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# DIALOGUE

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Gerri Sinclair

*Gerri Sinclair is the executive director of the Masters of Digital Media Program at Vancouver's Centre for Digital Media (Great Northern Way Campus). She brings to the role more than two decades' experience in business, academics and government policy—focusing specifically on the Internet and digital media technology. Here she talks about her career, her perspective on research and digital media, and her new role as a SSHRC council member.*

**You hold a PhD in Renaissance drama. Some might think that's an unusual credential for the executive director of a digital media program.**

I suppose they might. In fact, it has been directly relevant to my career in a number of ways. The basic disciplines of working, doing research and analysis—all of those are essential foundations for any career. While working on my doctorate I had my first experience communicating research results to a wide audience. It was one of my first experiences with publication and disseminating results to other professionals. But more broadly: the field of English literature provides a wonderful landscape for understanding experience. Through it, you learn about the history of science and philosophy and get to explore the entire range of human psychology. Every discipline is touched.

**So how did you become involved in digital media?**

My eight-year old son and I wrote a simple computer program years ago: a few lines of code that, when you clicked "Run," made a snake of Xs wind along the screen, eating more Xs and growing with each one. When I saw that snake, I thought instantly: "That's theatre, that's the next iteration. The code is the script." I really understood code in a different way and believed it was going to change everything. When my second child was born and I had some time off, I decided to learn more about coding. I took a Grade 11 computer science course at night school and worked my way up to a graduate course at Simon Fraser.

**You also have quite an interest in business.**

Oh, yes. I was always interested in business, even as a child. I had a jewelry-making business in grade four. My friends and I ran lemonade stands, held garage sales. Years later, when I built my R&D group at Simon Fraser, I became very interested in how to commercialize the research applications we were working on. And I've always felt there was an important role for women to play in the boardroom and in the business world. There again my doctorate has served me well: the writing and communication skills, the analytical skills and research. In business, you're constantly preparing business plans and marketing strategies.

**With respect to digital media, where do you see things heading in the near future?**

What I find very interesting is how the interactivity has intensified in the digital space. Maybe 20 years ago, someone asked my wish for the future and I said I'd like for all "my people"—family and friends—to be available on email. Well, now we have instant messaging, Skype . . . the computer has become our most powerful instrument of communication, replacing the telephone, the television. I see that tendency continuing to develop and being augmented.

**In what ways?**

Today on the Internet we interact in a two-dimensional environment, and the overriding metaphor is the book, it's text. We look at videos online embedded in 'pages'. But we're moving to a 3D world that will be immersive and fully engaging—from an Internet of pages to an Internet of spaces and places. Moving between them will be a kind of passage, going through a physical portal between environments.

**You've recently become a SSHRC council member. What made you take on that role?**

I was on the board at the Canada Foundation for Innovation for 10 years, and when my tenure there came to an end last year I still felt I had contributions to make. The CFI works mostly in the hard sciences, but increasingly there is a profound social science and humanities underpinning to all of what's happening with technology today. I'm excited to really get into the role at SSHRC.

**How do you see the next phase of your career?**

In terms of the Centre, 13 months ago we were scrambling to open our doors: now there are 50 graduate students and that will grow to 100 in the next few years. My immediate plan is to focus on delivering the master's of digital media program electronically. Looking at online education, the way it is delivered today isn't much different from that of the old correspondence course. It's not the team-based, synchronous experience it could be. I want to use the power of immersive, 3D worlds to give people the chance to work together to build multinational collaborative projects regardless of the distance between them.