An Immersive, Interactive Journey Back in Time: Traversing SIGGRAPH's 50th Conference History Exhibition and Events

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Abstract

The SIGGRAPH Conference celebrated its 50th conference in the summer of 2023 at the Los Angeles Convention Center. To mark this special occasion, the History Chair coordinated a series of events and exhibitions that pushed boundaries and brought together luminary pioneers of computer graphics. The vast array of exhibits included the world's largest immersive computer graphics timeline, an immersive, interactive time tunnel, cabinets of computer graphics curiosities, a custom-made robot that used AI to connect people, interactive games and art projected on the floor, retrospective talks, illustrated AI predictions regarding the future, Blasts from the Past, 50 Years at a Glance visualization posters, collectible showcases, and lots more.

Keywords

computer graphics, immersion, interactivity, history, AI, robotics, SIGGRAPH, archives, projection.

Introduction

Through the use of immersion, interactivity and innovative technologies as well as sensory and cognitive stimulation, attendees of SIGGRAPH's 50th conference celebration were able to take a metaphoric journey into the past. For some attendees, the wide range of experiences provoked memories, offering an outlet to relive earlier times and an opportunity to reunite with colleagues. For others it provided a glimpse into the history of computer graphics that preceded them yet helped define the technological world they live in. This panel explores the conceptual and technical aspects of the innovative, informative and inspiring projects that were produced for this special occasion. From the fully immersive *Time Tunnel* to the *Connections* robot, AI *Postcards of the Future,* and *Retrospective Talks* as well as *Blasts from the Past* and the *Cabinets of Computer Graphics Curiosities* exhibits, these engaging experiences not only brought together a huge community of computer graphics pioneers and volunteers to create the works but also united the SIGGRAPH community in honoring those who came before. Bonnie Mitchell, the coordinator of the event, along with Kon Hyong Kim, Yamin Xu, and Terry Wong will discuss the various components of this exhibition, as well as the Retrospective talk series, displays, videos and other engaging experiences.

Connections

As the SIGGRAPH conference attendee entered the concourse foyer at the Los Angeles convention Center, they were confronted by one of Yamin Xu's custom-built interactive robots (see figure 1). Mimicking human curiosity, the robot attempted to make contact with the viewer by looking them in the eyes. This sentient behavior provoked the audience to engage the robot in playful interaction as it attempted to capture a photograph of the attendee. Once the robot captured the likeness of the person, this image was digitally compared to an image database of photos of past SIGGRAPH community members using custom-built facial recognition software and AI. When the closest match was found, this photo was projected on the wall and alongside the attendee's image. The original intent was to encourage attendees at the conference to get to know the past CG pioneers, award winners, committee members and other SIGGRAPH community members. To an extent, this did occur. Large crowds gathered around the robot and cheered gleefully when the robot had matched the photo of the person with an earlier photo of themselves. This behavior made it clear that the robot was serving as a time travel portal for long-time SIGGRAPH conference attendees to reconnect with their younger selves. People would repeatedly engage the robot's attention, making a variety of facial expressions until the AI facial detection matched their new photo with an image in the database of themselves.

Figure 1. Interacting with the *Connections* robot at the SIGGRAPH 2023 conference.

Postcards from the Future

In the late 19th century, a French image series entitled, *En l'An 2000* (In the year 2000), depicted artists' perception of what the world would look like in the year 2000. [1] Over an 11-year period, nearly 90 postcards were produced. Isaac Asimov acquired a set of the cards and published them in *Futuredays: A Nineteenth Century Vision of the Year 2000*. [2] These 19th century creative visions of the future served as the catalyst for the SIGGRAPH *Postcards from the Future* project. A call for participation was issued and students were also invited to submit illustrations depicting what they thought the future would look like in 50 years. The call for participation was available on the SIGGRAPH website but very few submissions were received and none were selected by the jury. A new call was issued and disseminated and resulted in no submissions. Students in the SIGGRAPH History Chair's class were asked to submit but because it was not required, only one submitted an illustration. The History Chair reached out to Patrick Lichty, an artist well known for his work in AI, and asked him if he would enlist AI to help visualize the future. Through a series of very detailed prompts, Patrick along with a few of his students, produced 63 more postcards for the exhibition using AI. Explicit instructions were given to the AI to create an image using a specific art style. It was told to imagine what the future would look like in regard to transportation, architecture, education, food, entertainment, etc.

After the postcards were displayed (see figure 2), the attendees at the conference were asked to guess which of the 64 images was human-made. Most people were unable to correctly identify the human-made image. Three attendees were scrutinizing each and every image on the wall so the History Chair asked them if they knew which one was created by a human. They immediately pointed to an image depicting the future of food - the correct image. When asked how they knew, they said the illustration had artfully rendered text on one of the jars and AI would never create text that looked so organic.

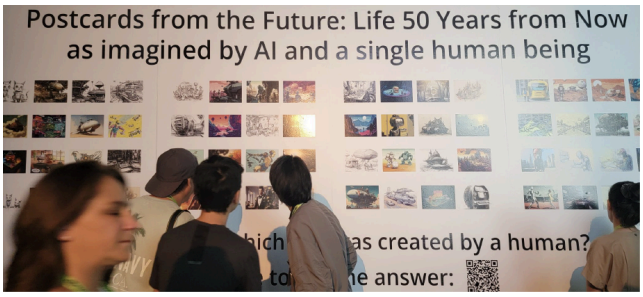

Figure 2. *Postcards from the Future* at SIGGRAPH 2023.

Interacting with Time

Just beyond the robot and *Postcards from the Future*, the attendee entered the *SIGGRAPH Time Tunnel*. This huge immersive environment presented a glimpse of the future infused with traces of the past. This 38 meters (125') long x 7.5 meters (25') wide x 4.2 meters (14) high tunnel with floor to ceiling seamless projections, provided an opportunity to immerse oneself in an interactive environment where the images, animations, and sounds filled the peripheral vision and transported the viewer to a new realm. Bonnie Mitchell was the director of the project and Kon Hyong Kim was the chief technical engineer and also produced interactive artwork and visualizations for the environment. Kon, from the UCSB Allosphere Research Group, who is an expert in the field of immersive systems, worked with the Freeman AV company and the *Time Tunnel* team to spec out the technical hardware and projectors. Freeman AV used one ton trusses to construct this massive structure which held the 125' (38 meter long) seamless screens and the 16 projectors.

A number of artists and musicians from various institutions including UC Santa Barbara and York University created content for the environment including data visualizations of content from the ACM SIGGRAPH History Archive. In Bowling Green, Ohio a team digitized and formatted thousands of images to be used in the environment. Autodesk, the exclusive sponsor of the *Time Tunnel*, provided content from their partners including animations from Weta, ILM and other studios. Participants interacted with the content using HTC VIVE controllers, controlling the sound and movement of the imagery.

Figure 3. *50 Years of Computer Graphics Immersive Timeline*

The *Time Tunnel* also housed the world's largest immersive computer graphics timeline (see figure 3). Through the collaborative efforts of approximately 40 computer graphics pioneers, directed by Bonnie Mitchell, a timeline consisting of over 2000 entries in 8 different categories was developed. Mitchell designed the visual look of the timeline but it became apparent that adding that many entries to the animated structure would require an algorithmic solution. Award winning AI developer and artist, Ryan Laney wrote the code to automate the visual development and animation of the project. [3] When the timeline appeared on the screen within the *Time Tunnel*, the cubes containing the information and images would spin every 10 seconds revealing a constant flow of information for a given topic in a specific year. This immersive timeline was immensely popular but was rarely given

enough screen time for people to absorb the wealth of information. A special screening was arranged for the pioneers of computer graphics. Luminaries including Jim Blinn (NASA Jet Propulsion), Alvy Ray Smith and Ed Catmul (co-founder / president of Pixar), Jim Foley and Andy Van Dam (Computer Graphics book) gathered in the Time Tunnel to reminisce and reminisce about the past. This special gathering of over 100 pioneers was the highlight for many attendees of the conference.

The Body's Presence

In the middle of the *Time Tunnel*, four downward facing projectors displayed interactive artworks that responded to the presence of attendees. As people strolled across Alexa Mahajan's *Digital Dreamscapes* or *Generations* installation or traversed Kon Hyong Kim's *Steps Through Time* (see figure 4), the images transformed into trails of light, color and form. Particles chased shadows and colorful swirls emerged. Stepping in certain areas revealed hidden Easter eggs consisting of icons from the field of computer graphics such as the Stanford 3D bunny and the Utah teapot.

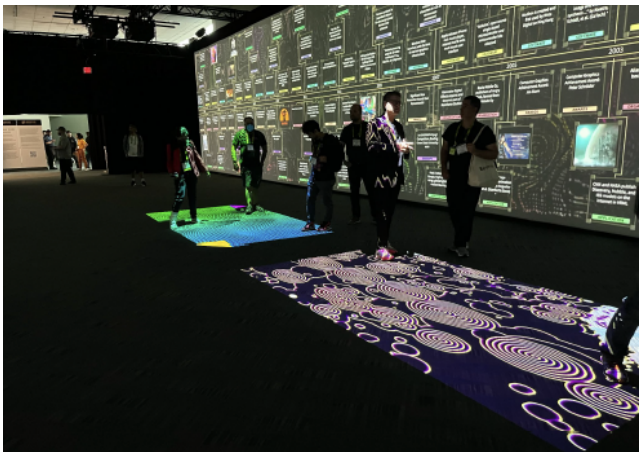

Figure 4. *Digital Dreamscapes and Steps Through Time*

The fourth downward facing projector showcased *Catch a Falling Star: the People of SIGGRAPH Game* (see figure 5). This interactive game required the player to use small hand-held round projection screens to catch images of past SIGGRAPH volunteers, committee members, award winners and CG pioneers. If they "caught" a person in the correct category, sensors detected the image on the screen and the player scored points. This incredibly popular multiplayer game encouraged people to work together to try to beat the high score of the day and conference.

Collecting, and formatting the photos was a huge task and involved a number of student helpers, with Jan Searleman coordinating the effort. Kon, Joseph Symons and Eliot Feibush programmed the sensors and interaction resulting in a very popular experience for the attendees.

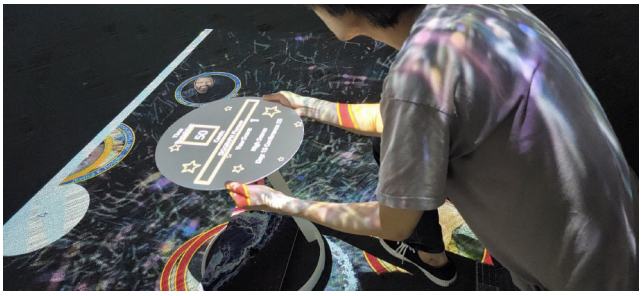

Figure 5. *Catch a Falling Star: The People of SIGGRAPH*

50 Years of Innovation & Creativity

A Video Journey

The SIGGRAPH History exhibition consumed four large alcoves as well as a large portion of the concourse foyer and exhibition hall of the Los Angeles Convention Center. After exiting the *Time Tunnel*, an attendee would traverse a long hallway with four alcoves. In the first alcove, an attendee would encounter *Computer Graphics Pioneers: Rare Gems,* a video display consisting of historic footage from computer graphics labs and early innovators in the field. These works were displayed on CRT monitors and was coordinated by Ed Kramer, chair of the SIGGRAPH Pioneers Group. This video display, coupled with *When a Bit Became a Pixel,* a video produced by the Computer History Museum, transported the viewer back to the days when displaying graphics on a computer screen was similar to summiting Mount Everest without ropes or Sherpas. [4]

50 Years of Artifacts

T-shirts have always been the garb of choice at the SIGGRAPH conferences. In the 80s and 90s, the conference held T-shirt competitions where individuals and companies showcased their wearable designs. Starting in 1977, the conference issued an official T-shirt to commemorate the event and this practice has continued to this day. Many spin-off T-shirts entered the scene in 1984 as a result of the wide range of new programs within the conference as well as the Local SIGGRAPH Groups, wanting their own T-shirt design. This resulted in nearly 200 different SIGGRAPH T-shirts over a period of 47 years. To allow the attendee of the SIGGRAPH 50th conference celebration to personally experience wearing these T-shirts, a Snap kiosk entitled *Magic Mirror* (see figure 6), allowed them to select a T-shirt and hat to wear virtually.

This effort was coordinated by Mark Billingurst and involved a lot of volunteers to do the coding and prepare the T-shirt images. A phone app was developed which also included SIGGRAPH pins as well as T-shirts and hats. Images of all the T-shirts were also displayed on the wall behind the kiosk.

Figure 6. *Magic Mirror,* virtually wear a SIGGRAPH T-shirt

Vulture Culture: A History of Swag

This obsession with artifacts extended beyond T-shirts. Starting in 1982, the conference issued an official conference pin or wearable button which was distributed the year before the conference occurred. Again, other programs and groups within the SIGGRAPH followed suit by issuing their own pins. In total, more than 150 different pins and buttons were produced over the years (see figure 7).


Figure 7. SIGGRAPH pins, hats and bags

As the financial security of the conference improved, so did the number of artifacts. Items such as backpacks, coffee mugs, posters, hats, umbrellas, ribbons, slinkies, pens, watches, bobble-heads, stickers, earrings, were distributed at the conference. This nearly complete collection of SIGGRAPH swag resides in the SIGGRAPH Archives temporarily housed at Bowling Green State University. To commemorate the 50th conference celebration, over 1000 of these items were sent to Los Angeles and displayed in showcases (see figure 8). These items served as vectors of memory. Groups of people gathered around the artifacts to reminisce and relive past SIGGRAPH conferences.

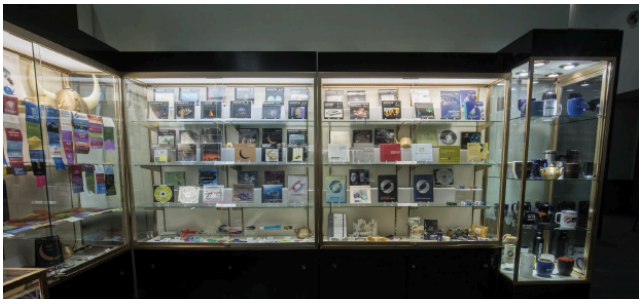
Figure 8. *Vulture Culture: A Visual History of SIGGRAPH Collectibles*

Cabinets of Computer Graphics Curiosities

The field of computer graphics has changed significantly since the ACM SIGGRAPH conference began in 1974. Prior to the SIGGRAPH organization's inception, major breakthroughs in computer graphics such as Evan Sutherland's SketchPad and head-mounted display, [5] laid the groundwork for an exciting path forward. Head-mounted displays (HMD) were one of the biggest challenges and even today, we are still grappling with issues such as latency, encumberment, interactivity, and the quality of graphic displays. At SIGGRAPH's 50th conference, a 45 foot (13.7 meters) x 10 foot (3 meters) alcove was allocated to the *Cabinets of Computer Graphics Curiosities* exhibition (see figure 9).

This collection of artifacts from major computer graphics research labs was coordinated by Dave Kasik from Boeing, a major company heavily involved in the development of computer graphics in the 60s and onwards. The exhibit was arranged and installed by Terry C. W. Wong and a host of volunteers. Progressive iterations of innovative hardware development intrigued both pioneers of computer graphics and newcomers alike.

Although Sutherland's HMD, named the *Sword of Damocles* because of its intimidating and formidable appearance, was too fragile to transport to the conference, numerous other historic HMDs filled the cases. [6] VFX Academy Award winner, Paul Debevec displayed his original light probes [7] and Mary Whitton showcased her Ikonas Graphics System boards (1980), the world's first General-Purpose Graphics Processing Unit (GPGPU) [8]. The showcases contained stereo imaging devices, head mounted displays, graphics boards, graphic interfaces, and more. To witness the history of CG hardware development laid out before you, was akin to seeing multiple version of your child, at all ages, standing side-by-side.


Figure 9. *Cabinets of Computer Graphics Curiosities*

50 Years of Innovation & Creativity

The First Renderings

The overall goal of the 50th SIGGRAPH conference celebration was to tell the story of computer graphics experientially. Although the Call for Participation did not yield adequate submissions for the *Postcards from the Future* exhibit, it did result in an amazing project proposal from Gordon Romney, one of the earliest developers of

rendering algorithms and programming languages. Gordon received his Ph.D. from the University of Utah's Computer Science and Electrical Engineering program in 1969. His thesis advisor was Ivan Sutherland and he was involved in the development of the first 3d computer renderings. He claims to have coined the term "rendering" in relation to the process and product produced. Gordon arrived at the SIGGRAPH conference with his wife, two sons, and chairs. He set up showcases and a video wall and sat down and began telling stories to all the attendees that stopped by his alcove. The displays contained Polaroid photographs of 3D rendered shapes and other artifacts from the 1960s. In the planning stages of the history celebration, many people told Mitchell, the History Chair, that only older people would be interested in the content included in the exhibition but Gordon Romney proved them wrong. All week long Gordon attracted crowds of people of all ages to listen to his amazing stories (see figure 10).

Figure 10. Gordon Romney telling stories from the 1960s.

The History Archive and Algorithmic Revolution

Beside the *First Renderings*, the ACM SIGGRAPH online History Archive was displayed and visitors were encouraged to peruse the 40 thousand entries (see figure 11). Attendees were encouraged to look up their personal profile pages and the contributions they had made to the SIGGRAPH conferences over the years. The archive contains information about the art exhibitions, animation screenings, paper presentations, emerging technologies demonstrations and much more. A component of the online repository holds information about the SIGGRAPH award winners.

The awards range from the prestigious Steven Anson Coon Award to Audience Awards for best animation. One of the categories is the Distinguished Artist Award with past recipients including Manfred Mohr, Lillian Schwartz, Donna Cox, Monika Fleishmann, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Paul Brown, Jean-Pierre Hérbert and more. Inspired by many thought-provoking conversations with Roman Verostko, Mitchell wanted to produce a video that honored a subset of these artists - those that pushed boundaries using computer programming as a cornerstone of their practice. The *Algorithmic Revolution in the Visual Arts* was directed by Mitchell and produced by Elaheh Afroozan. It highlighted content from the ACM SIGGRAPH History Archive related to the work of Harold Cohen, Charles Csuri, Roman Verostko, Yoichiro Kawaguchi, Vera Molnar and others (see figure 11).

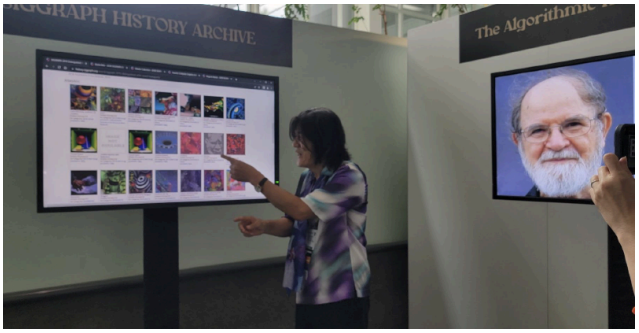

Figure 11. The *ACM SIGGRAPH History Archive* online and *The Algorithmic Revolution* video featuring Roman Verostko and other SIGGRAPH Distinguished Artist Award winners.

Traversing a History of Publications and Posters

The wall opposite to the alcoves showcased three different exhibitions. This 60 meter (approx. 200 foot) wall contained over 50 posters from past SIGGRAPH conferences. Two indents in the wall, located at both ends of the hallway served as perfect framing devices. A grid of 144 SIGGRAPH Proceedings, Electronic Art and Animation catalogs and other conference publication covers were displayed (see figure 12). One of the original ideas proposed for the 50th celebration was to set up selfie-stations where people could photograph themselves in CG-related historic settings. Although this grid of publication covers was never intended for that purpose yet it nevertheless served as a backdrop for hundreds of photographs.

The second inset housed juried posters for the *Visualizing 50 Years of Computer Graphics at a Glance* exhibition. From Everardo Reyes' visualization of the SIGGRAPH Art Show to Jon Peddie's "tongue in cheek" comparison of the average temperature of conference locations to preferred habitation climates, these posters revealed trends and looked at the past 50 years in new, innovative ways.

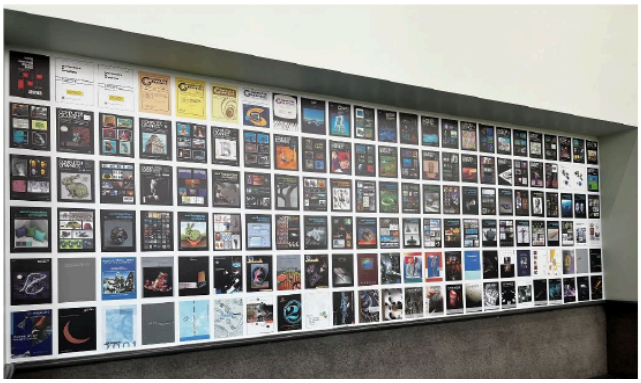
Figure 12. Display of publication covers from 1974 to the present

Blasts from the Past

Mark Billinghurst from the Empathetic Computing Lab, was selected to coordinate the *Blasts from the Past* displays. This huge exhibition of innovative technologies

was located in the exhibition hall apart from the other history displays. Fifteen curated exhibits were selected from the thousands of past SIGGRAPH Emerging Technologies demos. Works such as Hiroo Iwata's *Food Simulator*, Carolina Cruz-Neira's *vDen* (a portable version of the CAVE originally developed at the EVL lab in 1992) and *Muu 2000: Artificial Creatures as an Embodied Interface* dazzled the audience and proved that innovative technological developments from the past are as impressive today as they were many years ago.

Figure 13. Paul Debevec's Presidential light rig.

Games from Yesteryear, located adjacent to the *Blasts from the Past* exhibit, offered the audience an opportunity to play historic games on consoles and computers from the 70s, 80s, and 90s. Pixar showcased their *Complete Walking Teapot Museum* as part of the *Blasts from the Past* and Paul Debevec set up a *Light Stage History* exhibit. Paul's exhibit featured the light rig and furniture used when creating the first 3D portrait of a US President, Barack Obama in 2014 (see figure 13). [9]

Retrospective Panels

A series of panels complemented the exhibitions and featured pioneers in the field of computer graphics as well as coordinators of past SIGGRAPH conference programs. *Fast Backwards* mirrored the coveted *Fast Forward* session that SIGGRAPH holds every year. In the *Fast Forward* session, paper presenters do a 1-minute synopsis of their paper in an amusing, high-energy atmosphere. In the Retrospective panels' *Fast Backwards*, Juan Miguel de Joya and Pete Segal highlighted early, pioneering and impactful breakthroughs that changed the way people engage with the world today. Pioneers were asked to come onto the stage to share unforgettable stories and reflect on how industries, and communities have changed over the years. The panel, *50 Years of Changes - How to Brace Yourself!* featured an all-star team of CG pioneers - Alvy Ray Smith (co-founder of Pixar) James Frederick Blinn (NASA JPL), James D. Foley (Georgia Tech), Andries van Dam (Brown Univ.), John Turner Whitted (Raytracing and Radiosity), Donald P. Greenberg (Cornell Univ.). Through stories and humorous charts illustrating changes over time, including an analysis of the weight of each proceeding over the years and stories about the workstation wars, these pioneers captivated an audience of all ages (see figure 14).

Figure 14. *50 Years of Changes - How to Brace Yourself!* panel

The historic *SIGGRAPH Bowl* was resurrected and Jim Kilmer, dressed in a gold-sparkly tuxedo, acted as the MC for a *Family Feud*-style game show involving the audience and "surprise" guests. The remaining two Retrospective panels focused on the history of SIGGRAPH conferences and experiences. *Looking Back to Look Forward: Keeping SIGGRAPH Vibrant for Another 50 Years* was presented by past conference chairs, and long-time SIGGRAPH volunteers. The *Evolution of SIGGRAPH Experiences*, moderated by Joan Collins, was a journey through the past SIGGRAPH Art Shows, Guerrilla Galleries, Electronic Theaters, trade show Exhibits and Emerging Technology demonstrations. Together these five Retrospective panels illuminated the past as well as forecasted the future and set the stage for the exhibits discussed above.

Conclusion

Overall, the SIGGRAPH 50th conference celebration was a metaphoric journey that enabled the conference attendee to traverse the past as they contemplated the future. The speakers on this panel discuss the concept behind the various components of this seminal event and the collaborative effort it took to make it happen. Sparked by a desire to bring the ACM SIGGRAPH History Archive to life, Mitchell, the SIGGRAPH History Chair, along with the panelists and an international team of nearly 100 volunteers, collaboratively overcame numerous obstacles and staged the largest exhibit of its kind in the history of SIGGRAPH. This innovative and mind-stimulating event brought computer graphics pioneers and conference attendees together to honor 50 years of progress. SIGGRAPH has always been an organization that focuses on the future. By focusing on the history of computer graphics, the 50th SIGGRAPH Conference celebration events highlighted the importance of the past as a space for reflection and commemoration as we work together to define the future.

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Bonnie Mitchell is a new media artist and Professor at Bowling Green State University in Digital Arts, in Bowling Green, Ohio, USA. Mitchell is a member of the ISEA International Advisory Committee and ACM SIGGRAPH History and Digital Arts Committee where she focuses on the development of their online archives. She was the SIGGRAPH 2023 conference History Chair in charge of the immersive Time Tunnel, history displays and retrospective talks. Her current creative practice focuses on development of physically immersive data visualization environments that showcase climate change over time. Mitchell's artworks explore spatial and experiential relationships to our physical, social, cultural and psychological environment through interaction, abstraction and audio. She has created numerous abstract visual music installations and animations that have been shown in hundreds of venues world-wide.

Kon Hyong Kim is a VR researcher and media artist at the University of California, Santa Barbara's Allosphere Research Group. His research focuses on highly immersive virtual environments, projection-based VR systems, and hyper-dimensional mathematics. He has designed, constructed & operated multiple VR environments around the world including ISEA and SIGGRAPH, and actively researches how to enhance immersive experiences. He is currently a postdoctoral researcher at UCSB.

Yamin Xu is an artist and electronics geek, working on the edge that blurs digital animation, artificial intelligence, and robotics with an emphasis on the exploration of computational perception as an inseparable part of art expression. He strives to create and define new things, which have not been clearly perceived as art. This motivation is sustained by his rigorous art/engineering practice, which is informed by the convergence of divergent spheres of study: religion and science, privacy and surveillance, robotic and organic. The result is in innovation, feedback to affect and expand his understanding and definition of art. His artwork has been exhibited internationally, such as ACM SIGGRAPH, TEI and CAA. Currently, Yamin Xu is an Assistant Professor at Bowling Green State University Digital Arts program.

Terry C. W. Wong is an archivist and co-organizer for the ISEA Archives. He has a bachelor's degree from the Applied Science Department of the University of British Columbia and a master's degree in fine art from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Currently, he is working on his graduate research study on connecting new media art archiving worldwide in the School of Interactive Arts and Technology at Simon Fraser University. Terry has been involved with the New Media Art Archiving Summit that takes place at a few editions of ISEA. He is currently a member of the organizing committee for the Summit on New Media Art Archiving.