

INTERVIEW INTEGRALE DU LAUREAT DE LA POLYSHERE D'OR

AGEPoly : *Are you surprised to receive this special award from students ?*

Prof. Arjen LENSTRA : Of course I was surprised, and very pleasantly surprised too. But I also had mixed feelings, as I already got the regular IC teaching award back in 2008. It would be good for the school if the circle of usual suspects is widened a bit. Obviously, not much the students (or I) can do about that...

AGEPoly : *In your opinion, what are the right ingredients to be so popular in IC's classrooms ?*

Prof. A.L : I honestly don't know. Could it be my usage of traditional, basic teaching methods such as chalk and blackboard, despite the fact that the teaching evaluations describe my handwriting as "écriture horrible"? I just try to be myself, relax, listen to the students and try to understand their concerns.

AGEPoly : *Do you think a good professor must be a good comedian ?*

Prof. A.L : Maybe, and an occasional unexpected and somewhat orthogonal remark (for instance about my past as I used to work for a large organization described by some as "borderline criminal") certainly helps. That comes at the spur of the moment, however -- the main thing is to prepare each and every class as thoroughly as possible.

AGEPoly : *Tell about yourself, you teach with PlayStation consoles, students really appreciate this method. More generally, are you a player ?*

Prof. A.L : No, I used to be a banker, even worse. But indeed, we use our playstation cluster for a variety of student projects, for events such as the Journée "Oser tous les métiers", and for research in security of information protection methods. Ever since we installed our 215 playstations in the summer of 2007, they've been running full steam, with a remarkably low failure rate, carrying out all kinds of challenging calculations that otherwise would have been much more expensive. Since the mid 1980s I have been interested in methods to harvest computing time at below market prices. Playstations are just one example; imagine what we will soon be able to do on the worldwide army of hundreds of millions of smartphones that are idling while their users are asleep!

My first exposure to computer games was in 1974, in the basement of the mathematics department of the university of Amsterdam, where about half a dozen terminals were remotely connected to Amsterdam's only computer (a CDC with 12-bit bytes, and computationally speaking probably less powerful than a current microwave oven). It may have been the dungeon-like environment or the unhealthy look of those who were playing, but it did not attract me and that never changed. But, 25 of our playstations are equipped with monitors and students can come and play one of the many games that we have.

AGEPoly : *To conclude this interview, do you have a message board to pass on to students, colleagues or the school ?*

Prof. A.L : Students: Please, do not hesitate to ask questions. If there is something you don't understand, most likely you're not the only one. We are here to help you understand the material, not (just) to intimidate you. This applies to all classes, not just mine. And participate in the teaching evaluations -- they are extremely valuable. School: This is not the right forum to start this discussion, but nevertheless: everyone (students, staff, school) would benefit from a more flexible grade-interpretation system. Can we open the discussion on this topic ?