In libraries, and in the professional discourses of librarianship and information studies, we often talk about “technology” as a means to an end. Or, we speculate about technology as though it emanated from the horizon of a futurity that appears sometimes threatening, sometimes empowering, but always inevitable: e.g., artificial intelligence will “revolutionize” the ways we move through the world. In this way, we participate in a vanguard posture of anticipation and expectation that is often associated with the early phases of digital humanities.

But what if the history of technologies is more complex than a simple drive toward progress? This becomes all the more important to consider as the promise of digital tools does not necessarily incorporate the real conditions in which they are encountered. In the flesh — how technologies shape habits of body and mind, just as those habits influence the conditions under which technologies are developed and deployed. In this way, we can see that the drive to digital humanities, like digital technologies more broadly, is a project of participation, identity, and desire.

Yet, in the face of this complexity, we also have an opportunity to realize another project of digital humanities: to participate in the development of technologies as a matter of the conditions under which they are encountered. As digital humanities continues to grow as a field, we can use this project of participation to transform the meaning and purpose of digital humanities as a disciplinary practice.

Designer Ryan Godding’s recent book, Designing History: Theorizing the Digital Humanities (2017), offers a strong case for taking this project seriously. In it, Godding uses the phrase “designerly thinking” to describe the way in which digital technologies emerge through processes of development, experimentation, and iteration. This is in contrast to the way in which we often think about technological development as a series of well-defined steps from conception to implementation. Instead, Godding describes design as a process of shaping and reshaping technologies through ongoing feedback and evaluation.

This approach is particularly relevant to the field of digital humanities, which is characterized by a focus on the development and application of digital tools to the study of human culture. By embracing designerly thinking, we can better understand the ways in which digital technologies are shaped by the context in which they are encountered and the communities that use them.

In this way, digital humanities becomes not just a means to an end, but a project of participation and design. As we develop new digital tools and technologies, we can use this approach to ensure that they are developed in a way that is responsive to the real conditions in which they are encountered and the real needs of the communities that use them.

Ultimately, this is not only a matter of creating better technologies, but also of creating a more equitable and just society. By taking a designerly approach to digital humanities, we can ensure that technological development is not just a matter of progress, but also of justice and equity. This is not just a matter of personal choice, but also a matter of collective action. As we continue to develop new digital tools and technologies, we must do so with an eye toward the real conditions in which they are encountered and the communities that use them. Only then can we truly say that we are designing for the future, rather than designing to control it.