

An HCI Love Story

Barry Wellman

NetLab Director, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, March 11, 2004

Sidebar article forthcoming in the *Encyclopedia of Human Computer Interaction*

Edited by William Bainbridge. Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing, 2004.

I first met Bev Meyrowitz in 1963 at summer camp, where she was the counselor for the nine-year girls and I the nine-year old boys. It was attraction at first sight, and we spent a happy summer together. Well before the end of it, I (we?) was in love.

But love is one thing; marriage is another. Was Bev the one to be my lifelong mate?

Human-computer interaction gave me the answer. As a Harvard graduate student in 1964, I took one of the first computing courses offered to sociologists. The human-computer interface then was brutally direct: I would keypunch 20 to 1,000 IBM control cards, walk to the computer center, while being careful not to drop or mess up the cards en route (and not bend, spindle or mutilate them). I would go to the card reader that connected directly to the giant mainframe (an IBM 7094) and feed my card deck into its jaws.

Ten hours later, I got printout back. With luck, it would give me the results of my *DataText* statistical analysis. Much more frequently, it would give me a bunch of error messages, telling me that my logic was silly or that I had carelessly omitted some punctuation in my control statements.

This was miserable work. The probability of success was low, and gratification was delayed a minimum of ten hours. I fell into the rhythm of submitting my first computer job at 10 AM, getting output at 8 PM, checking and fixing it, and then resubmitting it at 10 PM for pick-up the next morning.

Yet, there is more to life than computer runs. In my case, there was Bev, who was commuting from her first school teaching job in New York City to visit me in Cambridge.

Tired as Bev was from commuting and coping with her rough-n-ready students, she spent much romantic time with me in the computer center – where we sublimated our love on keypunches – and trudging to and from the computer center. We'd get up in the morning, go to breakfast, and then to the computer center. We'd come back from the movies in the evening, and go to the computer center. When the inevitable happened and the large deck of control cards dropped, she stooped to the occasion and immediately bent down with me to pick up and sort the cards.

It was then that I knew that Bev was a keeper. What more stringent test could there be?

Forty years later, our IBM cards have been replaced by a high-speed Internet interface. Yet, Bev Wellman is still there, as we sit at our home PCs, side-by-side.