal of this, for me, is that she is working primarily with the creator of content (although her book does also include a chapter on visitors the main narrative is about the creators).

This also became the main focus of my research as it progressed – while I had initially intended looking at audience for digital projects, the research increasingly became about the process of creation – and all the issues that emerged as websites and digital content were prepared for.
MANGLE OF DH

“Some digital projects iterate, some digital projects fail; some engender whole new fields of investigation, while others close in on themselves… This is the mangle of digital humanities, and it is certainly part of current practice, although often erased, forgotten or variously overcome” (Presner, 2015, p. 58).

The first theme or chapter for my thesis is about the idea of the mangle of DH – iteration and re-iteration of digital projects

This is because my project has been a re-iteration of a digital project first created by someone else – The Cork Memory Map - and then, because of various issues, recreated by me elsewhere and since built on by others – in terms of adding content

This idea of some projects falling by the wayside – having technological lifespan after which, if they are not maintained, the projects “fail” – or are no longer usable.

This is a facet of software in general. Ensmenger says “In theory, software should never need maintenance because software does not break down or wear out, at least not in a conventional sense…Except that software does break – all the time, at great expense and inconvenience to its users” (Ensmenger 2010, p. 224-225)

This is the mangle of DH that, up to relatively recently, few digital humanists were willing to talk about – this idea of embracing the messy side of practice is having a “moment” – I’ve been writing about this for one of my chapters and most of my citations are very recent – since I began my research in 2013.

I’ve put this book, Oral History and Digital Humanities up here because it really is an
illustration of this phenomenon. The chapters in the book describe several different
digital oral history projects – out of nine descriptive chapters, five of the authors talk very
candidly about digital “failures” as a feature of the work that they have been involved in
over the past few decades (some projects iterated, some did not). Such personalized
narratives of digital calamity are more common, I think, in OH than in DH (possibly
because of a more ethnographic sensibility in the discipline makes it more acceptable).
* Note these is also the Dombrowski article, “Whatever happened to Project Bamboo”
This, as well as generalised discussions of “failure” by people such as Presner and Chun
and Rody, suggest that this might change in DH in the near future.

Ensmenger, N. (2010). *The Computer Boys Take Over*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and
One of the things that I have struggled with as I have been developing digital projects is a kind of “tug of war” between the theory of oral history – and the things you have to do (sometimes undermining or contradicting that theory – in order to make a website that people are happy with.

“...we ought to be conscious of the performance shapes and forms that oral narratives assume. Furthermore, we should acknowledge that any narrative cannot be separated from its form – from its performance.” (Abrams 2010, 130)

But creating an oral history map, like the Cork Memory Map is essentially a process of de- and re-contextualising excerpts from oral narratives -OH theory is suffused with discussions about this crisis of representation in terms of how oral histories are used; excerpted, edited, interpreted, where does the POWER lie, is analysing oral histories an act of disempowerment, who is entitled to interpret the narratives, etc.
“...it would be great if you did have the transcript and the photo to go with it, every one, because it's just more visually appealing.”,

(LVWC_SR003_040515_MaddenOSheaDee: Stephen Dee 4 May 2015 at Cork Folklore Project)

“I felt in some of it, like, very little, but there might be a need for a little bit more interpretation when you're introducing it about the individual [...] then the context of it is set. [...] I'm not talking a big speel but just to explain who the person is, where they're situated.”

(LVWC_SR001_170216_CFPStaff: Tomás Mac Conmara 17 February 2016 at Cork Folklore Project)

Just a quick look at how that has manifested itself in some of the data that I have collected from user studies.

• I tried to build a site where the idea of orality/aurality were to the fore – but when I did user studies sessions the main comments from people were not about the oral history excerpts, but about making sure that there were pictures and transcripts to accompany them – one respondent said “it would be great if you did have the transcript and the photo to go with it, every one, because it's just more visually appealing.”,

• And in the second session, when I had most of this material added, the request was for more text:

“I felt in some of it, like, very little, but there might be a need for a little bit more interpretation when you’re introducing it about the individual [...] then the context of it is set. [...] I’m not talking a big speel but just to explain who the person is, where they’re situated.”

This also illustrates one feature of the feedback that you get when building digital projects – there is always more that you can do- and in a time bounded project sometimes you might need to draw a line under something and move on
This goes to show that the medium is important – as well as the form – if you are trying to create online content. People want pictures, they want text – and then they want more text and, in particular – context.

I said earlier that one of the features of my work was that I was working with and getting feedback from people who were working on the creative side of on the creating – rather than with end users.

One of the advantages of this when you are looking at people’s responses is that you know all these individuals personally* and can see their own perspectives, where they are coming from, in their response. So, Stephen is a former staff members at CFP who is a big user of social media and he is someone who would be concerned that the display should be visually appealing – his focus is primarily a public facing one. And Tomás comes from an academic oral history background – and therefore whenever he comes across an excerpt from an oral history narrative his concern is that this information should be contextualised. – because for him, oral histories are a research resource.

A similar point has been made by COC in terms of the old memory map:.....

*There are disadvantages as well – for example I think people were reluctant to give negative feedback.
“A central drawback of the map was a lack of contextualisation for the individual stories [that]... severely restricts or nullifies their usefulness as a research resource…” (O’Carroll 2015).
DH is said to “have a radical, open, democratic aspect that is linked to mass literacy movements, making scholarly materials widely available to populations that had not previously had such access” (Chun, Grusin, Jagoda, & Raley, 2016).

I think the differences in Stephen’s and Tomás’ responses may raise a question about the way that different digital projects are built tailored to or catering to different imagined audiences… a research audience or a general public audience.

One of the issues that I feel that has come up in my DH reading - in particular in relation to DH literature about audience, value and impact – is that most writing assumes a scholarly audience… in contrast to the ideal of DH, which is said to have this “radical, open, democratic aspect that is linked to mass literacy movements, making scholarly materials widely available to populations that had not previously had such access” (Chun, Grusin, Jagoda, & Raley, 2016).

Obviously it’s important for CFP as a community organisation to keep the general audience in mind all the time, but also the Project is very aware of it’s potential as a research resource, so it tries to maintain a balance between the 2, research and/or engagement.

So – this is just an illustration of how I have tried to respond to that kind of feedback in
my pilot project

CATALOGUE number
Interview date
Short “bio”
Links to relevant pages about an interview if it comes from a subcollection in the archive

But still thinking that most DH projects fall on one side or the other of this research v engagement divide – and that it needs work and re-thinking to provide one resource that is suitable for both uses

The kinds of digital projects you build depend on the context in which they are created
Dh literature often assumes this context is scholarly
SPECIFICITY MATTERS

- Mangle of DH – this is work that involves iteration and re-iteration. (If a digital project doesn’t work out you shouldn’t just pretend it didn’t happen, but should examine the reasons why.)
- Tug of war – digital publishing can involve some conflict or turmoil between theory and practice. The medium is important.
- Research & Engagement or Research V. Engagement – can you do both in the same project? Does DH do both?

My final point is that specificity matters.

My ethnographic research is:

- About a very specific digital project
- Carried out within a particular organisation
- And at a particular time

But this kind of specificity matters because it has allowed me today to speak (fairly briefly) about much larger themes within DH and in oral history also.
REFERENCES

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