



Innovative Meetings

By Michelle Russell

The 'People Who Make Computers Less Computer-y' Conference

As meeting professionals grapple with how to use technology to enhance face-to-face engagement at their events, a conference for people who make computer-human interaction their life's work offers a few possibilities.

A flexible smartphone made of electronic paper was just one of the futuristic tech tools unveiled at the CHI 2011 Conference, held at the Vancouver Convention Centre on May 7–12. That comes as no surprise. CHI is shorthand for the Special Interest Group on Computer-Human Interaction (SIGCHI) of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). The full name of the conference is even more of a mouthful: the ACM CHI 2011 Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems.

Yet the focus is less on computing systems than you might expect. For participants at CHI — which has been held for 30 years, and which this year attracted more than 2,700 people — it's all about human interaction: with technology, and with each other.

"What I tell people about this client," said Janee Pelletier, CMP, vice president of Conference & Logistics Consultants, "is that these are the people who make computers less 'computer-y.'" The group is unlike many engineering or computing societies, where "there's a lot of technology for technology's sake," said Pelletier, who manages the logistics for CHI's conferences. "That is not what this group is like at all."

That may be a result of the cross-disciplinary nature of SIGCHI's members and attendees. These are "engineers and scientists and the 'big thinkers,'" Pelletier said, "but they also have sociologists, psychologists, and people who are interested in design and ergonomics. There's a lot of design around, 'Okay, we've made a mouse, but how can we make the mouse fit your hand?' This is the group that was demo-ing virtual reality in the '80s, before anyone ever heard of a Wii or Xbox; this is the group that came up with touch-screen computers. The people in this Special Interest Group understand that technology is a tool; it's not an end in itself. They are working to make computers that enhance

and improve everyday life."

More than 100 people work at the conference, "and only two of us are paid to do it," she said. "The volunteers are very invested, and some of them work so many hours that I forget that they're volunteers." Moreover, SIGCHI truly talks about itself "as a community," Pelletier said, "and more than any of the other clients that I work with, they're friends. They've seen each other at these conferences for 30 years. It's a very collegial group."

How CHI melds high-tech with high-touch is instructive for meeting professionals across every industry.

More Than Displays

At the 37 paid booths in the CHI 2011 exhibit hall, "there were things that will blow your mind," Pelletier said. "They are 10 to 20 years down the road." In addition, there was a strong poster program, with more than 200 posters, called "works in progress."

But this being the Computer-Human Interaction group, an important element of the conference was something called simply Interactivity — interactive demo stations located in meeting rooms and the ballroom. "These are works that are being developed in the university setting," Pelletier said, "which may or may not be commercially viable." About 21 different performance-based demos took place as part of Interactivity this year, including a number of smartphone apps, such as Graffito, a technology designed for festivals. "There's a big, white screen, and everybody logs onto the same app," Pelletier said. "You can use your phone like a paintbrush and it shows up on the screen. Ten, 20, or 100 people can all do it at once. It's interactive, digital art-making, and it's amazing."

While some of the tools in Interactivity were

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TOUCHSTONE:
CHI 2011 attendees
exchanged contact
information via
Poken devices (see
Take Away, p. 42),
which transfer
information when
touched together.

'The Power to Transform Persons' Lives'

According to the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) website (www.acm.org), the "ACM Special Interest Group on Computer-Human Interaction is the world's largest association of professionals who work in the research and practice of computer-human interaction. This interdisciplinary group is composed of computer scientists, software engineers, psychologists, interaction designers, graphic designers, sociologists, and anthropologists, just to name some of the domains whose special expertise come to bear in this area. They are brought together by a shared understanding that designing useful and usable technology is an interdisciplinary process, and believe that when done properly it has the power to transform persons' lives."

work-related, Pelletier said, "a lot of the items that we saw were simply designed to be fun. But most of them are designed to enhance your interaction with other people, which I think is what this group does so differently than some of the other conferences that are in the technology space. They have a very different way of looking at a problem."

CHI's Interactivity component is how "a lot of things come out of this conference," she added. "Somebody thinks, 'Hey, I'm going to do this because it will be fun and I'm going to see if I can do it' — and then all of a sudden, it becomes something that people want to buy."

A Learning Culture

Not surprisingly, SIGCHI created its own proprietary content-management system. Volunteers manage all the content: An interdisciplinary group plans the educational content, and six communities gather the important points from different dis-

ciplines, then bring them together at the conference. CHI 2011 featured 18 concurrent tracks.

"You might see a track that's about health care, you might see a track that's about blogging, you might see a session that's about Facebook," Pelletier said. "It's all over the board. You might even have a session that's about comics. Even for a non-techie, the sessions are interesting."

As CHI is essentially an academic conference, it's mostly research papers that are presented. "They might have a 90-minute session, and the presentation [of the research paper] itself is 20 to 25 minutes," Pelletier said. During a 90-minute session on Facebook, for example, there might be four or five 20-minute presentations on topics related to Facebook. "That encourages participants to get up and move around," she said, "because there are a lot of natural breaks."

Moving around the session room is one thing. But at CHI, it's a commonly accepted practice to

ON THE WEB: For more information about the ACM CHI 2011 Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, visit www.chi2011.org. To see the EventBurn CHI 2011 page, visit www.eventburn.com/chi2011. To learn more about Poken, visit www.poken.com.



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continued

Take Away



POKEN FACE: "We had something like over 17,000 Poken exchanges [at CHI 2011]," said Janee Pelletier. "For some people, it got to be a contest. When you exchange something, they call it poking — like when you poke someone on Facebook — and several people were competing [for the top spot] because Poken posts statistics on their site."

get up and leave during one session to go to another "if something more interesting is going on in another room," Pelletier said. "A lot of them will be sitting there, maybe reading the Twitter feed on their phone, and if 10 people in the next room tweet, 'This presentation is really great, you've got to get here,' they may actually get up and leave that session to go to the other — and within their culture, that's perfectly acceptable. It encourages the presenters to make sure that what they're presenting is engaging and lively."

Cutting Through Social-Media 'Clutter'

Not surprisingly, CHI is an ideal incubator for start-up tech companies. This year's conference served as a "sort of a test subject," Pelletier said, for EventBurn, a social-media aggregator. EventBurn took all of the different social-media streams that were going on related to the conference — Facebook feed, Twitter account, Twitter hashtag, Flickr stream, LinkedIn group — and put them together in one place.

"We've had an aggregator before," Pelletier said, "which is sort of an ongoing list of the things that are happening right now — this is what so and so said on Twitter, this is what so and so

posted on Flickr." What EventBurn does beyond that "is take all the information that's out there and look at how often things are used, and bubble the ones that are more popular to the surface."

For example, during CHI 2011, there were 12,000 bits of social media — that is, people mentioned the conference or used its hashtag 12,000 times. "EventBurn took all of those bits," Pelletier said, "and said, 'Okay, these are the most recent, these are the most interesting, based on how many times they are being used,'" and brought those items up top.

Big plasma screens at the registration area and at an Internet café displayed the EventBurn page, or attendees could access it on their own devices via the web.

"What the EventBurn guys tell people is that it cuts through the clutter," Pelletier said. It's a tool "that helps people understand social media by showing them the best of what's going on, rather than what's the most recent. It takes the additional step and says of the things that are happening right now — these are the things that we think you'll find most interesting."

Which sounds like a most human way to process information. ■

Poken Around

With a high-tech group, it's hard to know if a tool offered for use during a conference will be cutting-edge enough to meet its members' standards. One tool — Poken — given to attendees at the ACM CHI 2011 Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems made its planner, Conference & Logistics Consultants' Janee Pelletier, CMP, a little nervous.

A USB stick that you plug into your computer to upload your contact information, Poken is like a digital business card. "They're about the size of a quarter, and when you touch them together, they light up to indicate that you've exchanged information," Pelletier said. "I wasn't really sure if this group would go for it because it seemed a little old-school to me — I mean, they're not really business-card kind of people — but everyone loved it."

► **Michelle Russell** is editor in chief of *Convene*.

Innovative Meetings is sponsored by the **Irving, Texas, Convention and Visitors Bureau**, www.irvingtexas.com.