In Memoriam

Carl Machover, 1927–2012

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The Person

The Eurographics citation succinctly described him as

A man of charm, wit, integrity and authority. His words carry weight; the weight that comes from a lifetime of experience and reflection. He has an eye for detail and illustration through the carefully selected example. He is also a man of vision and foresight. His lectures are always a careful balance of reflection on the past, experience of the present and vision for the future.²

To me, Carl was an exemplar mensch. He was modest and kind to a fault; had an irrepressible sense of humor; had a raucous, distinctive belly laugh; and, so far as I could see, was always cheerful and optimistic, independent of any circumstances. Another key aspect of his personality was the importance he attached to family and friends. His marriage to Wilma was a model of mutual love and devotion; watching the family over the decades in the family videos was a moving testimonial to the joys of family life.

The Builder

Like most engineers, Carl loved to build things. In his case, the definition of “things” included communities (which I describe later), document collections, and more traditional basement workshop objects.

From the beginning of his career in the 1960s at Norton Laboratories, he was involved with computer graphics hardware design. While at Information Displays, Inc. (IDI), he helped create the stand-alone CAD platform, IDIOM (IDI Input-Output Machine). IDIOM had its own operating system based on the Varian 620-I computer, a DEC PDP competitor.

The University of Minnesota’s Charles Babbage Institute (www.cbi.umn.edu) houses the immense
collection of papers Carl accumulated. The institute describes the collection as “a rich source of information for researchers interested in ACM's Siggraph, CAD/CAM, virtual reality, and other subfields of computer graphics.”

The Babbage Institute has an oral-history interview (and transcript) with Carl that goes into depth on his experience with computer graphics throughout his lifetime.


The Connector
His role as connector, in Malcom Gladwell’s “tipping point” sense, and respect for a wide range of people were in evidence from the beginning. The communities he nourished ranged from professional computer graphics groups such as ACM Siggraph, the National Computer Graphics Association, and the Eurographics Association to ASCI (Art and Science Collaborations, Inc.), whose memorial tribute described him as

a sought-after public speaker who tirelessly championed real-time, interactive graphics displays for computers, foreseeing today’s world of scientific data visualization, rich interfaces and computer-generated film animation.

Michael Macedonia, in his report on the Machover Symposium, which celebrated Carl’s 70th birthday, put it well:

Carl Machover has played an essential role in the field of computer graphics as teacher, mentor, and businessman. His contributions extend back to the early days of the technology, when he was executive vice president of Information Displays in the 1960s. Since then he has nurtured a young industry and technology through tireless work and productive friendships.

The Teacher and Mentor
Through professional tutorials on CAD/CAM and VR and his role as Adjunct Professor of Computer Graphics in Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute’s Department of Electrical, Computer, and Systems Engineering, Carl conveyed his enthusiasm and understanding to the next generation of computer graphics innovators. Through his approachability, he mentored others in the community who asked for advice. As ACM President Alain Chesnais said, “He was a mentor for many key people at Siggraph. I often went to him for advice with the various startups I’ve been involved in. He would always make time to chat and suggest options.”

The Dad
Carl’s son Tod is a composer and MIT professor who inherited his musical, artistic, and engineering talents from his parents. He fondly describes how his father used to take him into the basement workshop to get him to help with building projects, such as a remote-controlled airplane that took a couple of years to build and crashed on its first flight. Carl’s pianist daughter, Julie Machover Anderson, recalls the elegant doll house that he made, which included a working doorbell that played “There’s No Place Like Home.”

His daughter Linda Machover Samuels is a professional organizer, an author, and the creator of Oh So Organized (www.ohsoorganized.com), a service that guides clients to find the sweet spot between chaos and perfection. When she was in college, Carl would write to her from time to time but never signed his name. Instead, he drew caricatures of himself appropriate to the country he was in at the time. The family still cherishes those caricatures of Carl as a guy from Mexico, Italy, France, China, or beyond.

At the Machover Symposium, colleagues from near and far attended. Tod and Julie wrote and played a song for Carl, called “He’s Our Dad.” Linda brought the cherished Carl caricatures for all to enjoy. You can download the song from http://carlsymposium.wordpress.com. The site also has pictures and stories gathered from his friends to honor Carl’s work and life, including the famous caricatures.

The Communicator
While at Norton Laboratories, Carl wrote a primer on gyroscopes for the sales force that combined clear scientific writing with humorous hand-drawn cartoons, demonstrating both his ability to communicate with nontechnical people and his respect for...

From CG&A’s birth in 1981, he supported the magazine as both an editorial board member and a regular contributor. His roles included new products and hardware editor, guest editor, and author. His articles’ varied topics included computer graphics history (1994), a guide to sources of information about computer graphics (1983), the business of computer graphics (1991), and computer art (1995).

As individuals and as a community we mourn our loss of Carl, but we celebrate his rich life and are grateful for all he gave us.

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References

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