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## **SIGCHI is still SIGCHI**

**From the Chair**

This is the third column written by a set of new chairs governing the SIGCHI Executive Council. In the first column, we introduced you to a brand new board and changes to the SIGCHI organizational structure. We also laid out what we felt were the important issues for SIGCHI. We followed this with our plans for building an electronic community via a significant redesign of our web pages. In this column we are joined by Past SIGCHI Chairs, Mike Atwood, Jim Miller and Austin Henderson to discuss an important topic that SIGCHI has been struggling with for eight long years. Jim, Austin and Mike are three of the chairs that have worked long and hard on attempting to get ACM to create the CHI Society. The five of us explain why we are no longer pursuing this goal.

A large amount of previous SIGCHI Chairs' efforts have been devoted to SIGCHI becoming a Society within ACM as opposed to a Special Interest Group. Societies were conceived of as new kind of entity within ACM that would have give SIGCHI more autonomy. For example, SIGCHI wanted the ability to set up local chapters in other countries where ACM has not registered as a legal entity, the ability to turn our best conference publications into an archival resource (i.e., a journal that would then be put into standard bibliographic databases) and finally, the ability to hire and manage our own office personnel. It was felt that we would also gain in stature if we were called 'The CHI Society' and had Presidents and Vice-Presidents as officers rather than Chairs and Vice-Chairs. It was also felt that a significant number of SIGCHI's members,

e.g., psychologists, graphic designers and technical writers, might not be interested in being part of an organization with central commitments to computing.

SIGCHI has pursued this issue relentlessly within ACM. Some issues have been impossible to resolve, such as SIGCHI becoming its own legal entity; only ACM can legally have that status and SIGCHI is not large enough to venture out on its own without suffering significant consequences. ACM changed policy on other issues and gave SIGCHI the autonomy it was seeking by making changes that were put in place for all ACM SIGs. Other issues are still not resolved, but SIGCHI continues to pursue their resolution; our plans for their pursuit close this column. The issues that have been resolved are the following: First, SIGCHI is putting out an archival journal called *CHI Letters* that consists of the CSCW, UIST and CHI Conference Proceedings. ACM heartily endorses this move and is doing the same with other SIG conference publications. Second, because we are a larger SIG needing more services, ACM is willing to let us hire personnel to reside in the ACM office who will serve only SIGCHI's needs. We are looking into the possibility of sharing support staff with another large SIG.

The issue that is not yet resolved is the formation of local CHI chapters in countries other than the United States. SIGCHI has many of these. At present, these chapters are treated as local ACM chapters and subject to ACM requirements. However, often the country in which the local chapter is located requires the parent organization to file legal forms or conform in

some way to the requirements of the country's laws for handling non-profit organizations. The legal and bureaucratic costs for doing so in the many countries that have ACM chapters is enormous. However, not having your parent organization be considered a valid legal entity in various countries makes our local chapters jump through all sorts of hoops. For example, some local chapters are enjoined from being able to open local bank accounts. Others create their own society within their country and then also create an ACM local chapter with the same membership, etc. Because this is primarily SIGCHI's problem at the moment, SIGCHI has set up a committee to gather information for ACM staff on how to handle each country's requirements. We will continue to inform the leaders of ACM on our progress in solving this problem for each country in which we have a local chapter.

As for stature, if we were to make the move to Society status, we would move from presenting ourselves as one of the four most powerful SIGs in an 80,000 member ACM to being a single ACM Society of 5,000 members. A constant cry within HCI is to improve user interfaces by getting to the source of the interface development. Being in contact with the other SIGs within ACM, and being a recog-

nized mover and shaker within the foremost computer society gives us many opportunities to help shape ACM policy. If we became a Society, even a Society within ACM, our very increased autonomy would remove us from some of this ACM contact. On the other hand, being a Society also has considerable stature, so this is one issue where the resolution is unclear.

As for being President or Chair, the ACM constitution lets us call ourselves whatever we wish. It is the SIGCHI bylaws that require us to be called Chair, Executive Vice Chair and Past Chair. In general our autonomy is not seriously compromised because it is SIGCHI who makes and passes its own bylaws by vote of the SIGCHI membership within the constraints of the ACM constitution and bylaws.

Instead, the real issue with autonomy within ACM lies not with people making active decisions that may hurt SIGCHI, but in people not making decisions. One of the chief problems SIGCHI experienced in its efforts to become a Society has been the organizational structure of ACM. The SIG Governing Board meets twice a year. Its voting members are elected SIG chairs. This is a large board. Serious issues such as defining a Society cannot get resolved in two meetings that already have a large agenda. In two years there is another ACM election and an entirely new set of chairs has to be introduced to the issue again. The SIG Governing Board has an Executive Council and sets up committees to look at issues between meetings, but anything as controversial as creating a new entity leads to much discussion on the board. Pursuing the Society Issue

with the SIG Governing Board is time consuming and SIGCHI has many other problems to deal with. Given the resolution we have had with ACM on many of the issues that brought us to propose a CHI Society, we have decided to redirect our energies elsewhere in order to more effectively serve our community.

It is unclear where a society would be placed in the ACM organizational structure. It cannot simply be another SIG on the SIG Governing Board. This would give it little power for its size and interest in autonomy. The mountain that ACM would have to move to generate a new entity within ACM cannot be done by the SIG Governing Board. This has to be done by the ACM Executive Committee but to the EC, we look like a single SIG asking for special favors. We argue that the case of SIGCHI needing more autonomy is not a SIGCHI problem alone. We want the EC to recognize a growing opportunity for ACM. Because computing crosses so many fields, most of the Special Interest Groups within ACM contain a significant number of members who do not consider themselves computer scientists. SIGGRAPH's local chapters are primarily graphics artists. SIGIR draws its members from library schools, etc. The nature of some of the ACM SIGs is to provide a niche for cross-disciplines to come together. The members of the local chapters often have more allegiance to the SIG than ACM. As the SIG grows, it can nurture this membership in the way that the parent organization cannot. We will continue to advise the ACM EC to deal with these changes in our ever-expanding computing commu-

nity. We worry that not providing organizational structures that include these people in the ACM fold will cause them to form their own entities and fragment the SIG's community.

One of the items that ACM and SIGCHI have agreed upon is to revisit the issue of Societies again. ACM and its SIGs have stayed at the same membership level for some time, around 80,000 members. However, ACM is moving to provide more practitioner-oriented material on its web site and through its Digital Library. This could increase membership substantially and create a large number of new SIGs. If this happens, ACM might need to move to a multi-tier management level, e.g., Societies with their own SIGs. SIGCHI could also grow significantly in size and require more management autonomy.

Overall, ACM management is very willing to consider setting up a Society infrastructure. However, we have to recognize that volunteer time comes dearly and setting up a new entity within ACM would require a significant redesign of the organization. Therefore it has been concluded that for the moment, for both SIGCHI and for ACM, the advantages gained do not warrant the additional management complexity within ACM or the additional volunteer time and costs within SIGCHI and ACM. Instead ACM and SIGCHI will continue to work to amicably resolve the issues that led to SIGCHI asking to become a society in the first place.

Marilyn, Wendy, Jim,  
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