Ian Parberry's Conference Diary

**The 2nd Annual Microsoft Academic Days on
Game Development in Computer Science Education**
February 2007

As I've written elsewhere I was heavily involved in this conference, from the initial proposal to add an academic track (in contrast to the 2006 conference which featured only invited talks), through to being Program Committee chair and Guest Editor of the *Journal of Game Development* special issue. The task of being Program Committee chair, which as those of you with experience know is a very time-consuming activity, was made more complicated by three issues The first issue was the fact that this is the first time for the conference to accept refereed papers, which meant that we needed to invent a process, not just follow an established one. The second issue was the fact that we needed to collaborate with Microsoft, which underwrote the cost of the conference, including generous travel grants to participants. Since the requirements of academics are very often at odds with the corporate way of doing things, there were misunderstandings that took time to identify and fix. The third issue was that the conference preparations were undertaken with a very accelerated timeline due to cruise ship availability. Even without the added overhead of inventing a process that works for both academics and Microsoft, we would have been very pressed for time. Nonetheless, my program committee performed above and beyond the call of duty, and I am indebted to them. They performed effectively and even cheerfully under pressure. You will find a list of their names here.

I arrived in Florida two days in advance of the conference on Tuesday, February 20 and checked into the Disney Coronado Springs Resort, the site of the first day of the conference. On Wednesday, February 21 members of the Program Committee and I were given a tour of EA Tiburon Studios. The rest of the conference attendees arrived that evening. The conference proper started at 8am on Thursday, February 22 with a series of invited talks. I was particularly honored to introduce one of the invited speakers, Maria Klawe, President of Harvey Mudd University. My history with Maria goes back to 1981, I am embarrassed to say, when I was a beginning graduate student at the University of Queensland in Australia. I remember clearly that she encouraged a group of graduate students to compose limericks on the subject of theoretical computer science, which as I said in my introduction to my talk, impressed two things on me that remain with me still: That research should involve students, and it should above all include an element of *fun*. At noon we departed on buses to the ship, and after enduring the check-in procedure and the lifeboat drill, we explored the ship. The conference resumed at 7pm with poster sessions and, after dinner, invited talks until 11:30pm.

The next day, Thursday, February 22 featured talks from 8am to 11:30pm, with 3 hours onshore at Nassau from 4:00-7:00pm. The afternoon talks had parallel sessions. While ashore with a group of people that included Ken Perlin and Jessica Bayliss, we roamed the town, explored a church and the governor's mansion, refrained from buying tacky touristware (imagine the same gewgaws you can buy in the US only they have Nassau stamped on them), and Ken and Jessica purchased pirate accessories to wear to the "dress like a pirate" dinner on board that night.

On that subject, I did not have to purchase pirate accoutrements, since I was already in possession of a serviceable Captain Jack Sparrow outfit. In fact, on the way to dinner, I was guilted into having my photograph taken with an older midwestern couple who seemed to think that I was part of the Disney entertainment. Perhaps I have a second career ahead of me, should my university grow jaded with its fledgling Engineering college and like Tulane University before it, choose to put us out on the street. If you were at the "dress like a pirate" dinner on Thursday, that Captain Jack Sparrow was me, and my piratical sidekick was Ken Perlin.

Thursday, February 24 featured talks from 8am to 11:30pm, with the afternoon at Castaway Cay from 12:15-4:30pm. The morning talks were triple-tracked. By the morning of Sunday, February 25 we were back in Florida, and headed for the airport. Sunday morning I was forced to get up before 6am to go through immigration procedures with the rest of the foreign nationals. After several days of frenetic activity and late nights, this was something I very much did not appreciate. Although merely boring and bland in the extreme, it served merely to foreshadow the rest of the day.

Photos

Pre Conference: Tuesday, February 20

Just another day at DFW airport for the corporate road warrior. As Douglas Adams said in *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*: It can hardly be a coincidence that no language on earth has ever produced the expression "As pretty as an airport."

Inside a small metal tube hurtling through the lower atmosphere in search of Florida, sans anything to eat. Thank you, Corporate America, for making plane travel *such* a third class experience. What's up next in the cost-cutting agenda? Crates of live chickens in the aisle? BYO chair?

Approaching Orlando International Airport. Every time I see a lake in Florida I think of Piers Anthony's Lake Ogre-Chobee. (Disclaimer: I can only read those books when illness has reduced my IQ to 80 or less.)

Onshore: Wednesday, February 21

The Disney Coronado Springs Resort, site of the first day of conference presentations. It's an awesome place, but my feet got tired.
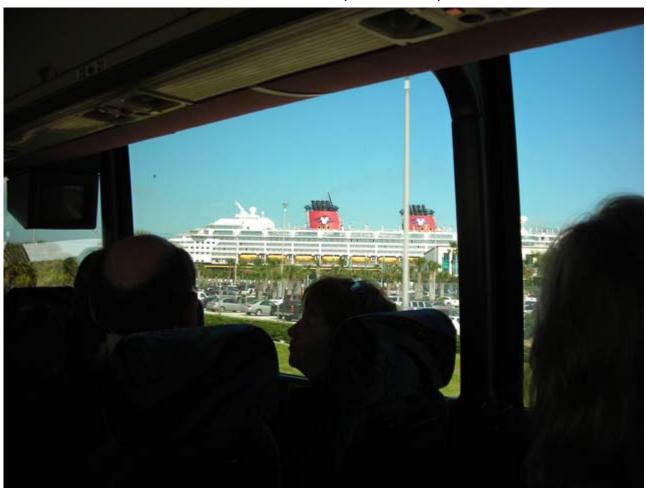
The Program Committee waiting in the lobby for their tour of EA Tiburon. On the left in the green shirt is Kent Foster from Microsoft, who is responsible for much of the organization of the conference. With his back to us wearing the orange backpack is Yusuf Pisan. Looking over his shoulder with her sunglasses on her head is Tiffany Barnes. Over her shoulder in the green shirt is John Nordlinger from Microsoft Research, who is also responsible for organizing the conference. He's talking to Ursula Wolz whose blonde hair you can just see over Yusuf's left shoulder. To the right in the blue-ish shirt with his back to us is Mike Zyda. He's talking to Jessica Bayliss on his left, and TL Taylor on his right.

The tour of EA Tiburon was one of the rewards for being a Program Committee member. I can't take you inside for obvious reasons.

Onshore: Thursday, February 22

On the bus bound for the ship. The bus trip took about an hour, but I can't say that I really noticed. I was pretty tired from the morning's presentations and was glad of the break.

Boarding the Disney Wonder. Yes, the gangplank had mouse ears. This was after the boarding procedure, which I found less intimidating than I was expecting. They took my green card but let me keep my passport. I was expecting the other way around, actually.
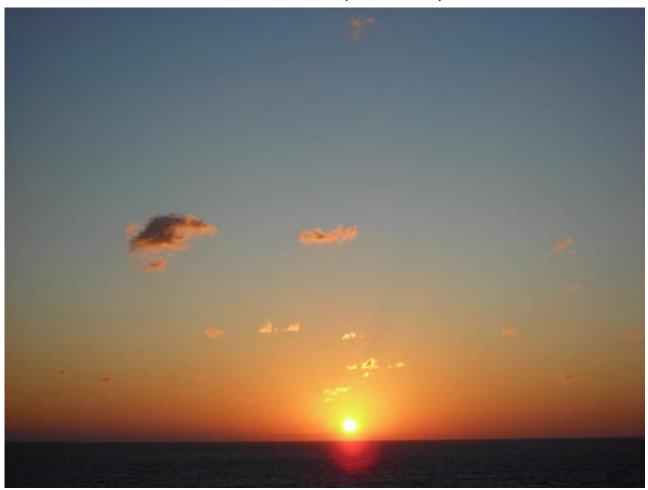
On Board: Thursday, February 22

Off to sea. They made us line up on deck for lifeboat drill, just like in the movie, *Titanic*. Yes, somebody had to make a wisecrack about that. Yes, I did some mental arithmetic to estimate the number of lifeboats on board from the number that I can see, and divided the number of passengers and crew by the number of lifeboats. I liked the number I came up with. Not that bobbing in the water in the Caribbean would be a bad thing except for the sharks. Come to think of it, would it be easier to freeze to death or be consumed in chunks by an ocean predator? Tough call. Anyway, as you can see, after the lifeboat drill everybody went inside to explore.

Leaving Florida in our wake. I'm starting to relax already.

Sunset over the Caribbean. The lens flare here is kind of cool. I wonder about the state of my CCD chip, but I figure the light intensity is low enough for it not to do any permanent harm.

Nassau, The Bahamas: Friday, February 23

Nassau from the ship. Having read some reviews online, I was expecting to be accosted by commercial riff-raff but since the conference attendees got off later than everybody else (we were attending talks until late in the afternoon), the dust had pretty much died down by the time we hit town. The locals were friendly, and nobody tried any funny business.

The governor's mansion, Nassau. Where did I see this last? Oh yes, I think it was on TV a couple of nights ago in the background of a bunch of lawyers bickering over the late Anna Nicole Smith. A bunch of guards eyed us suspiciously, which I found curious because the place is otherwise pretty laid back. The two facts are probably not completely unrelated.

The ship docked at Nassau. What can I tell you? The ship is big. It's hard to get the whole thing on screen.

The cabin staff had this amusing or irritating (depending on your perspective, and whether or not you've been on a cruise ship before) habit of making cute little towel animals.

Ian Parberry and Ken Perlin engaged in a serious discussion of software piracy.

Castaway Cay: Saturday, February 24

One of the presentations: Michael Youngblood locked in mortal combat with the A/V equipment. This was the smaller of the three parallel sessions, and was placed opposite Ken Perlin's invited talk, which accounts for the empty seats. I hear Ken's talk was, as always, excellent. I also hear he mentioned my name, and since my ears weren't burning at the time, I can only assume that he said nice things. Since Ken and I were two of the few conference attendees who dressed as pirates for dinner, we do have a certain cameraderie. Shared embarassment tends to do that.

Castaway Cay. I was a little skeptical of Disney buying an island, but it turned out to be a great experience. There were no low-lifes, no junkies, nobody trying to beg from us or make money from us, basically just beaches, drinks, and free food. What's not to like?

Not the cruise ship, the Flying Dutchman from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie. You could tell it's the one from the movie, because this side looks great, whereas the other side is basically just a bunch of metal plates. Ah yes, image over substance, that reminds me of my university's

administration for some reason.

Ian Parberry, Program Committee Chair, with Maria Klawe, President of Harvey Mudd University and keynote speaker.

Post Conference: Sunday, February 25

The ship returned to Florida overnight, and on Sunday we embarked on buses to Orlando airport, feeling tired, wrung out, and frazzled. There we found that due to a major winter storm in the northeast of the US, all flights were either at best delayed, and at worst canceled. We spent a lot of time in the airport and got home late in the evening. But I'm not going to show you any pictures of that horrendous 12 hour period. Go figure. I'm choosing to block the memory of that and remember the rest of the trip. After all, one man's delusion is another man's healthy mental attitude.

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