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# A BRIEF HISTORY OF DIGITAL HUMANITIES



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**A BRIEF HISTORY OF  
DIGITAL HUMANITIES**

*(A STORY AS TOLD BY CATS)*

BY AMANDA ROBIN HEMMONS

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## A CAT NAMED D.H.

There once was a cat with fur as black as night, whose name was D.H. She wondered often what those letters stood for. Was it Dormouse Hunter? Or maybe Dread Hairball? Since very few cats knew how to read, none of her cat friends had any ideas either.

Cats are terrible with secrets unless it's their own, so not knowing bothered D.H. very much. Her friends got annoyed with her complaining and sent her to speak with the strange cat down the street.

Nyan was, in fact, the strangest cat D.H. had ever met. He was always wearing some kind of sweet pastry box, and rainbows followed him everywhere he went. There was no question that he knew all sorts of things, though, and he was one of the few other cats that could read.

"Do you know what D.H. stands for?" she asked her strange neighbor.

To D.H.'s surprise, Nyan nodded. "It stands for Digital Humanities," he said.

"What? That's not a good name at all, is it?" D.H. said unhappily. "I don't feel very digital."

"But you like to sleep on top of the computer, don't you?" Nyan pointed out reasonably, and she had to admit this was true.

"What about the humanities part?" D.H. wanted to know. "I like being a cat, I don't want to be human!"

Nyan purred reassuringly. "It doesn't have anything to do with being human. It just means you find humans interesting and you like to study them."

D.H. thought that was a silly comment. Most cats thought humans were interesting, with their silly noises and strange fur. "Is that all?" she said. "There are a lot of cats that find humans interesting, so why aren't there more of them named Humanity?"

"Maybe so. But I don't think many find them interesting enough to teach themselves to read one of the human languages," Nyan responded. He added, when D.H.'s tail lashed back and forth in embarrassment, "Being different from other cats is not a bad thing. I mean, look at me!"

"Hmm," D.H. said doubtfully. "Well, can you tell me more about what it means to be Digital Humanities?"

"Well, I suppose someone has to," Nyan said.

## A HISTORY

"It all starts with punch cards," the strange cat told D.H. He used his rainbows to show her an image of the stiff paper with holes punched into it.

"That doesn't look very digital," D.H. said.

"You'd be surprised!" Nyan said. "The earliest computers ran off of punch cards, you know. They used them to store information, before figuring out how to do that with vacuum tubes and magnets. Even today all computer languages are still based on binary, which is made of ones and zeros, and that comes from the punch cards."

"I think I understand," D.H. said. "The zeros for the punches and the ones for the blank space?" She was pleased at Nyan's agreeing nod. "So what happened with the punch cards?"

"They used them to store information as a concordance. That's an alphabetical list of the main words used in a book or collection of work, and it involves listing every instance of each word with its immediate context. The point, of course, is to then be able to analyze the words, find translations, make indexes, and so on." Nyan twitched his whiskers. "I've never done it myself but it seems like a lot of work."

"I see, so the punch cards are a sort of digital thing. And the words are the humanities part, clearly. Please continue."

"Yes, all right. So we have two people who created punch card systems for analyzing works. Professor Josephine Miles on the poetry of John Dryden in the 1950s, and scholar Roberto Busa on the writings of Thomas Aquinas which took thirty years to complete in 1980," Nyan said.

"My goodness!" D.H. said with wide eyes. "That certainly is a lot of work. And you're telling me this was just punch cards the whole time?"

"Punch cards is where it started, but moved on to computers soon enough," Nyan said. "Scholars began using mainframe computers to automate tasks like word-searching, sorting, and counting, which was much faster than processing information from texts with handwritten or typed index cards."

He went on to describe how, in the decades which followed, archaeologists, classicists, historians, literary scholars, and a broad array of humanities researchers in other disciplines applied emerging computational methods to transform the scholarship of the humanities. D.H. was sure it was all very relevant but she had to fight back more than one yawn. Something something specialized journals founded in the sixties and seventies.

D.H. blinked herself alert again when Nyan started talking about the internet. She was a big fan of the internet; she liked watching videos of other cats being very silly.

"You see," Nyan was saying, "with all these different human scholars making their texts available digitally and working on similar things, it made sense to agree upon some kind of standardization." Nyan continued, "And in the nineties, they made major digital text and image archives, which proved how useful text-encoding for literature could be!"

He shifted his rainbows around until the image of the old punch cards changed to an old clunky computer that was as big as a desk, and then to the size of a large box that sat on a desk.

The screen on the illusory computer switched on and a basic black screen with green text popped up. D.H. stared at the blinking cursor with a cat focus and swishing tail.

Nyan didn't seem to notice her distraction. "With computers being linked through local networks-" D.H. jumped as a dozen more computers, miniature in size, popped into existence in an orbit around the first one. "-and then connected worldwide through the internet, researchers all over were experimenting with databases and hypertextual editing. This was to be structured around links and nodes, not like the standard linear convention of print."

Nyan's rainbow vision of the old computer faded and was replaced by a modern desktop that D.H. was more familiar with and had seen many humans using. "Personal computing and the World Wide Web meant that Digital Humanities work could become less centered on text and more on design. The multimedia nature of the internet has allowed Digital Humanities work to incorporate audio, video, and other components in addition to text."

"Like the funny animal videos you can see online," D.H. said, nodding wisely.

"Yes, exactly!" Nyan said excitedly. "did you see one of the ones I was in?"

"Oh, um. Yes, definitely," D.H. lied.

"So we have this whole concept of using computers to store texts and to help analyze them and all that. They were calling this 'humanities computing' for the longest time," Nyan said. "Then in 2004, John Unsworth, Susan Schreibman, and Ray Siemens were the editors of an anthology called *A Companion to Digital Humanities* and they popularized the term Digital Humanities there."

Nyan went on to add, "We can really blame the Americans for the name. In 2006 the National Endowment for the Humanities, or NEH launched the Digital Humanities Initiative and that really launched the widespread use to the term."

"My goodness, 2006 was a long time ago," D.H. said. "Before I was born."

"Before I was born, too," Nyan remarked.

## A CONCLUSION

"...Does that answer your question?" Nyan said at last.

"Oh, more than," D.H. assured him.

"There's more I could say," Nyan said brightly. "There's the whole history of computing that's very interesting. I have a friend in Ancient Egypt that could show you all about the abacus!"

D.H. just looked back at him, unimpressed. "I'd like to be home before dinner time, actually. Thank you for your time!"

"Oh, all right," Nyan muttered. "No one ever wants to go time-traveling with me."

D.H. didn't hear. She was already on her way home. Digital Humanities was an interesting subject and all, but not if it interfered with dinner.



## Further Reading

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## **NOTE TO THE READER**

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