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Video-gaming, *Paradise Lost* and TCP/IP: An oral history conversation between Ray Siemens and Anne Welsh

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Abstract

This extended interview with Ray Siemens was carried out on June 21st at Digital Humanities 2011, Stanford University. It explores Siemens’ early training and involvement in the field that is now known as digital humanities. He recalls that his first experience with computing was as a video gamer and programmer in high school. He had the opportunity to consolidate this early experience in the mid-1980s, when he attended the University of Waterloo as an undergraduate in the department of English where he undertook, inter alia, formal training in computing. He communicates strongly the vigour of the field that was already apparent during his graduate years (up to c. 1991) and identifies some of the people in places such as the University of Alberta, University of Oxford, and the University of British Columbia who had a formative influence on him. He gives a clear sense of some of the factors that attracted him to computing, for example, the alternatives to close reading that he was able to bring to bear on his literary research from an early stage. So he reflects on computing developments whose applications were not immediately foreseeable, for example, when in 1988 he could not have foreseen that by 1989 TCP/IP would be widely established as the communication protocol of the internet. He does by reflecting on the prescience of the advice that his father, also an academic, gave him regarding the use of computing in his research and on his early encounters with the conference scene.

Preamble

Dr. Raymond Siemens is Canada Research Chair in Humanities Computing and Distinguished Professor in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Victoria, in English with a cross appointment in Computer Science, and serves as the Vice President, Research Dissemination, for the Canadian Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences. Siemens is also Visiting Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Digital Humanities at King’s College London, and has been Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute for English Studies (London) (2005, 2008), Visiting Researcher at Stafford Hall University (2004-11), and Visiting Research Professor in Digital Humanities at Rasmussen University, Copenhagen (2010).

As Siemens himself points out in this interview, the question “what is digital humanities?” is at present an open and vigorously contested one. This interview, along with the other selected interviews published here, reveals that the routes through which digital humanities scholars first encountered and used computing technology are as diverse as the answers to the “what is digital humanities?” question. This oral history interview not only explores Siemens’ early involvement with computing and the field now known as digital humanities, it raises many fascinating research questions, some of which are being explored by this project. A central question is the level of formal training that digital humanities scholars had in computing up to the mid-1980s and how this has shaped their understanding of what digital humanities is and is not. In this interview we see that Siemens was perhaps one of the first generation of scholars to be formally educated in computing in the humanities. More data is needed in order to systematically explore this and to consider it in a wider comparative context; yet, the small sample of interviews published here provide rich and varied initial insights into this.

Click for the accompanying audio interview.

Interview

Anne Welsh And it’s a nice easy question to start with, and you can talk as long as you would like. How did you first get involved in what we now think of as digital humanities?

Ray Siemens You played video games at high school and had the fortune of being in a course with friends where we wrote our own video games.

Welsh Cool.

Siemens So, ten years ago, before we started talking about video gaming and computing culture being associated with DH, I wouldn’t have gone back that far but because that is now a part of what we now consider DH to be, or in an area that DH services and is served by, it seems appropriate to go there. So I started programming games with my friends in high school. When I got to university in the mid-eighties (I’m in my mid-forties now) universities were just beginning to introduce a computing curriculum in the humanities and arts and basic family courses with first generation Macs and so on. There were courses to take that nicely moved from gaming in high school into a more university-oriented curriculum. Then I had the good fortune of going to the University of Waterloo, where that was not only part of the curriculum but even in their English department, which I was in as an undergraduate. They also had an association with computer science. They had a co-op programme where people went into computational environments for work terms when they weren’t in their academic term and that was the foundation for a movement, always with a couple of very strong, positive academic mentors. My undergraduate advisor at Waterloo was someone who was really involved in this and well connected. While I was there they hired a gaming professor, specifically a gaming professor who was teaching courses in the mid-eighites on computer games as narrative.

Welsh And is this within English?

Siemens This is in an English department. I then went on to do graduate work at a number of places, all of which had phlegding programmes in digital humanities, then called humanities computing, or computational literary studies and things like that. But if and only if that I was that was always arriving just a year or two after something really interesting had happened at all the institutions I was at, so there was something that we would now call digital humanities going on, something very significant. It’s still happening. I have the pleasure of working with people at the University of Alberta, University of Toron, Oxford, University of British Columbia, always finding really interesting and engaged people who were starting things in what we now know as digital humanities. So, I really feel that I got my start because of being engaged with these very engaged people, as they were pioneers in the field. In fact, it has been a real pleasure when I recognize that not everyone’s trajectory is like that. I feel privileged to have had that good fortune. There was nothing planned, you know, an undergraduate doesn’t necessarily think that they’re going to be doing this sort of thing, so you go with what seems right, you go with where opportunities are, you go with what’s interesting and I’m just really fortunate that there were always these interesting things to do and all pointing in a direction that we now call digital humanities, but really starting at that time.

Welsh That’s really cool, because in a way, do you think it would be fair to describe yourself as maybe the first generation who was educated within computing in the humanities? The people who were educating you had built those programmes having had to learn in different ways, perhaps, and then they made a formal structure or brought it into a formal structure and you were in the first generation of your university to have benefited from that?

Siemens That’s a really good point. That’s right. So, the people who I consider to be the big academic pioneers of the field were those who were setting up the programmes that I had the good fortune of taking, always in the first or so year of its operation. So absolutely, I think it was that generation speaking that would make me in the position that you have suggested.

Welsh Can you please name, if you are happy to do so, the people that you feel really influenced you when you were getting to the research stage you are at now. As what and if I think as of the Ray Siemens research profile was starting to come together, who were the people about whom you thought “Wow, that’s really cool, I’m going to follow in their footsteps”?

Siemens Well, I think pretty much chronologically the people I had the pleasure of working with over time and that couldn’t help a be a lot also of those who were very influential on me.

Welsh Cool.

Siemens So, in my undergraduate degree Phil Smith, who had then come from Harvard to the University of Waterloo to do his computing; Paul Beame; Neil Randle as well, he was our hot in his gaming at that point. They then went on to work with people like Steven Reinberg and David Mill at the IBM lab, and they gave me this big pile of books and said, “OK, it’s your job to revise these.” And I said, “well what is this?” and they said, “Oh, it’s Telecommunication Protocol / Internet Documentation.” And so I started working with people who were at the forefront of that. That was a really moment for me, it was when I realized that I could use a number of means beyond straightforward code reading — so this was very early on in my university education — I could use many means beyond code reading to help understand the literature that I was engaged in. And that’s a very unique and still unique moment, but there is even, and I was working with people who were at the forefront of that. That made it exciting. That type of approach became one of many in my toolkit for literary studies and (going back again to my undergraduate degree here) being involved also in a number of fairly significant computational moments, was, I think, important as well. For example, one of my work terms was with IBM in Toronto, I was at the University of Waterloo which is very close to Toronto; I was doing documentation in the IBM lab, and they gave me this big pile of books and said, “OK, it’s your job to revise these.” And I said, “well what’s this?” and they said, “Oh, it’s Telecommunication Protocol / Internet Protocol.” And I said, “What’s that?” They said, “Well, we call it the Internet for short.” I said, “Oh, that sounds good.” And then, that was my job to re-write the manual for the thing that would blow wide open (this was 1988)! By 1989, “boom!” we had something very, very basic there, theorized and then that was very soon followed by that to the web as we know it now. Purley by chance I showed up in Toronto, and I was given the chance to rewrite that’s the foundation of the all from the IBM perspective — so how could I not learn something as part of that process? If there was a eureka-moment for me, it was when I realized that I could use a number of means beyond straightforward close reading — so this was very early on in my university education — I could use many means beyond close reading to help understand the literature that I was engaged in. And that’s a very unique and still unique moment, but there is even, and I was working with people who were at the forefront of that. That made it exciting. That type of approach became one of many in my toolkit for literary studies and (going back again to my undergraduate degree here) being involved also in a number of fairly significant computational moments, was, I think, important as well. For example, one of my work terms was with IBM in Toronto, I was at the University of Waterloo which is very close to Toronto; I was doing documentation in the IBM lab, and they gave me this big pile of books and said, “OK, it’s your job to revise these.” And I said, “well what’s this?” and they said, “Oh, it’s Telecommunication Protocol / Internet Protocol.” And I said, “What’s that?” They said, “Well, we call it the Internet for short.” I said, “Oh, that sounds good.” And then, that was my job to re-write the manual for the thing that would blow wide open (this was 1988)! By 1989, “boom!” we had something very, very basic there, theorized and then that was very soon followed by that to the web as we know it now. Purley by chance I showed up in Toronto, and I was given the chance to rewrite that’s the foundation of the all from the IBM perspective — so how could I not learn something as part of that process?
Welsh: Yeah, definitely. I started off the same, I read literature at St Andrews, which is very much the old style, so I know exactly what you mean: dynamic, but in a completely, completely different way. In terms of the field in general — you said “it is a field, is not a field” — did you think of it as a field at the time? Or did you see yourself as doing literary stuff and the computer stuff just ran alongside it?

Siemens: I know originally I wondered how to bring the two together. So, even as a high school student playing computer games, I liked doing that more than doing some other things, so I thought how can I bring this thing inside-out into what I'm doing? And so maybe I began as a hobbyist and my focus then as an undergrad was more literary, but it was at a place where there wasn’t a fine line, or even a heavy line, not even a dotted line drawn between the two. In the English department I was taking courses about computer gaming. I was taking courses about computer assisted learning and what we would now call digital humanities. It wasn’t until grad school that I found that I was separating things out more, so during my master’s degree, what I began to realize with the help of all the wonderful people I worked with, was that I was [in my interests] really separating content from method. That, I think, is a pretty standard observation these days, and I was happy to have had it at grad school during my master’s degree in the late eighties or early nineties. So, that was a moment where it was all well separated out. Lately, though, in my mind it is coming back together, and DH methods and tools are among many that one uses, I think, for any type of academic endeavour in the area and I think that’s a really good thing. It’s nice to have a DH conference, which is dedicated to maybe not DH as a field but DH as a confluence of fields, where we can understand methodologically both connected with and divorced from — for academic and intellectual purposes — content areas. I think it’s also really important that those methods have a home, whatever they may be, and I think DH has a great role in bringing those homes together, too. I think there is a lot of good that can be done through that approach. I haven’t answered your question though, have I?

Welsh: No, you have and they’re more nuggets than questions really — we’ve got some interesting data. Thinking back again, do you think you were quite typical when you first met people from different universities and different cultures? Did you find that your experience for your generation was quite typical; or did you feel that other people had different courses that were different, courses in terms of courses through their lives, that were different from yours? Or do you think your formative experience as an academic was typical for the era? Hard to say? It’s impressionistic?

Siemens: I had always assumed that there was nothing unique about what I was doing, if that makes any sense, but whether it was typical? No. I knew I was a bit different, and a bit different because let’s say when I was asked to read Paradise Lost in its entirety for the first time, which was pure joy by the way (not everyone feels that way, so I feel it’s important to underline this). It’s a very long poem and my first engagement before I sat down and read it — I read it through straight as best I could — was to begin to use text analysis computing tools (TACT from the University of Toronto) it gave me a sense of things that close-reading might uncover. At the same time, though, I did what most people do, had a quick primer for a sense of the patterns you will pick up, so they didn’t seem so foreign when you encountered them. I was the only one who used TACT in my seminar (I mean text analysis computing tools; we were all wonderfully tactful), and at that point I knew that I was different.

Welsh: How do you think (thinking outside of academia) did other people view computers and how they were being used?

Siemens: My Dad was an academic, what I would call an on-school academic, an academic of a certain generation that retired about 15 years ago, and when I showed interest in that area (well this is how I’ll approach that, you can reduce me and ask the question again) when I showed interest in that area, he sat me down as a father should his son in those situations and he basically said “you should take a look at what’s rewarded in the system you’re about to enter, take a look at how people do things”. He pointed out that people who do things with computers often can do more [things] and do more interesting things, and then he listed a number of things that he felt he had done some interesting things. There were some people I knew, some that I didn’t know, some that I grew to know, in fact, one of them was his own dissertation advisor from University of Wisconsin in the late fifties and early sixties, Karl Kraber who had done work in this area (also I believe Steve Jones’ dissertation advisor, who’s not of the same generation as my father). But, you know, that was made very clear to me at that point that there were benefits to consider and that was done factored in a way one can if you are in an academic family.

Welsh: Did you feel at the time that your father was particularly prescient or was there a kind of buzz around the computer generally, just in the era as it were?

Siemens: Well, my father passed away but he would appreciate me throwing this joke in, so I will; he said that his goal for the rest of his career was to retire out of this computer field. So that was the joke, at the same time as he was giving me the advice, saying “This is not a field, if you are going to do this academic work, get on board” and I think “So you would prescient — he was a deep thinker who saw what was coming and, himself, chose not to embrace it, but recognized that others had the same option.”

Welsh: Same luxury.

Siemens: There we go, yeah.

Welsh: That is really, really interesting. I’m just looking through my checklist to make sure that we have covered everything. I wonder about some of the conferences, because you talked quite interestingly about “is it a field, is it not a field”, so I wonder what was your first engagement with the community that we as we would see it now and how that did come about?

Siemens: Well, I’ve been to Digital Humanities conferences called various things since before I was even in university, tagging along with my father to conferences in high school because (say) I wanted to see what Boston was like. I grew up in Edmonton, which is up far away, especially if you go back to twenty/thirty years ago, very far away even by air from larger centres where conferences then would take place and there was a lot going on, I was really excited. (Where I began really starting to focus was in my undergrad, where I had an undergraduate advisor — Paul Beem — who focused very much on what we in our community take for granted today but other communities still don’t, he believed if you did the work as a research assistant or an associate, you should be involved in the dissemination of that work and get full credit. And so I went to a number of conferences with him, the SIGDOC Group, a documentation group under ACH’s special interest group structure. I went to the Society for Teaching, Learning and Higher Education, where a lot of our pedagogical work was being shown off, I went to my first which was then joint ACH/ALLC conference in Kingston, which was a bit late because I was actually right next door with some of the same people in 1989 when I was still in that part of the world around Toronto, when the two groups came together, the North Americans and the European groups. That’s when we started talking internationally, and I was there not even knowing it, just knowing the group of people I was with, guess, a positive thing, because I was there with friends, undergraduate friends who were also working with some grad students, who were also then research assistants for many of the people’s names in the field who we recognize as being founders today. And so on; maybe I’ll stop there on that sentiment.

But I will say, one thing that’s been very clear even from that one experience of being in Toronto at a conference I didn’t even know I was at, was that I was part of a really good community and a really flexible community structure that could embrace an undergraduate, that could draw in an undergraduate who was only peripherally involved because as an undergraduate I was being mentored by graduates, who were more centrally involved, who were being mentored then by their research supervisors, who were much more centrally involved, who were then at a conference that was truly momentous, I believe, for our discipline, those who are involved in training, and other ventures including what we do at the summer institute in Victoria but, also, those in industry. One thing I have noticed lately is that there seems to be opportunity and possibility of further opportunity between academia and a number of really great enterprises outside academia, not only university presses, not only Google but many, many other ventures. You know one of the great post-docs of many great post-docs in my lab has just moved on to join a firm in Victoria, that was a very, very easy ladder of movement for her and that can only exist because we’re doing things that ensure that academia and the business community at large can understand each other.

Welsh: Yes! Well I think that’s a lovely place to stop really. Thank you so much, that’s absolutely brilliant.