SIGGRAPH 2010 – Emerging Technologies Chair Interview

Written for the Los Angeles ACM SIGGRAPH

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In the spirit of The People Behind the Pixels theme for SIGGRAPH 2010, Emerging Technologies Chair, Preston Smith took time out from his busy schedule while at the conference to answer a few questions about his history with ACM SIGGRAPH and his vision for the future.

Preston Smith, Emerging Technologies Chair
SIGGRAPH 2010

How did you become involved with SIGGRAPH, how many years have you been involved, and what lead you to become the ETech Chair?

I attended college later in my life than the typical student and was working with a large retail company when "Jurassic Park" came out, which inspired me to become a part of the computer graphics industry. The dinosaurs looked like they really existed; their motions and movement, the muscles underneath their skin. Technology just seemed to leap so much in that movie compared to what we had seen before. It made me say, "That's what I want to be a part of."

So I went to college and happened to meet a professor who was a member and attendee of SIGGRAPH.   He informed me of the possibility of being a part of the conference as a student volunteer. So, in 1996 I submitted and was accepted as a student volunteer. That experience with the industry first hand, and with the incredible people behind it, was all it took to make me never want to miss being a part of this amazing and historical event. I have been a part of SIGGRAPH ever since.

You have served a few different roles on ETech - what did you most gain or learn from each of these roles?

From student volunteer to student volunteer team leader to subcommittee, every year's participation has been incredible. So this marks my 15th year and every year I have played a role in the Emerging Technologies venue. From my first year's assignment (the Digital Bayou in 1996) up to my current role as Emerging Technologies Chair, my personal goal is to give my services and abilities towards making the conference a great experience for attendees, contributors, and volunteers alike.

I seriously think the role of student volunteer is what sets the stage to truly learn to do every task to the best of one's abilities. The fact that, as a student volunteer, we are tackling a variety of jobs helps to establish the required humility and willingness to do anything and have a good time doing it, all the while developing an appreciation for the opportunities presented at SIGGRAPH.

What is your profession and how does it tie into SIGGRAPH?

I am currently employed by the Laureate Institute for Brain Research. We use MRI technologies to do research on eating disorders, and study patient's brains to see if they process things differently when it comes to food. We are just starting up in Tulsa, Oklahoma and I got to be in on the ground floor. I am a LINUX administrator, so the computer background is how it ties in to SIGGRAPH.

What various sciences and industries were involved in the Emerging Technologies venue this year?

- Haptics
- Display Technologies
- Interactive Techniques
- Immersive Techniques

- Augmented Reality
- Motion Capture Technologies
- Robotics
- Mobile Phone Technologies
- Laser Technologies

How was the 2010 Emerging Technologies arena different from past years?

As always, our goal is to engage attendees through diverse and original ideas. This year the ETech floor was a focused choice selection of what the industry has to offer. Across the industries and universities, everybody is aware of SIGGRAPH and they know what we have to offer, so we get lots of submissions each year. In 2010 we went through the usual selection process by a jury of industry experts and professionals. They rank the submissions and recommend the number of entries invited to demonstrate. This year the jury went through a second round of voting in order to further reduce the selections; so we really show off the best of the best. Also, this was one of the first years that we required video submissions, and that really helped the jury a lot during their decision making process.

How many exhibits were on the Emerging Technologies floor this year?

We showcased twenty three technologies.

How many countries were represented on the floor this year?

This year there were technology teams from five countries, US, Japan, France, Germany and Taiwan.

What was the overriding message of Emerging Technologies demonstrations this year?

Beyond a doubt, our message this year was that innovation is alive and well in the computer graphics and interactive techniques world. We showcased a wide variety of technologies that should surprise, inspire, and truly make people wonder.

What trends in technology, consumer products or other areas did you see indicated by the submissions for Emerging Technologies this year?

Display technology continues to be a hot subject and show important innovation, plus interactive technologies are reaching new heights and spanning across all the human senses.

What implications does the Emerging Technologies venue have for artists and others working in the computer graphics industry?

This year's message and implication for anyone in the computer graphics and interactive techniques industry is that today's ideas can be realized and can be tomorrow's daily tool in graphics or interactivity. We hope that people walking through Emerging Technologies will leave inspired to push the envelope and be creative in their professional lives.

Will you be back next year as the Chair of Emerging Technologies?

No, I will not because a new Chair is assigned to each arena every year. Cole Krumbholz will be the Chair for SIGGRAPH 2011 which will be held in Vancouver.

But after doing this for fifteen years, I can't imagine not being a part of the conference and I will be an attendee at the very minimum, because for me the draw of SIGGRAPH has always been the people, even more than the excitement and the graphics. So this year's theme of The People Behind the Pixels is literally the whole reason why I have done this from the very first year as a student volunteer. And the bonds created in those two weeks out of the year are very strong and very unique and picks up again the next year. It must be something similar to what took place back in medieval times when there were traveling musicians and gypsies and groups like that which made circuits from town to town. They had that brief interaction, and that strong bond building. Then they would say goodbye, knowing that next year they would all be coming back together again.

So you're saying that we're all SIGGRAPH vagabonds?

Yeah.