TOCHI Editor-in-Chief Transition: Farewell from Shumin Zhai, Welcome Ken Hinckley

After 6 years on the job, I am completing my two terms as Editor-in-Chief of *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*.

Ken Hinckley, a long-time associate editor for TOCHI and a leading researcher in the field of human-computer interaction (HCI), will lead the journal as TOCHI's fifth Editor-in-Chief. Congratulations to the ACM publications board for such an excellent appointment. And welcome, Ken, to your new role—and thank you for taking TOCHI forward.

It has been a great honor to serve at the helm of TOCHI for the past 6 years. When I was called by the search committee back in 2009, the computer science community had just begun a multiyear debate on the unusual imbalance of how conferences versus journals influence the computing sciences. I had been deeply involved in both the conference side and the journal side of publishing HCI research as an author, reviewer, editor, committee member, and papers chair. And early in my career, I had witnessed different publication cultures in other engineering and science research communities as well, giving me a healthy respect for both conferences and journals as publication venues.

So I wanted both sides—conference and journal—to continue finding success in their complementary roles.

Our top conferences, such as CHI, served the vital role of community building through annual conventions. But unlike professional conferences in most other fields, they also served as archival publication venues. In my view, this dual-purpose arrangement of our conferences worked quite successfully even though they faced increasing challenges on several fronts, including scaling to thousands of submissions that all had to be batch processed on an annual basis.

On the journal side, some of the same HCI pioneers who built our strong conferences also had founded and successfully grown our top journals, such as TOCHI. In a heavily deadline- and quantity-driven culture, however, TOCHI had a publication cycle that had grown too long and a publication volume that stayed too small (publishing sometimes as few as two articles per issue and with only four issues per year).

The leisurely pace and limited volume presented many challenges. Authors were deterred by the long and uncertain review turnaround time. Reviewers put off journal reviews for too long. Action editors were not dogged enough in chasing down reviews or decisive enough in accepting or rejecting manuscripts.

With the strong support of TOCHI's editorial board, I took shortening review turnaround time and growing the journal's size as a top priority while maintaining and improving the journal's quality. A year later, in 2010, we lowered the average turnaround time from 140 days to 74 days. The average turnaround time continued to improve and now stands at about 50 days over the past 3 years.

As a result, I was pleased to see the TOCHI submission and publication volume steadily grow year after year (Figure 1). In 2014, we published more than twice as many papers as in 2009, now in six issues instead of four. Meanwhile, TOCHI has consistently ranked among the top few ACM Transactions in key metrics, such as the ACM Digital Library download rate per paper. Our current submission stream is quite

Fig. 1. TOCHI's submission and publication volume over the past 6 years, by the number of papers received and accepted yearly from September to September.

Fig. 2. Number of manuscripts submitted per country. Over the past 6 years, TOCHI received 780 original submissions from 50+ countries around the world. Data estimates and visualization from Manuscript Central.

healthy and continues to grow. With one more quarter remaining in this year, we have received 180 submissions, already more than last year's total.

Looking back on the past 6 years, TOCHI received about 780 original submissions from 50+ countries (Figure 2). We accepted 133 papers in the same time period, many after multiple rounds of revisions. This leads to *one* acceptance rate estimate of 133/780,

Fig. 3. Number of published papers over the past 6 years, grouped by number of days from initial submission to final acceptance, including revision time.

or 17%. Unlike conferences, journals do not have a single unambiguously defined acceptance rate: for example, some of those 780 submissions are not yet resolved because they are still in various stages of review and revision, and some of the 133 acceptances include submissions that came in before this 6-year window began.

Authors often ask how long they should expect for their paper to be accepted and published. Figure 3 shows the distribution of “days to final decision” among the accepted papers over the past 6 years. All accepted manuscripts underwent at least one revision. But a few moved through the entire cycle (submit, review, revise, resubmit, accepted, and publication online) *in fewer than 100 days!*

Thus, TOCHI sometimes turns around articles for publication faster than most conferences. The bulk of the accepted papers took between 3 and 24 months to get accepted, which included the time authors took to do all (and sometimes multiple rounds of) revisions.

Of course, the unfortunate reality is that the majority of papers are not accepted. Many reject decisions arrived quickly, whereas others fell into the long tail end of slow-coming final decisions (Figure 4). Some submissions underwent major revisions but ultimately were not accepted. Such long-tail reject cases are unfortunate for both authors and reviewers but are a necessary part of a rigorous peer review process.

Managing these long-tail cases, either ultimately accepted or rejected, continues to be a struggle. We set an aggressive timetable for reviews; we frequently remind reviewers to complete their work by the agreed-upon deadline; and we prod action editors to come to timely decisions. Unfortunately, sometimes well-qualified reviewers are not available within the time frame we want their review. Sometimes other demands intrude in action editors’ priority tasks. Nonetheless, I apologize to those authors whose manuscripts fell into this long tail. And I appeal to all qualified HCI researchers to help us out by responding to—and, if possible, accepting—TOCHI editors’ requests to take on a review in as timely a manner as possible.

We also try to very quickly turn around papers that the editorial board deems out of scope (“immediate rejects”), or that we can see right away are unlikely to eventually pass a full and rigorous review process (“early rejects” that include some feedback on why the paper was unlikely to meet the very high bar of quality required for publication

Fig. 4. Number of rejected manuscripts over the past 6 years, grouped by number of days from initial submission to final decision, including revision time if any.

in TOCHI). This conserves reviewer resources, of course, but more importantly is respectful of authors' time, allowing them to quickly resubmit to a more suitable venue or to further develop their work before publishing.

For all other TOCHI papers that go through the full review process, an editorial board member handles the submission and assigns multiple reviewers based on their domain expertise and availability. I am generally very impressed by the excellent quality of TOCHI reviews and frequently receive compliments from authors for the high quality of the resulting feedback and insights offered. I thank the many reviewers who have reviewed for TOCHI for lending valuable time and expertise to these reviews, as their work is essential to TOCHI and to HCI as a research community.

All of the associate editors on TOCHI's editorial board were appointed based on their outstanding research contributions to the HCI field; their reputation as fair-minded academic judges in areas of expertise that met our submission stream's needs; and last but not the least, their ability to follow and enforce an agreed timeline and pace of handling submissions. I consulted extensively to vet candidates before I approached or appointed anyone to TOCHI. Unlike conference committee work that takes place in "burst mode," the journal requires sustained, constant, and tireless effort until one retires from the editorial board. I must thank all TOCHI associate editors who have served during my tenure, including

- 26 who were appointed to the board during my Editor-in-Chief tenure and still continue their service;
- 9 who started before my tenure and have since retired, plus another 7 who joined and retired during my tenure;
- and a remarkable 8 individuals who started their service on the TOCHI board before my tenure—and continue to contribute as editors even to this day.

One benefit of serving as Editor-in-Chief is the opportunity to read some of the most engaging, insightful, and eloquent action letters these outstanding associate editors wrote. I have learned a great deal from them and wished I could write that well.

I particularly want to thank Jeff Nichols, who served as TOCHI's information director, which in truth typically demanded that he act more like the Chief Operating

Officer of the journal. In fact, it was his emphatic “Yes!” in support that helped me to accept the TOCHI Editor-in-Chief appointment 6 years ago. I would not have been able to do this job in addition to my regular research work, a start-up endeavor to launch gesture typing as a new mobile input method, and product innovation jobs—first at IBM Research and then at Google. Thankfully, both employers accepted my expenditure of work time on TOCHI on the many occasions when nights and weekends did not suffice. And thankfully, my family—Isa, Lina, and Pernilla—were even more forgiving when I should have spent more time with them.

I also want to thank my three TOCHI predecessors as Editor-in-Chief—Jack Carroll, Jonathan Grudin, and Dan Olsen—for building a strong foundation for TOCHI and for their advice I sought after. Dan Olsen also continued to support and advise TOCHI as ACM SIGCHI’s vice president for publications and helped to build TOCHI’s paper presentation programs at leading ACM HCI conferences including CHI, UIST, and CSCW. I should also thank Robert Jacob, a founding member of the TOCHI board, who continued to support TOCHI as SIGCHI’s vice president for publications after Dan. Rob also serves as TOCHI’s acting Editor-in-Chief whenever there is a potential Editor-in-Chief conflict with a submission, in addition to his regular load as an associate editor.

HCI was not well represented in the 1998 Computing Classification System (CCS)—ACM’s official conceptualization of the computing field. I thank many TOCHI board members, particularly Michel Beaudouin-Lafon, who joined me on the ACM CCS 2012 edition task force that systematically organized HCI topics and made HCI a top-level computing field named *human-centered computing*.

TOCHI is one of the core journals of the ACM and has received strong support from the ACM publications board and ACM staff. For example, in the first 5 years of my tenure, every year TOCHI applied for an increase of about 100 in our page-count budget to support anticipated growth, and ACM always granted our wishes. This has empowered TOCHI to magnify its impact and grow tremendously during my tenure.

Finally I’d like to thank and congratulate all of our authors, particularly those authors whose submissions were eventually accepted for publication by TOCHI. With an ever-increasing pace of research work, and in a deadline-driven and often quantity-biased academic culture, submitting work to a stringent, demanding review process with a nondeterministic timeframe and outcome takes a special kind of discipline and spirit in pursuit of research excellence. But it is a level of excellence that is difficult to achieve without publishing significant and landmark results in a high-impact journal like TOCHI.

Although I am quite happy with TOCHI’s growth over the past 6 years, there were many goals I had in mind that were not achieved. Since our top-tier conference papers were already quite selective and allowed increasingly lengthy papers, I had hoped more TOCHI papers would have integrated and synthesized more definitive results from multiyear research programs. I had also hoped TOCHI could be more lively by publishing trend-setting or historical anchor articles with commentaries from leading research peers in the same area. We have had a few leads, but they did not materialize for one reason or another. Ken and the TOCHI editorial board have a lot more work to amplify TOCHI’s impact even further, and I am looking forward to more growth and success for TOCHI under Ken’s leadership!

Sumin Zhai
Editor in Chief

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