The 23rd British Computer Society conference on Human-Computer Interaction was hosted by Cambridge University and Microsoft Research Cambridge, UK. New tabletop displays, mobile devices, 3-D games, communications and ubiquitous computing technologies demonstrated the convergence of science and design at the 23rd British Computer Society conference on Human-Computer Interaction hosted by Cambridge University and Microsoft Research Cambridge, UK. The conference demonstrated how we might communicate with technology, and each other, in the near future. Robots who can read your mind, video software that can morph your face onto moving frames, near perfect computer-generated speech, and much more were presented in a friendly, relaxed atmosphere.

Recent developments in Human-Computer Interaction suggest a more cross discipline, communicative approach between people who create new technologies and those who use them. As an experienced educator I therefore carefully considered the grand claims of some technical researchers. For instance, a tabletop display was touted as interactive learning technology. The presenters demonstrated graphics being moved around the tabletop by hand, collating a number of images and virtually dropping them all into a box. Impressive, but then the presenters suggested that this would be fun for children and, “hopefully at the same time learn something.” Such a comment concerns me greatly and reinforces my belief that any technology (real or virtual) about to be trialed in the education space must be supported by informed educational research. Otherwise, we will end up with numerous technical solutions looking for non-existent problems. As Alan Blackwell, Chair of HCI 2009, remarked, “Design should only be done for a client. Without a client there is no purpose and so the design will fail.” In the education space I am sure Stanford University professor Larry Cuban would quite agree.

To celebrate the 800th anniversary of Cambridge University, the conference additionally hosted a fascinating Open House Festival of Interactive Technology in the William Gates Building. Seventy four exhibits demonstrated innovations in computing, communications and gaming. Of relevance to virtual worlds researchers were demonstrations of computer-generated natural sounding speech, a glove that senses objects moving towards it, Emotion Artificial Intelligence for creating characters or avatars.
with lifelike emotions and characteristics, emo-
tional intelligent interfaces which can infer your
mental state from facial images, programming
LEGO Mindstorms, augmented reality applica-
tions where in-world artifacts such as a poster
can become active surfaces with virtual 3-D
images, and multi-touch displays where, for
instance, real objects can be moved on a tabletop
and immediately mimicked in a 3-D world. A
summary of all the exhibits are available via
the conference website (http://www.hci2009.
org/). Conference papers are also available at
the ACM Digital Library http://portal.acm.org/).

ALT-C 2009, THE 16TH
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR LEARNING
TECHNOLOGY. “IN DREAMS BEGINS
RESPONSIBILITY” - CHOICE,
EVIDENCE, AND CHANGE. THE
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER,
UK, 8-10 SEPTEMBER 2009.

Michael Wesch, Assistant Professor of Cul-
tural Anthropology at Kansas State University,
USA, provided an invigorating first keynote
for delegates to ponder over the conference
theme. His early work studying the impact of
writing on a remote indigenous culture in the
rain forest of Papua New Guinea provided a
fitting context upon which to consider the ef-
fects of social media and digital technology on a
more globalised society. His message was how
media mediate our conversations, classrooms,
and institutions and the implications for how
we teach, what we teach, and who we think we
are teaching. Wesch’s vision of students today
is available on YouTube (http://www.youtube.
com/watch?v=8p-b0SQUt20).

Martin Bean, Vice-Chancellor Designate
of the UK Open University, provided an inspir-
ing, energetic, conversational keynote again
emphasizing how networking technologies
have transformed communication and how the
OU will adopt and innovate communications
media, especially social, for new kinds of stu-
dents. Bean suggested universities are entering
a crisis – a crisis of relevance – as globalized
competition for the 2.5 million students studying
outside their home countries become a reality.
Coming from twenty years in the business
sector (he was at Microsoft) he emphasized
that business goes where the talent is located,
and that educational institutes need to support
students’ employability rather than train discrete
disciplines. He commented that universities
are their own worst competition because they
are not adopting new communications (social
networking and even broadcasting information
such as iTunes University). Martin concluded
with a number of recommendations for all
universities: academics’ work must be integral
to the university and not peripheral; the need
for an open, clear research agenda; the need for
student personalization; and the need to invest
in people alongside technology.

During the conference there were over
300 presentations including workshops, demon-
strations, discussion forums and vendor
applications all encompassing the educational
technology landscape. The term ‘virtual’ though
was often associated with online management
systems. In the UK these are primarily called
VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments) and are
basically variations of BlackBoard and Moodle
repositories. The conference was also supported
by a regularly updated Web resource facilitated
by Crowdvine. Asynchronous conversations
were conducted, presentations uploaded, notices
displayed and meetings arranged. Crowdvine
thus provided an excellent online schedule
format that allowed delegates to move around
to different presentations with ease. Updated
tweets via Twitter enabled conversations across
presentations too. One particular lively discus-
sion, during the presentation and in Twitter, was
the debate entitled ‘The VLE is dead!’ where
delegates located remotely could add their
comments. There appeared to be a desire by
delegates to move away from institutionalized
VLEs to more student engagement through
personal learning environments. An accom-
panying BLOG and video of the presentation
can be viewed online (http://www.pontydysgu.
org/2009/09/the-vle-is-dead-or-is-it/).
Finally, most virtual worlds presentations focused upon Second Life adoption such as spending a lot of money replicating a university then not really knowing what to do next, supporting school pupils informally in their transition from school to university, conducting course activities such as photography or programming, and forensic science simulations. Good research in educational possibilities of virtual worlds appear to be entering a better phase as academics recognize the need to go beyond novelty and obtain valid evidence of efficacy via quasi-experiment designs. I am sure we will see more focused educational research on 3-D worlds next year.

The ALT-C 2009 conference homepage is available at http://www.alt.ac.uk/altc2009/

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