The annual convention of the Modern Language Association is the greatest show on earth for the humanities, with thousands of attendees, hundreds of panels, and thousands of job interviews for aspiring professors.

The scope and importance of the conference turn it into a bellwether of trends — and for some years now, digital humanities have been all the rage.

Digital humanities — using computer technology to understand literature and the arts, or vice versa — are something more than a fad. They present new ways to approach the work of humanities scholarship, and they’ve already delivered not just new results but new kinds of results. Those findings were on abundant display at the MLA.

Digital humanities have also become integrated into the academic job market. That raises the question: Will expertise in digital humanities get graduate students the academic jobs that so many of them seek?

At the moment, demonstrated digital expertise certainly helps. Humanists are generally keen to learn the new uses of technology. Graduate students, who know a call to the keyboard when they see one, have responded. Most are already tech-savvy, and many are using their knowledge to add a digital aspect to their professional profiles. I have a student on the academic job market this year with a sophisticated website underway, in addition to her traditional print dissertation. Interest in her digital work has given traction to her candidacy.
Digital humanities are one of the few growth areas in today’s dismal academic job market. Some departments have advertised specifically for digital humanists, while others have proved eager to hire people who bring digital expertise to their applications — even if the advertised job calls for a specialty in something else.

But I don’t think this technological drive will change the graduate-school playing field very much in the long run. The excited pursuit of digital humanists now reminds me of the way that literary theorists were recruited starting about 30 years ago.

Theory — a mixture of deconstructionism, poststructuralist psychoanalysis, and the study of indeterminate reader response — arrived at American colleges and universities in the 1960s from Europe and immediately began to undermine conventional ways of seeking meaning. That made it a good fit for scholars living in an uncertain time. On the heels of trendsetters at Yale and elsewhere, literary theorists gradually infiltrated departments of literature around the country.

Theory crossed a certain invisible threshold in the mid-1980s, and then suddenly every department needed to have a "theorist" on its faculty. Advertised openings mushroomed, as literature departments sought to represent this new field on their faculties.

Literary scholars of a certain age know the result: After a few years, those job openings for theorists went away. That didn’t mean theory itself went away — quite the contrary. Instead, it was absorbed. New Ph.D.’s in literature simply added competence in literary theory to the already long list of things they needed to know. Just about every graduate student learned something of literary theory, meaning that everyone became a theorist of sorts.

As a result, there was no longer a need to hire "theorists," because the understanding of literary theory became part of the basic package that new Ph.D.’s were expected to offer to employers. Today, more than a generation beyond the hiring explosion in literary theory, my own department requires an introduction to literary theory for majors in English and comparative literature. In that respect we are quite typical. A handful of my colleagues take turns teaching the course. Others could step up, if need be, because today we are all theorists, more or less.
The same thing will happen with digitally-based scholarship, I think. Graduate students everywhere are becoming digital humanists — for two good reasons.

**Reason No. 1: Scholarship.** The first reason is that digital technology is the source and home to much lively and interesting new inquiry, both among scholars and in the undergraduate classroom.

One of the most notable benefits of the digital revolution is the way that it facilitates collaboration. Humanists have been slow to embrace collaboration. After all, we’ve been raised on the myth of the solitary author who toils away in the attic, emerging after years with a work of genius, written in deathless prose. Whenever we ask, "Which part of this is his?" (and versions of that question still come up in personnel meetings), we show the continuing persistence of the lone-scholar myth.

Likewise, humanists have historically found it harder to collaborate than is the case for scientists and mathematicians. Most scientists are socialized into their professions through laboratories, which are hotbeds of collaboration. Mathematicians, who can do their problem-solving in real time (with the technical matter of "writing up" coming later), schedule visits with each other so that they can work together. But the way that humanists have worked reminds me of the title of a documentary that I saw years ago: *Piano Players Rarely Ever Play Together*.

Computers, however, have been bringing humanists together, and that can only be a good thing. This new work has a chance to revolutionize what humanists do. Sidonie Smith, an English professor at the University of Michigan and a former president of the MLA, declares in her excellent 2015 book, *Manifesto for the Humanities*, that the new digital environment "ratchets up the urgency of pursuing a 21st-century vision of doctoral education."

**Reason No. 2: Jobs.** Graduate students understand all of that, of course, but they’re becoming digital humanists because it gives them a better chance to get an academic job. That’s the second and more important reason for the proliferation of digital humanities among graduate students.
Digital humanists are grabbing a disproportionate share of the few professorial openings out there because departments want to bring this new work to their own campuses. Not being born yesterday, graduate students have followed demand and have gravitated to this promising intersection of literary study and computing technology.

Flash forward 10 years, and digital humanities will be present in just about every humanities department. Everyone will be a digital humanist, more or less. And as with theory, the digital humanities job openings will go away.

I’m not describing a bad thing, just a predictable evolution. Digital humanities will stay, but their job-market moment won’t. That moment is now. If you’re a digital humanist, you’ve got a horseless carriage to ride, and it might just carry you ahead of the horses around you. But hurry, before everyone else gets one, too.

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**A Rallying Cry for the Humanities**

By Kelly J. Baker

Attention, humanists: Want to find your mojo? Take a page from the astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson.