In Memoriam: John Riedl

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This recollection of John Riedl, founding coeditor-in-chief of the *ACM Transactions on Interactive Intelligent Systems*, presents a picture by editors of the journal of what it was like to collaborate and interact with him.

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On July 15th of this year, ACM TiiS lost its founding coeditor-in-chief, Professor John Riedl, who had fought cancer for 3 years with his characteristically boundless energy, intelligence, and good humor. John is known and admired around the world as a pioneering and perpetually leading researcher in the areas of recommender systems, social computing, and interactive intelligent systems. The awards granted to him in the ACM context alone include the titles of ACM Distinguished Scientist and Fellow and the 2010 Software System Award—with the GroupLens team, whose MovieLens has served as a mainstay of recommender systems research since 1997. He was a co-founder and Chief Technology Officer of the influential early Internet company Net Perceptions. One TiiS associate editor put it this way:

Some researchers know how to take an idea and run with it. John Riedl was a guy who knew how to run marathons with his.

Details of John's scientific and technical achievements can be found in many tributes, some of which are referred to on the TiiS website. This essay aims to present the perspective of a number of TiiS editors who had the privilege of collaborating with John and who can therefore answer the question: How does the extraordinary level of competence that is reflected in John's well-known achievements look in everyday interaction? My own impressions as a collaborator with John on several projects since 2002 are blended with thoughts that were contributed by associate editors of TiiS.

I was very impressed by John's breadth of knowledge and his sharp wit. He asked excellent questions, from encryption algorithms to the design of user studies.

Talking with John, you had to make sure your attention didn't wander for even a second lest you might miss some subtle insight. He would scroll through a 25-page journal submission during a phone conference and immediately identify the aspects that required careful attention. Even when discussing a question about journal policy or communication with colleagues, he would bring up pertinent results from some article that he had read or study that he and his students had conducted, believing that scientists should take scientific results into account in their decision making.

John was always creative, incredibly insightful, and truly open and willing to help others.

You might expect such a formidable mind to be striving constantly for higher levels of personal achievement and recognition. But John's energy was almost always channeled toward the goal of helping others to achieve. His approach to catching a lot of

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fish was not to fish impressively around the clock himself but rather to teach a lot of other people how to fish and then to offer them a combination of strategic guidance and just-in-time problem solving help.

We [the guest associate editors of a TiiS special issue] found John's personality compelling. He was always friendly and ready to help us deal with any questions and complications that arose in the course of our work.

I will miss John's generosity of spirit: he saw people's latent talents; helped them bring out those talents; and then celebrated with them as if it were their sole achievement.

This approach benefited all parties. Those whom John mentored received most of the recognition—John consistently preferred to be listed as the last of a group of contributors—and they acquired skills and insights that would serve them for decades; John was able to ensure the success of a broader range of projects than would otherwise have been possible, while maintaining an exemplary balance between research, teaching, family, and other aspects of private life that many have adopted as a model for their own lives.

John helped to create the best aspects of the tone of our research community. He did this in his manner and attitudes. In my experience, he was ready to listen, really listen to people. He treated them with respect. He was generous and open and encouraging.

Given that John was constantly collaborating and interacting with others, it is fortunate that he was the most enjoyable person to be with that many of us have ever known. Whenever he picked up the phone or appeared on the scene, it was as if the sun was emerging from behind the clouds. Even after returning to work after a grueling round of treatment, he would regale people with amusing and enlightening anecdotes about his experience, making them feel more cheerful than they had before.

What I will miss most about John is his seemingly endless supply of good humor and boundless energy. He brought a sense of fun with him where ever he went. That is truly a rare gift.

As a summary of the qualities of John Riedl that are not directly recognizable in his long list of achievements and honors, many who knew him well would agree with the following tribute:

Everything seemed brighter around John, and the world seemed like a giant playground to him. He was my advisor, my friend, my guide, and my support, and I will miss him greatly.