



ILLUSTRATION BY SHELLEY EVENSON

preamble

Marc Rettig

“Talking about art is like dancing about architecture.”

— Steve Martin

ACM interactions

awards committee



JOHN RHEINFRANK, seeSpace, L.L.C.

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Co-chairs

LAURALEE ALBEN, Alben+Faris

STUART CARD, Xerox PARC

ABBE DON, Abbe Don Interactive

SHELLEY EVENSON, seeSpace, L.L.C.

JIM FARIS, Alben+Faris

BILL HEFLEY, Carnegie Mellon University

AUSTIN HENDERSON, Apple Computer

IAN McCLELLAND, Philips Corporate Design

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ACM interactions

awards jurors

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JOHN RHEINFRANK, seeSpace, L.L.C.

HARRY SADDLER, Apple Computer

CAROL STROHECKER, Mitsubishi Electric Research Laboratories

TERRY WINOGRAD, Stanford University



Steve Martin has already said it well (or was it Grace Slick?), so I'll resort to a paraphrase. Talking about interaction is like dancing about architecture. And judging the quality of something so elusive, so intangible as the back-and-forth conversation people have through a piece of technology is, well... hard.

So we need to get it straight right from the beginning. We call this an "award" (and we intend to heap praise on award-quality entries), but it is really a discussion about quality of interaction, design, people's needs, and how our field can address those needs. Discussions take place on many different scales. The committee and jury have spent days on end talking about these matters, and now we are making the first statement in a discussion on a much larger scale: we comment through this magazine, and we're hoping you will reply through your letters and through your entries.

This issue of *interactions* contains the jury's report on the subject, and asks a few questions. For those in a hurry, I'll summarize the story in a few sentences.

We asked for a wide range of entries, and got a good response

The call for entries went out in the Spring of 1995, first at SIGCHI, then in various magazines, Usenet, and the Web. Response was encouraging—we received over 200 requests for entry kits.

We encountered difficulties

Here's where we know we can do a lot better next year. Partly because it takes a lot of effort to start something like this from scratch, and partly because we were relying entirely on volunteers, the entry kits were late, late, late. By the time people received their kits, they had

less than four weeks to complete and return their entries. In that time they had to write a design brief and come up with ten minutes of "home video." Sadly, fewer than one sixth of the kits sent out were returned as entries.

The second difficulty is the "dance about architecture" problem I've already mentioned. We aren't judging aesthetics, though visual design is one criterion. We aren't judging dialog flow, though this is an important consideration. We aren't judging originality, effectiveness, robustness, or any other quality on its own. This is about quality of interaction, and there is no way for our entrants to show us interactions. However well qualified they might be, the jury admits to some feelings of inadequacy here. We aren't stock exchange traders, customer support reps, or concert musicians. How can we adequately measure the quality of these people's experience with an entrant's design?

The only answer is, "we try our best, which is far better than not trying." In particular...

We discussed each entry at length

We gathered people with a tremendous depth and range of experience and gave them time to study each entry. The jury spent a long day looking through the entries, watching videos, and discussing what they saw. Their thoughts gathered on sheets of newsprint, and on video tape. Weeks later, most of the jury assembled again to revisit some of the entries, verify their decisions, and to find ways to express the group's thinking to the rest of the community through this magazine issue.

We settled on criteria for the awards

We deliberately avoided publishing criteria during the entry process, wanting them to emerge from the jury discussions and the qualities we saw in the entries themselves. Lauralee Alben's article on page 11 describes the results.

There were six finalists...

The field of entries eventually narrowed down to six finalists:

- APPLE GUIDE, from Apple Computer

- GRAPHING CALCULATOR, from Apple Computer
- MEETING MANAGER, from the City of Edmonton
- THE MUSE, from a group based at Carnegie Mellon University
- NOKIA FEATURE STEREO TV, submitted by IDEO London
- NYSE HAND-HELD TERMINAL, submitted by Mauro/Mauro Designs

This list came from the jury's process of working through each entry, deciding whether it reflected outstanding qualities for each of the criteria. If they stood out in a sufficient number of areas, or if they stood out strongly enough in some way, they were listed as finalists. The diagrams for each finalist, scattered through the magazine, show where each entry excelled.

...but no "winners"

The first year of the awards is somewhat special, since it is the jump-start year, the year of bootstrapping. At its first meeting, the committee decided not to set explicit categories for entries, feeling that any categorization of the field would be artificial and arbitrary. Instead, we decided to let categories emerge from the field of entries, by clumping together entries with similar goals and situations of use.

For similar reasons, we decided not to set criteria for the judging process up front. Instead, criteria would emerge from jury discussions about the entries.

This explains why, in the end, we felt uncomfortable choosing any of the finalists for recognition above the others as "winners"



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of the award. It seemed unfair, for one thing, to choose winners based on criteria entrants hadn't seen when they prepared their entry kits. It also seemed unfair to judge one entry's user experience as "better" than another when they all addressed such dramatically different kinds of people and situations of use. If we had more entries, it would have been easier to say things like, "this game is clearly better than that game," or "this enterprise transaction system is clearly better than that one." From the beginning we made it clear that we not only wanted criteria to emerge from the process, we wanted the categories to do the same. We achieved the first goal, but didn't have enough entries to achieve the second.

technology and society have affected the world of design. Guessing from the submissions this year, the issues will also document the growing maturity of interaction design.

Thank you

The jury and committee worked hard. Even in the face of deadlines and demanding tasks, they were careful to protect the integrity of the award and the interests of the field, and be pillars of good cheer. What's more, they volunteered their time to write for this issue, which wasn't in their job description as jurors. Thank you.

Andersen Consulting provided significant financial support, use of their facilities and

*We aren't stock exchange traders, customer support reps, or concert musicians. How can we adequately measure the **quality** of these people's experience with an entrant's design?*

So we applaud the work of the finalists, and recognize their achievements in this issue. We are setting high standards, and, in this precedent-setting first year, are grateful for the finalists' role in setting the pace.

We are eagerly looking forward to next year

Now it is your turn in this conversation. Reply to us by email (interactions.awards@acm.org) or through letters to the magazine. Most importantly, reply to us through your entries this year. Show us quality, so we can show it to the rest of the design community.

Subsequent awards issues will document the shifts in the larger, community-wide discussion. Think how interesting it will be to look through ten years' of awards issues to see shifts in trends, watch dominant concerns come and go, and observe how changes in

equipment for the jury sessions, and large doses of time and good will from their employees. Don Chartier, interactions architect and Associate Partner in the Change Management practice in Chicago, went beyond the call of duty on several occasions and we're grateful for his help. Lisa Guyton and Mary Dudley contributed much needed logistical support, including smiles and Starbucks coffee.

Xerox PARC and Apple Computer also donated meeting facilities and time from their staff.

Steven Cherry, editor of *interactions* magazine, was an important source of advice, encouragement, and good conscience.

Now, on to next year. Watch these pages for announcements, and email awards@acm.org to request your entry kit. Send us your stuff! 📧