

25 Years of CHI Conferences

Capturing the Exchange of Ideas



1982

Gaithersburg, MD

Pioneering researcher

Alphonse Chapanis (top right) spoke at the first conference, which was initiated by Ben Shneiderman (bottom center) and Bill Curtis (top left, with Jerry Weinberg).

In 2007 we celebrate 25 years of CHI conferences. What better way to commemorate this milestone than with a retrospective of photos celebrating the people, activities, and events of CHI over the decades? Ben Shneiderman, one of the founders of the CHI Conference, has been a diligent photographic chronicler of the annual event. He helped prepare a photo spread in the following pages that seeks to reflect the conference's development over the years. We asked Ben to offer brief comments about his experiences as the unofficial photographer of CHI, specifically as regards both the art and science of his memorable work.—<eic>

PHOTOS AND ESSAY BY BEN SHNEIDERMAN



1983

Boston, MA

By 1983 CHI had been formed and it took over the conference, nurtured by Lorraine Borman (bottom left, with Raoul Smith). Luminaries included Brian Shackel, Ron Baecker, Bill Buxton, and John Seely Brown (center, left to right) and Aaron Marcus (top right).

1985

San Francisco, CA

CHI went west, where heroes like Doug Engelbart and Alan Newell (top) could trade stories.

1986

Boston, MA

Enid Mumford (top right) and many emerging stars presented their demos as CHI came back east.

My enthusiasm for photography came from my uncle, the renowned photojournalist, David Seymour “Chim” (1911-1956, www.davidseymour.com). He used a camera to develop “concerned” photography; the goal of which was to show what was good in the world and what needed improvement. As a founder of the famed photographer’s cooperative Magnum, he and his colleagues Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and George Rodger created the legend of the bold photojournalist who captured images of both war and glamour. Capa and Chim lived

More than 3300 images from 26 CHI and 39 CHI-related events—all indexed by the names of participants—can be found on the ACM SIGCHI Web site at www.sigchi.org/photohistory.



1987

Toronto, Canada

CHI ventures outside the U.S. for the first time and the passionate discussions (top) rage on. Wendy MacKay (bottom right) shows off the latest in mobile communications.

the legend till their tragic deaths in hostile war zones.

During college I considered following my uncle into a photography career. But I chose computing as my profession, and kept photography as my hobby. I carried my camera to most professional events, photographing famous researchers, familiar colleagues, and unknown attendees.

My goals were to capture my professional colleagues doing their work and the elusive moments when ideas were being exchanged. Posed pictures of



1988

Washington, D.C

The conference reception took place in the elegant and historic Building Museum (bottom right).

The happy faces of Alan Wexelblat and friend (center) capture the spirit of CHI events.

1990

Seattle, WA

Ben Shneiderman tries out glove controls (top left) at an event where demos reached their peak with tours-de-force from Don Hopkins and Joy Mountford with Bruce Tognazzi (center, left to right).

groups and portraits of individuals fulfilled the documentary goal, but capturing an unphotographable idea was harder. Like a neutron in a bubble chamber, ideas leave no trace, but you can see their impact in the faces of participants. Conferences provide the right venue because the organizers' goal is to enable intellectual commerce, but the conference setting also provides a substantial challenge in that the layouts and lighting make photography difficult.

During the early years I carried my 35mm single lens reflex camera with a



1991-1993

*New Orleans, LA
Amsterdam, Netherlands*

CHI hit *The Big Easy* during Jazzfest in '91. The shot of a reclining Bill Verplank (top) is an artifact from Amsterdam.

1994

Boston, MA

Mitch Kapor provided the keynote (top right) and Dave Roberts and John Bennet (bottom) compared notes.

28mm-70mm zoom lens, using flash as little as possible. I started by taking only black and white photos, but eventually switched to color slides and prints. I kept trying digital cameras, and by 1999 I converted to digital photos for the convenience in editing, speed of distribution by email, and pleasure of carrying all my photos on my laptop. The small digital cameras were a pleasure to carry around and they produced good enough results, although I have some regrets that the image quality has slipped.



1995

Denver, CO
Marilyn Salzman (top center) shows the enthusiasm of CHI volunteers.

1996

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

1997

Atlanta, GA
The 1997 Browse-off was a memorable competition among tree browsers with Christopher Fry (bottom) as timekeeper.

1998

Los Angeles, CA
CHI Kids (center left) was always a highlight of the conference.

While taking photos, some subjects were sure I had a hidden evil agenda, and others were just camera shy. However, when the photos were published, I got an equal number of questions from people about why their photos were not included. The 25-year span of the photos (except the years 1989 and 2004) reveals changes in male facial hair, my own included, and the shift in spectrum to gray. It shows changes in fashions for skirt-length and tie-widths, but more apparent are the changes in technology such as the disappearance of plastic slides on



2000

The Hague, Netherlands

John Thackara (bottom center) was a natural keynote for our second Dutch conference; *interactions* magazine editorial board (top) enjoyed its annual lunch meeting.

overhead projectors in favor of PowerPoint on digital projectors. The prevalence of laptops, mobile devices, and cell phones grew, and the prominence of women, always a CHI distinction, became steadily stronger.

I am pleased that my photos have taken on historic value. But too often this occurs on the sad occasions of the passing of CHI leaders such as Alan Newell, Joseph Licklider, and Rob Kling, or of young researchers who die far too early, such as my former student David Carr.



2001

Seattle, WA

Bill Gates (top right) delivered the keynote; attendees had fun annotating the photos we made available on seven kiosks (bottom center).

2002

Minneapolis, MN

Workshop attendees show their CHI spirit (center) while Helen Sharp, Yvonne Rogers, and Jennifer Preece (top left) celebrate a book launch.

2003

Ft. Lauderdale, FL

2005-2006

*2005 Portland, OR
2006 Montreal, Quebec, Canada*

Proud recipients of CHI Fellow Awards (second from top) and LifeTime Achievement Awards winners Judy Olson and Gary Olson (bottom) show their appreciation.

Photographing the CHI conferences helped sharpen my vision about people, their expressions, and their body language. Some people are naturally engaging with their colleagues, but others are reserved and avoid making eye contact. Being a photographer has the effect of making sure I pay close attention to events, but it also makes me more of an observer than a participant. Looking for the precise angle, getting the lighting right, and then waiting for the facial expression and hand motions to align remains a challenge even today. ♦

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