

How to Get Your SIGGRAPH Paper Rejected

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1 Introduction

Everyone knows what acceptable SIGGRAPH papers look like: just look in the proceedings. When one only sees the accepted papers and not the rejected ones, it is easy to get the wrong impression of what it is that SIGGRAPH likes and doesn't like.

I've submitted a lot of papers that SIGGRAPH didn't like, as well as a few they did. Also, I've been on the papers committee a few times and know what it is they look for. This note tells you something about what happens to your paper as it goes through the reviewing process as well as what people discuss when they're trying to decide whether to accept or reject your paper. I'll try to tell you everything I've learned about the SIGGRAPH secret: What SIGGRAPH wants, and how you can give it to them so they'll accept your paper. I'll also talk about some of the flaws in the reviewing process and how you can protect yourself against them. Finally, I want to share some thoughts on the present course and the future of technical papers for SIGGRAPH.

Before we do this, I would like to say why SIGGRAPH reviews are done the way they are. There are two reasons.

The first reason is the principal feature of the SIGGRAPH conference publication that makes it very attractive: speed. SIGGRAPH is one of the few high-quality publications that can publish a paper in less than a year. In 10 weeks, SIGGRAPH can do what other major publications take 10 months to do. In a fast-moving field like computer graphics, this is crucial.

The second reason is that SIGGRAPH has chosen a very different quality strategy than most other conferences. While other conferences will accept papers of incomplete work in progress, SIGGRAPH has chosen to shoot for the highest quality papers of complete results. Because of this, 80% of submitted papers are rejected. The MacArthur Foundation is more generous with its "genius" awards than SIGGRAPH is with its papers. There are more MacArthur awards each year than SIGGRAPH technical papers.

The emphasis on both speed and quality makes the reviewing process for SIGGRAPH very different from of a journal or another conference. The speed and quality emphasis also puts severe strains on the reviewing process. In a journal, the reviewer and authors can have a dialog where shortcomings and misunderstandings can be resolved over a leisurely pace. Also, even if there are significant flaws in a paper for another conference, the chances are that strengths will overcome the weaknesses in the judging. In SIGGRAPH, if the reviewers misunderstand your paper, or if some flaw in your paper is found, you're dead.

The reviewing process for SIGGRAPH is far from perfect, although most everyone is giving it their best effort. The very nature of the process is such that many reviewers will not be able to spend nearly enough time weighing the nuances of your paper. This is something for which you must compensate in order to be successful. But I'll get to that later. First, let's talk about what happens to your paper.

2 The reviewing process

How does your paper get accepted or rejected by SIGGRAPH? Let's follow it through the entire process.

First, you work for months, slaving away at equations, hacking

code, and feeding slides to your local photofinisher. SIGGRAPH fever rises to absurd heights at the last week: "Let's see I only have 105 hours until the deadline..." You put everything together, accomplishing superhuman tasks to make the Federal Express deadline at the very last minute. Your six copies are taken by the courier safely to the papers chair, then you-and everyone around you-collapse.

The next day, as you and hundreds of other morlocks around the world come out of sub-basements to blink at the first natural sunlight you've seen in weeks, is deadline day. Fully 85% of the 200 or so SIGGRAPH submissions arrive at the papers chair doorstep. Everyone else has worked until the last possible minute, too. The papers chair and several dedicated assistants then spend their long all-nighter giving your paper a number, entering it into the database, and typing and mailing a letter acknowledging receipt of your paper.

Immediately after this, the papers chair, along with two or three others on the papers committee, sorts through all the papers and assigns your paper to the pile for a particular senior reviewer. The papers program committee is made up of 25 or so of these senior reviewers. With the large number of papers, this partitioning process takes a full day.

One copy of your paper is retained by the papers chair. One copy is mailed to the secondary reviewer, and four copies are mailed to the senior reviewer. Thus each reviewer receives a large Federal Express box of your papers and video tapes. This usually happens a week after the deadline.

The senior reviewers receive a set of 14-18 papers. For half of these they act as secondary reviewer and for half as senior reviewer. As senior reviewers, they look at your paper and choose three additional reviewers-at least two of whom are external to his or her institution. The senior reviewer sends a list of these reviewers to the chair within two weeks.

The reviewers then each receive a copy of your paper, slides, and video. The reviewer reads your paper, evaluates it, and fills out the review form that eventually makes its way back to you. He or she may fill out the hard copy or may email the review back to the senior reviewer. The reviewer has four weeks to do this.

After the senior reviewer gets each review of your paper, a review summary is made and a score is computed. Copies are made of the summaries and reviews. The originals are then Federal Expressed to the chair.

The chair tabulates all the scores, sorts your paper according to score, records it in a database, and prints out a set of custom lists for each senior reviewer summarizing all the papers.

The following week, the paper selection meeting occurs. This meeting, where the fate of your paper is determined, lasts for two full days. If your paper is on the very bottom or very top of the list, very little discussion is given to your paper (unless the senior reviewer wants a short discussion by full committee). This no-discussion acceptance/rejection eats away at the top and bottom of the list until the density of discussion slows the process.

Then a "triage" session occurs. During this time, the senior and secondary reviewers, as well as others who might share expertise in the subject area, discuss your paper. They then decide to accept, reject, or discuss your paper. If they decide to accept or reject, your