ACM-W Interview with Alain Chesnais

Still settling into his new role as VP Technology of [JanusVR](#) for barely a week, Alain Chesnais took the time to chat with us and give us a glimpse of his professional career which spans over thirty years, highlighting his extraordinary contributions in encouraging women in the computing community to fulfill their full potential.

JanusVR Preview: https://youtu.be/XFKEz0tUHDc

After graduating from the then newly created Computer Science department at l'École Normale Supérieure de Cachan, he worked as a research assistant at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), where he focused his efforts on modeling the behaviour of distributed databases in the presence of locking. When Nicholas Negroponte and Seymour Papert were invited by President François Mitterand to set up the Centre Mondial Informatique et Ressource Humaine (CMIRH), he was hired as a researcher and eventually became the director of software development.

Chesnais fondly recalls discovering computer graphics during that time: While assisting a group of graduate students from the University of Paris VIII, who worked with Henri Gouraud, with whom he collaborated quite often, he found himself having to write a more efficient graphical software package for them in order to optimize their utilization of a VAX machine. The result was so great that he shortly found himself passionate about this new research area.

When the CMIRH closed down in 1986, he started up his own company, focused on distributed computer graphics. After selling it in the early 90's, he joined Thomson Digital Image to lead the rendering team, until its acquisition by Wavefront Technologies, and its subsequent acquisition by SGI to become Alias|Wavefront where he continued as Director of Engineering for the Maya project, which won an Oscar in 2003. He has since worked at several companies, where his many contributions have received great recognitions, such as [SceneCaster and TrendSpottr](#).

Nevertheless, as his professional career kept growing, so did his participation in ACM. In fact, Chesnais started [volunteering with SIGGRAPH](#) in 1985 by doing the mailing for the chapter in Paris. He then kept taking more and more responsibilities until elected chapter chair in 1991, then appointed to the SIGRAPH Local Groups Steering Committee, ACM Director of Chapters, SIGGRAPH Vice Chair, ACM SGB Chair, SIGGRAPH President, ACM Secretary/Treasurer, ACM Vice President, and ACM President in 2010; thus becoming one of the first presidents originally from outside North America.

Chesnais continues to contribute to the ACM leadership as Past President and Distinguished Speaker, seizing every opportunity to ensure that ACM keeps broadening its horizon internationally on the one hand, and on the other, that it continues to increase the participation and recognition of women in the computing field.

As a matter of fact, when invited to tech-centered think tanks, he is not shy about pointing out the lack of representation of women, even if it requires halting the meeting to invest some time in identifying and inviting women to the round table. After all, diverse groups make better decisions.

To Chesnais, inviting female technologists is not an arduous task, as it takes but a couple of minutes. Instead, the real challenge is to change the organizers' mentality, such that establishing well-balanced committees in the first place becomes second nature:

"I am not planning to stop until diversity becomes obvious. It should be taken into account naturally from the very beginning; no one should have to ask why there are no women in the room."

As an ACM-W Champion, Chesnais is a strong proponent of asking the right questions – instead of focusing on the creation of additional governance – in order to continue to change ACM from within, with respect to culture, race, and gender.

Needless to say, Chesnais does not just stop at getting the conversation going: He often lends his technical expertise as well, and was even rewarded with an enchanting LEGO 3D-printout of himself by Patricia Beckman Wells and Scott Wells, during a SIGGRAPH conference, as a thank you gift for assisting her with her doctoral thesis. LEGO Alain has since travelled the world and been captured in over 4000 photos with notable SIGGRAPH persons, as seen on his Facebook page:

http://www.facebook.com/LEGOAlain

Proud of our accomplishments thus far, Chesnais, the 2016 nominee for the ACM SIGGRAPH Outstanding Service Award, is very hopeful about the organization's future outlook. Furthermore, he invites us all to take a seat at the table and help shape a better future, as he shares one of his favourite quotes

"Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time."

Barack Obama, February 5, 2008.