

Video-gaming, *Paradise Lost* and TCP/IP: an Oral History Conversation between Ray Siemens and Anne Welsh

Ray Siemens <siemens_at_uvica_dot_ca>, University of Victoria
Anne Welsh <a_dot_welsh_at_ucl_dot_ac_dot_uk>, University College London
Julianne Nyhan <j_dot_nyhan_at_ucl_dot_ac_dot_uk>, University College London
Jessica Salmon <jessiesalmon_at_hotmail_dot_com>, University of Trier

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 vibrancy 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 Toronto, 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 too he reflects on computing developments whose applications were not immediately foreseeable, for example, when in 1986 he edited IBM's TCP/IP manual he could not have foreseen that by 1989 TCP/IP would be firmly established as the communication protocol of the internet. He closes 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 Research Professor at Sheffield Hallam University (2004-11), and Visiting Research Professor in Digital Humanities at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto (2010).

1

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 briefly explore the idea 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

2

published here provide rich and varied initial insights into this.

Click for the accompanying audio interview.

3

Interview

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

4

Ray Siemens	You said easy! No, that's a great question. As people talk more and more about what digital humanities is and whatever it may be, I think understanding how one got to whatever it is, is really important. I was a video gamer at high school and had the fortune of being in a course with friends where we wrote our own video games.
--------------------	--

5

Welsh	Cool.
--------------	-------

6

Siemens	So, ten years ago, before we started talking about video gaming and gaming culture being associated with DH, I wouldn't have gone back that far but because that is now a part that 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 familiarity courses with first generation Macs and so on. There were courses to take that nicely flowed 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 terms and that was the foundation for a movement forward, 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-eighties on computer games as narrative.
----------------	--

7

Welsh	And is this within English?
--------------	-----------------------------

8

Siemens	This is in an English department. I then went on to do graduate work at a number of places, all of which had fledgling programmes in digital humanities, then called humanities computing, or computational literary studies and things like that. But it seemed to me that I 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 strong. In addition to Waterloo, I had the pleasure of working with people at University of Alberta, University of Toronto, 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, you go with what seems right, you go with where opportunities are, you go with
----------------	--

9

	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 wasn't called that at the 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 the first generation in your university to have benefitted from that?	10
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 generationally speaking that would make me in the position that you have suggested.	11
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 you and I think of as 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"	12
Siemens	Well, I'll just list pretty much chronologically the people I had the pleasure of working with over time and that couldn't help be a list also of those who were very influential on me.	13
Welsh	Cool.	14
Siemens	So, in my undergraduate degree Phil Smith, who had then come from Harvard to the University of Waterloo to do arts computing; Paul Beam; Neil Randall as well, he was our hire in gaming at that point. I then went on to work with people like Steven Reimer and David Miall at the University of Alberta. I spent time with Ian Lancashire and many of his colleagues, Russ Wooldridge and others at that power house where Willard McCarty was as well, that is the University of Toronto Centre for Computing in the Humanities (CCH); from there I spent time at a couple of different institutions, including Oxford, where I got to know Lou Burnard and the folks at OUCS, University of British Columbia, where I ultimately completed my degree working with a number of digital humanists — but ultimately the brother of one of the key figures in digital humanities, often unsung: I worked with Paul Stanwood, a Renaissance literary English professor, and his brother was the person who, at the IBM research labs, developed the first key word in context dynamic index and then gave it back to our community in the late 1950s-1960s, before humanities computing exploding in the sixties and then with the further booms afterwards. So I worked with someone whose brother was at the centre of that, and he quite naturally understood what I wanted to do with literary studies and computation.	15
	But you folks know yourselves, this is a field where we all work together well, we all mentor each other in various ways, almost all of them positive, and there were many, many other wonderful people I had the pleasure of working with in various ways. We all do a lot of work together and that list would be much, much longer than those with whom I formerly was on a course with or studied under and so on.	16
Welsh	Yeah, exactly. So in terms of forming your own ideas, do you have any jumping off points	17

that you can really pinpoint, thinking way back to when you were faced with your first put-in, maybe your first grant proposal might be a good recollection to pin down.

Siemens

Gosh. That will be difficult for me, but I'll start talking and if it's really strange just wipe this part from the tape! The reason being — because, remember, this is a field that some say never really was a field per se, and has never really been a field, or may not even be a field but, rather, is a combination, a confluence of many, many interesting things. Now Willard [McCarty] says, digital humanities and humanities computing sit at the intersection of computational method and humanities endeavour. “Computational method” is very vague, and deliberately so. “Humanities endeavour”: that's very vague, too. It's always changing and, so, the intersection point is always changing too.

18

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 vague and dull eureka-moment, but there it was, and I was working with people who were at the forefront of that. That made it very 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 is 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 revise the manual for the thing that would blow wide open (this was 1986) by 1989, “boom,” we had something very, very big there, theorized and then practiced, and then we very soon had everything that led to the web as we know it now. Purely by chance I show up in Toronto, I'm given the stack of manuals to revise that's the foundation of this all from the IBM perspective — so how could I not learn something as part of that process?

19

Given the way things have gone since, its been instrumental, but I would say [rather than one big moment] it's more a matter of small moments cumulatively as things come together in a field that's very dynamic, dynamic in its own evolution and perhaps it's understanding, that eureka-moment could be understanding that digital humanities is as much process, in fact, is more a process than any fixed one thing or another, not all fields are like that, I think that makes digital humanities really exciting. You may know my other field is early Tudor Renaissance English literature, which is very exciting and dynamic too, but it's very different. Very different.

20

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 “is it a field, is it 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 computery stuff just ran alongside it?

21

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 and things like it into what I'm doing? And so maybe I began

22

as a hobbyist and my focus then as an undergrad was more literary, but I 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 in graduate school during my master's degree in the late eighties to early nineties, 89–91. So, that was a moment where it was all separated out. Lately, though, in my mind is it coming back together, and again, 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 methodology 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 nudges 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?

23

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, too, I did what most people do: read a quick primer for a sense of the patterns you will pick up, so they don't seem so foreign when you encounter 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.

24

Welsh

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

25

Siemens

My Dad was an academic, what I would call an old-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 refocus 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

26

he listed a number of people that he felt 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 Kroeber 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 familiarly 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 air as it were?

27

Siemens

Well, my father's passed away but he would appreciate me throwing this joke in, so I will: he said that his goal for the last bit of his career was to ride out this computer fad. So that was the joke, at the same time as he was giving me the advice, saying "this is not a fad, if you're going to do this [academic work], get on board" and I think he was right. So I would say prescient — [he was] a deep thinker who saw what was coming and, himself, chose not to embrace it, but recognized that others didn't have the same option.

28

Welsh

Same luxury.

29

Siemens

There we go, yeah.

30

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 conference community as we would see it now and how did that come about?

31

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, it was really exciting. Where I began really starting to focus was in my undergrad, where I had an undergraduate advisor — Paul Beam — 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 ACM'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 what 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, where the first joint conference between the two groups, ACH and ALLC, took place. In effect, I was at the conference and I didn't even know it, which is, I 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.

32

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 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 was a group of people I wanted to stay involved with. That was '89; it's a few years passed since.

Welsh

Yeah, definitely. The one final thing that I think I wanted to pick up just because you brought it up towards the start — it struck me when you were talking about doing work at IBM. One of the things, the observations I would make as someone who is very new to the field is that looking back to the eighties, there seemed to be more fluidity between academia and industry, if that's a sensible way to put it because I guess, the hardware that was being used was quite specialist and so there would be perhaps relationships there, through a kind of practical route as opposed to what we now have as industry-academic partnerships on a more thematic route, do you think that's an accurate observation, or how was it back then in terms of the whole industry-academia relationship?

Siemens

That was certainly my view then, and I think if you were to talk to some people who have been around maybe twenty years longer than I have been — I'm mid-forties; find someone who's mid-sixties to check — I think you'd get a much better reflection. But that's certainly my view and one thing I have noticed is that depending on which specific part of the DH culture you are talking with today that may have never changed. I think it's a good thing that we all work together and I think it's a good thing that academics and those who are wholly academically-focused work with those not only who are alternatively academically focused — 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 good 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 understand each other.

Welsh

Yes. Well I think that's a lovely place to stop really. Thank you so much, that's been absolutely brilliant.

