This Date in History - 1964 World's Fair

Fraida Fund

A classic example of a problem that has traditionally been easy for humans, but difficult for computers, is handwritten digit recognition. Because of the many variations in human handwriting, early attempts to "read" handwritten digits into a computer were very limited. It's very difficult to give a computer "rules" - for example, that all samples where specific pixels are marked must be a certain digit.

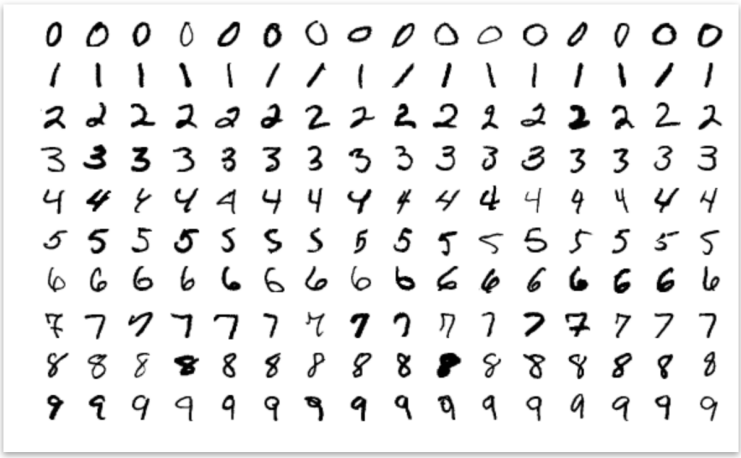

Figure 1: These sample digits in MNIST dataset show the variations in human handwriting.

It therefore seemed almost "magical" when, at the 1964 World's Fair in New York, IBM unveiled an amazing computer system that *read handwritten dates* off a small card. Visitors to the "This Date in History" exhibit would write down a date on a card and feed it into the machine.

Figure 2: Visitors entering date on a card. Source: Computer History Museum.

Then, the computer convert the handwritten date into digital form, look up the date in a database of New York Times headlines, and show a headline from that day on an overhead display. Watch the first minute

of this video to see a demonstration:

The results were also printed on a card that you could keep as a souvenir!

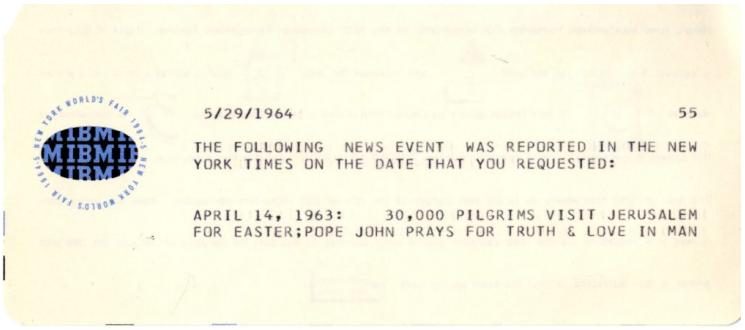

Figure 3: Keepsake card from This Date in History. Source: Computer History Museum.