Letter from the Editor

Plugging into the Cloud

After reading this issue, I had to seriously reevaluate my perception and definition of cloud computing. Unsurprisingly, given the wide array of computing models it encompasses, agreement among even experts is somewhat elusive.

For end users, cloud computing's inherent intangibility makes it tough to get a good grip on what it is and isn't, where it begins and ends. However, one thing is for sure: Cloud computing is hot and will soon have a big presence on your PC.

Google, already a big player in the consumer space with services like Gmail and Google Docs, is readying ChromeOS, a thin operating system that boots right to a browser. With Chrome OS, document storage and heavy computation (like web searches) will all occur in the cloud. Is this a taste of things to come? Fortunately for programmers and students, Google has opened up its "app engine" back end, joining other powerful services like Amazon's EC2 and Yahoo!'s BOSS. If you've been thinking about getting your feet wet in the cloud, there really isn't a better time to start tinkering!

Open Hack Day

In fact, I'm already guilty. As part of Yahoo!'s Open Hack day this past October, Bryan Pendleton, Julia Schwarz, and I (all Carnegie Mellon University students) built a cloud-based application in Python we call The Inhabited Web. In the 24 "hacking" hours permitted by the contest, we built the back end on the Google App Engine (**appengine.google.com**), making it massively parallel and distributed.

The idea, briefly, is to embed a simple visualization into web pages, next to the browser's scroll bar. Small triangles are used to represent users' positions on the current page (scroll position). Collectively, this allows you to see where people are congregating on a web page, perhaps next to a great shopping bargain, interesting news story, or funny video.

You can check it out and sign up your web site for the service at **wwww.inhabitedweb.com**.

Speaking of the web, we invite you to join our Facebook group (ACM Crossroads) and also to let us know what you think via email (**crossroads@acm.org**) and Twitter (hashtag #xrds).

I hope you find the current issue stimulating. The whole *Crossroads* team has been hard at work for three months on this cloud-centric edition of the magazine, and we are very excited about the amazing lineup of feature articles, covering topics from security and entrepreneurship, all the way to volunteer computing. You'll also find interviews with people working on the biggest and best cloud computing systems (see page 19).

Presenting XRDS

This issue also marks the last *Crossroads* that will arrive in the present format. We're very excited to announce *Crossroads* will be relaunching as of the next issue with an all-new look and tons of fresh content for students. We've placed special emphasis on recurring columns headed up by our new editorial team. Expect everything from code snippets and school advice, to historical factoids and lab highlights, to event listings and puzzles.

Heading up these departments is a talented team from all over the globe: Daniel Gooch (University of Bath), David Chiu (Ohio State University), Rob Simmons (Carnegie Mellon), Dima Batenkov (Weizmann Institute of Science, Israel), Michael Ashley-Rollman (Carnegie Mellon), Erin Claire Carson (University of California-Berkeley). I am also very pleased to announce James Stanier (University of Sussex) is now part of the senior editorial team, responsible for soliciting and magazine feature articles, joining Ryan K. L. Ko (Nanyang Technical University, Singapore), Inbal Talgam (Weizmann Institute of Science, Israel), Sumit Narayan (University of Connecticut), and Tom Bartindale (Newcastle University).

—*Chris Harrison*, Editor-in-Chief

Biography

Editor-in-chief Chris Harrison is a PhD student in the Human-Computer Interaction Institute at Carnegie Mellon University. His research interests primarily focus on novel input methods and interaction technologies, especially those that leverage hardware and the environment in new and compelling ways. Over the past four years, he has worked on several projects in the area of social computing and input methods at IBM Research, AT&T Labs, and most recently, Microsoft Research.