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DIANA NETHERCOTT

Siemens

Reading the future

The digital age is about to take book-reading to a whole new dimension

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Siemens' project is called the HCI-Book (Human Computer Interface and Interaction of the Electronic Book). It includes approximately 35 researchers and 20 research partner organizations from Canada, the US and Britain.

Siemens is the Canada Research Chair in Humanities Computing, studying the role that computers can play in the humanities. He has published extensively on the intersection of literature and digital technology, with more than 60 papers and presentations to his credit.

Literature made available online attracts huge audiences. Siemens says up to 50,000 people a day look at UVic's online Shakespeare project at http://ise.uvic.ca/index.html.

UVic researchers were awarded more than $82 million in outside research grants and contracts in 2005/06, nearly tripling in the past six years.

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by Jennifer Cador

Ever sat in front of your computer and read an entire book? Probably not, but chances are you will in the future. In fact, UVic English professor Dr. Ray Siemens predicts that within one generation, we'll be doing most of our reading online, books included.

Siemens leads a multidisciplinary group of researchers whose goal is to develop a new way of reading—the book of the future—in electronic form. It's an extension of an existing trend, he says, because plenty of online reading is already taking place.

"The kids who are about to enter adulthood do most of their reading online," says Siemens. "They're watching television less and going online for their news and entertainment."

But so far, online reading hasn't extended to book-reading for most people. Reading at the computer feels harder on the eyes than reading the printed page, and the computer's lack of portability is another factor. While laptops can be taken many places, their structure doesn't make reading on the bus or at the beach convenient.

Then there's the whole issue of tactile experience. Many people like the feel of books, and enjoy everything from turning the pages to the smell of the ink.

These are all valid observations that Siemens and his researchers are taking into consideration in developing new online reading models. Upgraded technology, such as monitors that are gentler on the eyes and the invention of "e-book readers," will likely address some of the practical complaints, while our own expectations about the reading experience will gradually change with technological advancements.

The diversity of expertise on the research team is unique. It includes historians, language specialists and social scientists, as well as computer experts. The idea is to examine all facets of the reading experience. This is an important point because in the past, the focus has been simply to get the information on the Internet. Little consideration was given to the other factors that people value when they read.

"What we're doing right now is looking back at 2,000 years worth of book culture and noting what has persevered over time," Siemens says. "Preliminary results are really interesting. For example, things like the standard book index structure have been around since the 14th century, largely unchanged."

Other book features that have stood the test of time include standardized spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, and the basic page layout. Siemens points out that to be successful, the electronic reading experience must incorporate those things that have lasted throughout the centuries.

Siemens visualizes the future of reading as an active endeavour.

"Let's say you're reading *Pride and Prejudice*. Imagine a world where you have links to movie versions integrated into the text, so you could click and see a director's vision of a scene. Or if you wanted to know more about Victorian culture or language, or more about Austen, the information is only a click away."

Siemens sees immense possibility in the books of tomorrow.

"What the future looks like is not a single book in isolation, but a book integrated with everything else on the Internet. The key is figuring out how to present it in a form we're all comfortable with."

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