In Memoriam

Jim Thomas, 1946–2010

Jim Thomas, a visionary scientist and inspirational leader, died on 6 August 2010 in Richland, Washington. His impact on the fields of computer graphics, user interface software, and visualization was extraordinary, his ability to personally change people’s lives even more so. He is remembered for his enthusiasm, his mentorship, his generosity, and, most of all, his laughter.

Jim’s technical accomplishments are well summarized elsewhere.1,2 This collection of remembrances images him through the eyes of his many friends and colleagues, who were asked to write a personal note about what Jim meant to them. A version of this article also appears online (www.computer.org/jim-thomas), with a space for you to add your own recollections and comments.

Dave Kasik, Boeing. The worlds of computer graphics, interactive techniques, and visual analytics lost a real pioneer when Jim Thomas passed away. Jim contributed to all as a technologist, a visionary, and a leader.

I had the honor of knowing Jim since the mid-1970s. We had a special bond because we pursued our technical muse similarly. Jim started in industry (General Motors) and then moved to research (Battelle Pacific Northwest National Labs). I started in research (Battelle-Columbus) and still work in industry (Boeing).

Our professional paths kept crossing, and we became friends. Jim was always ahead of his time. His work in computer graphics at GM found low-cost alternatives for interactive graphics terminals. He always placed the user first and organized the Graphical Interaction Interface Techniques workshops in the early 1980s. Those workshops set the stage for my user interface management system work, the Seillac UI model, and the User Interface Software and Technology conference. Jim’s devotion to complex interactive systems for genetic researchers led him to establish the field of visual analytics to assist intelligence analysts after 9/11. These accomplishments would make a highly successful career. But Jim had a knack for sticking his neck out to do the right thing professionally. The man could organize and inspire people to participate. He did this as papers chair for SIGGRAPH (1980) and as SIGGRAPH president. As his career evolved, he became editor in chief of IEEE CG&A, general chair of IEEE VisWeek (2003), a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and a member of the board of the Fraunhofer Institute for Computer Graphics (IGD).

In reality, Jim was involved in so many professional activities and gave so many talks that I lost track. I remember these because he persuaded me to help on their organizing committees and editorial boards. I am truly grateful because these opportunities helped shape and expand my own career.

My fondest memories and interactions with Jim dealt with him as a man. Our families became friends, and Jim comforted me in the light of my own life events. He cared about the human beings we are, much more than our technical accomplishments. His humanity spoke volumes and was the true source of his success. He loved his family, travel, wine of any variety, fishing, … everything and everyone.

Jim loved life and laughter. I’ll always remember his laugh. It still echoes in my brain.

Maureen Stone, StoneSoup Consulting. I first met Jim in 1985, when he interviewed me for the position of papers chair for the 1987 SIGGRAPH conference. In hindsight, I naively brought to the position little more than enthusiasm and the desire to make a difference. But he responded with equal enthusiasm, and thus began a life-long friendship and collaboration. After SIGGRAPH ’87, we worked together on the SIGGRAPH executive committee, on the CG&A editorial board, and on the research agenda for visual analytics. But what I remember most about Jim are our long dinners, replete with good wine, where we would simply talk—about people, about music, about life. It is hard to accept that there will be no more conversations with Jim, except in my mind.
Mike Bailey, Oregon State University. Jim Thomas was more than just a member of our computer graphics community. He was a leader—someone you knew was always there and was always someone you could look up to. Even though he is gone, he will forever be part of our landscape.

I first worked with Jim on the SIGGRAPH 1987 conference committee. Jim was one of the cochairs (Bob Thomas was the other). He had an admirable leadership style. Depending on the situation, he knew when to be decisive, forceful, accommodating, humorous, encouraging, motivational, or simply a friend. It was a pleasure to be his colleague.

Unlike many SIGGRAPH conference chairs who flame out after that demanding two years, the conference cochair experience seemed to elevate Jim’s enthusiasm for the field. Rather than rest on his laurels, Jim went on to make significant contributions on the SIGGRAPH Executive Committee as president of SIGGRAPH, at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, as chair of the 2003 IEEE Visualization Conference (chairing one major conference wasn’t enough?), and as a national leader in the field of visual analytics.

My most enduring memory of Jim is his laugh. He had a quick sense of humor and a rowdy laugh to go with it. Oftentimes at SIGGRAPH, I would discover him by following the sound of his laughter. It will be a long time before I will be able to remember not to listen for it. Jim cannot be easily forgotten. And that, I think, summarizes Jim’s legacy. While the laugh might be silenced, the friendship, the leadership, and the inspiration will persist for a long time.

Andy van Dam, Brown University. I want to express my deep gratitude for having had the good fortune to know Jim for decades; for having shared meals and late night catch-ups at SIGGRAPH, as well as many an adventure on the memorable SIGGRAPH trip to Russia in 1991; and, most recently, for having had a fun and productive collaboration with Jim and Richard May on a US Department of Energy-sponsored project in immersive visualization. Jim to me was the can-do guy, the eternal glass-half-full optimist who always looked at a problem, whether technical, managerial, or societal, as a fascinating challenge and an exercise in creativity rather than as an obstacle. I enjoyed seeing the world through his optics, and always learned from our chats, often adjusting my own optics on the basis of his observations and experiences.

Our shared love of the outdoors and dogs nicely augmented the graphics connection we had, and gave him a lot of opportunities for storytelling and infectious, raucous laughter. He exuded warmth and genuine, deep caring for family and friends, and led an admirable, balanced life filled with many contributions on the personal, professional, and societal fronts. I am proud to be part of his extended family who miss him terribly and will cherish his memory.

John Dill, Simon Fraser University. I’ve deep and fond memories of this leader, visionary, colleague, and friend, whom I first met at the General Motors Research Laboratory when he joined in 1971. Shortly after he joined the lab, he became a part of our graphics group and we became first colleagues, then friends. As a colleague, Jim’s breadth of vision was wonderful, his courage in trying new ideas and approaches, inspiring. As a friend, his depth of caring and thoughtfulness was heartwarming, and his laughter was infectious! The pumpkin-carving parties he and Berta started became an annual event we all looked forward to.

As our careers developed, we continued to interact and collaborate, both as colleagues and as friends, through activities at SIGGRAPH and on the IEEE CG&A editorial board, where I discovered Jim was not only a visionary, he was also a marvelous manager and organizer, and incidentally a tough act to follow as EIC.

Later, as Jim began what to me is perhaps one of his most important contributions, establishing the visual analytics field, I was fortunate to be one of those “drafted by Jim,” and again saw his vision and leadership in action, initiating this exciting new field.

Our field is the poorer for having lost Jim; it is richer for his having been here.

Theresa-Marie Rhyne, Consultant. Jim Thomas was a terrific mentor to me in visualization in specific and computer graphics in general. When he was chair of the ACM SIGGRAPH organization, he encouraged me to contribute to a workshop on visualization toolkits and systems that was held at IEEE Visualization 1991. This was my first effort to move beyond being an attendee and become a contributor to the IEEE visualization community. When Jim was CG&A’s editor in chief and I was the editor of the Visualization Viewpoints department, Jim supported my efforts to continue to develop the notion of opinion pieces on visualization for the department. Being there to provide the extra nudge on novel ideas and to develop people as professionals was a special quality of Jim Thomas. I will forever be grateful for his unconditional kindness to me.

Jim Foley, Georgia Institute of Technology. Jim Thomas was one of the most friendly, cheerful, and determined people I have ever known. He made things
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Jim Thomas was an outstanding leader, guide, and mentor, and we shall greatly miss him. Nothing was too much trouble—writing the paper for the conference (delivered on time), preparing the presentation, traveling, discussing with the delegates—and inspiring everyone. The conference organizer’s ideal invited speaker.

He has left us a shining example to follow. But it will be difficult for us—he is no longer here to guide us and inspire us.

L. Miguel Encarnação, Humana. Since my earliest professional days at the Fraunhofer Center for Research in Computer Graphics in 1997, through my service for the IEEE CG&A editorial board since 2003, and my subsequent quest toward introducing the principles of visual analytics to the healthcare industry, Jim has been one of my most defining mentors, a selfless supporter, and most of all—a friend. The encounters with him over the years—as brief as some of them might have been—will remain cherished memories.

Larry Rosenblum, US National Science Foundation. I’ve known Jim Thomas for at least 20 years, primarily through his term as editor in chief of CG&A while I was on the editorial board and through the IEEE Visualization Conference. In recent years, Jim’s intellectual focus was on his highly successful role as the founder of the field of visual analytics. After I moved to the US National Science Foundation (NSF), we worked together to bring about a joint NSF/Department of Homeland Security (DHS) program that expanded the field into needed mathematical and computational areas. Jim was, quite simply, a terrific colleague. He was fun to work with, handled stress superbly, and had insightful ideas. He also managed to maintain his outside interests, including fishing and wine appreciation. His passing is a technical loss, but more importantly, I will miss the constructive approach and outgoing personality that enhanced all of our joint activities.

Rae Earnshaw, University of Bradford. Jim Thomas visited the UK a number of times to give presentations at international conferences, first in the National Media Museum and then at the University of Bradford. His presentations were always very interesting and well received by the delegates. He was inspirational. His last presentation here was on the theme of “finding the unexpected and verifying the expected in massive information spaces”—a theme that he was to develop much further in subsequent work.

The National Media Museum had state-of-the-art cinema and projection facilities that we used for the conference, and I recall they worked for everything except Jim’s Mac! As usual, Jim had arrived early to ensure the presentation would work. It took a number of experts an hour to resolve the problem, but it was fixed—all ready for his presentation the next day.

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Kwan-Liu Ma, University of California, Davis. I knew Jim through several occasions, IEEE CG&A editorial board meetings, the IEEE Visualization Conference committee, and the NSF/DHS visual analytics program. He was so easy to get along with and talk to. I very much admired his leadership, positive attitude, and energy. He was a true role model and mentor to everyone. Like many
José L. Encarnação, Dieter Fellner, and Bodo Urban, Fraunhofer IGD. Jim was, worldwide, a devoted friend, an important technology motivator, and a strong inspiring research leader. We, in Darmstadt and in Rostock, Germany, at the Fraunhofer IGD, appreciated and enjoyed very much for several decades his many interests, skills, and talents.

Jim was an internationally highly recognized scientist and peer in computer graphics. To work with him was always rewarding and motivating. His interdisciplinary way of thinking and his understanding and mentoring of innovation processes, also at the international level, were exemplary and very successful.

Jim was also a prominent advisor to many government agencies, as well as academic and industrial institutions. In this role he gave the best advice to the Fraunhofer Institute from 1993 to 2003 in developing a presence in the US. He furthermore had a great influence in developing and integrating a new research line in visual analytics at the IGD at a very early stage of the development of this new discipline. We always profited from his advice and guidance, which was always of high quality and extremely motivating.

But we will not only miss the colleague and expert—we will miss even more the friend and the great personality he was.

Jim had a special and personal way in approaching people, friendly and modest—despite his many achievements—and that is what made him such a good colleague and such a good friend, in business, as well as in private. He always wanted to help, where needed, and even to support developing careers, wherever possible. But we also remember with deep emotions the very interesting, private conversations we had with Jim, the nice and warm moments we enjoyed in our many joint family holiday trips (Alaska, several places in the Alps—in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy—but also Norway and the Baltic Sea), and the many times we shook Yahtzee—one of his favorite games! We had many good times and a lot of fun together, and those we will never forget.

We write this on behalf and in the name of not only all staff of the computer graphics institutions in Darmstadt and Rostock, especially the Fraunhofer IGD, but also all members of the Computer Graphics Division of the Gesellschaft für Informatik, the German Computer Society, and the many, many friends and admirers Jim had there.

Wir werden ihm für immer ein ehrendes An- denken bewahren! (We will always keep an honorable memory of him!)

References