AI Magazine Volume 24 Number 2 (2003) (© AAAI)



# The 2002 Starting Artificial Intelligence Researchers Symposium

*Thierry Vidal*

■ During the 2002 European Conference on Artificial Intelligence (ECAI-02) was introduced the Starting Artificial Intelligence Researchers Symposium (STAIRS), the first-ever international symposium specifically aimed at Ph.D. students in AI. The outcome was a thorough, high-quality, and successful event, with all the features one usually finds in the best international conferences: large international committees, comprehensive coverage, published proceedings, renowned speakers and panelists, subsidized awards, and an exciting social program. Considering the numerous benefits gained by the young researchers through such a forum, no doubt STAIRS will become a regular and well-established biennial event.

The Starting Artificial Intelligence Researchers Symposium (STAIRS-2002) was held in Lyon, France, on 22 to 23 July 2002 (Vidal and Liberatore 2002).[1] STAIRS was a stand-alone conference but was affiliated with the European Conference on Artificial Intelligence (ECAI-2002), which took place at the same venue. It was the first international congress, with edited and published proceedings, specifically aimed at Ph.D students and recent Ph.D holders in all areas of AI. It offered them, on the one hand, a first experience in submitting and presenting a paper in an international forum with a broad scope and thorough selection process and, on the other hand, the opportunity to exchange ideas related not only to their research problems and approaches but also to their future scientific career.

The format of the conference included paper presentations in thematic sessions, a poster session, two invited talks, and a panel session. The program was set up by an international program committee consisting of confirmed junior researchers, covering all domains of AI, and the organization committee, also made up of young scientists, took care of the logistics and social aspects, in close collaboration with the ECAI Organization Committee. Another goal of STAIRS was indeed to offer researchers who have recently completed their Ph.D. and started a well-established career a thorough experience in putting together all the issues related to an international event with a broad thematic scope. Thierry Vidal, from ENIT, Tarbes, France, and Paolo Liberatore, from University La Sapienza, Rome, Italy, were the cochairs of the Program Committee. Nathalie Guin-Duclosson, from University Claude Bernard, Lyon, France, chaired the Organization Committee.

## Technical and Social Programs

From 64 submissions, the Program Committee selected 21 papers and 9 posters of high technical quality, covering a wide range of topics, including multiagent systems, natural language processing, learning, information retrieval, uncertainty management, constraint programming, and intelligent user interfaces. A distinction has been made between classical theoretical works and contributions dealing with applications of AI techniques in industrial projects. The latter were identified as application papers. Six such papers appeared in the paper sessions, and two more in the poster session, addressing applications from estimation of pollution solubility in wastewater or planning and optimizing in sheet metal bending to behavioral multiagent simulation of an active telecommunications network or knowledge discovery in steel industry measurement.

Interestingly enough, even the poster session was very successful. Although the papers had shown flaws that prevented them from being included in the proceedings, the works carried out were impressive, and the authors were very enthusiastic in explaining their approach to a large number of interested attendees. The best example is probably the work by Marta Sabou (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands) on creating portals using lightweight ontologies. Her presentation attracted many people during the two days, Sabou being one of the most passionate and involved students in the exchanges during the plenary sessions.

The technical program was completed by two invited talks. The first one was a general-scope tutorial entitled "How not to Give a Talk," given by Eugene Freuder, from 4C, Cork, Ireland. It gave Ph.D. students (and others...) crucial keys into the usual errors and blunders one can make when presenting research work. The aim of the second invited talk, which had been jointly selected by the STAIRS and ECAI program committees, was to exhibit a challenging, impressive, and comprehensive work carried out by a brilliant young scientist. Sebastian Thrun, associate professor of computer science and robotics at Carnegie Mellon University, appeared to be the best candidate for such a purpose. His talk, "From Robots to People—Probabilistic Techniques for Personal Service Robots," presented a number of projects he

had been involved in and his views on the next challenges in the area. It was given within the ECAI technical sessions on the day following STAIRS (24 July), but it was actually included in both ECAI and STAIRS programs.

The last session of the STAIRS technical program on 23 July was the panel session, which addressed present and future opportunities for AI research in Europe. It covered both industrial and academic viewpoints through four short preliminary contributions. The panelists were Luca Console, from University of Torino, Italy, who talked around his experience in European projects and thematic networks; Bertrand Braunschweig, from IFP, Paris, France, who presented the viewpoint of an industrial involved in research projects; Eugene Freuder, from 4C, who represented an intermediate position between theoretical and applied research; and finally, Steffen Staab, from University of Karlsruhe, Germany, who provided interesting feedback from his experience as the cofounder of a small-size company. In the second part of the session, they took a fair amount of time answering numerous questions from the students.

The social part of the symposium included a dinner on a riverboat that took us along the Rhones and Saone rivers, offering great views over the historical buildings of the old Lyon. This dinner contributed to the friendly and warm atmosphere among the attendees, which was one of the main achievements of the conference. Generally speaking, the organizers were impressed by the high level of active participation, almost every talk being followed by a lot of relevant and sharp questions from other students in the audience.

Two prizes were distributed during the dinner. The author of the best mature paper received EURO$1000 (US$1007), and EURO$300 (US$302) were given to the author of the best promising paper, that is, a paper grounded on strong ideas but showing minor technical or writing flaws. The best mature paper prize was given to Nicola Stokes, from the University College of Dublin, Ireland, for her contribution to the field of interpreting and segmenting flows of texts using techniques in natural language processing and information retrieval. The title of the paper was "Segmenting Broadcast News Streams Using Lexical Chains." The best promising paper prize rewarded Nicolas Sabouret, from University of Orsay, France, for his work entitled "A Model of Requests about Actions for Active Components in the Semantic Web." This paper also addressed techniques in the general field of natural language processing but applied to the emerging major domain of the semantic web.

## The Future

The benefits of such a congress are undoubtedly high. First, the organizers, who were given a lot of freedom to set up the event and, thus, were led to tackle all the issues attached to this kind of task, experienced an amazing opportunity that might help in their future career. They had the ambition to make it a thorough conference, with a high-quality scientific program, that could be quickly identified as a major event in the AI community. It seems this goal was reached.

Second, the authors got the chance to experience high-level exchanges involving their work, which is unusual so early in a research career: first with the reviewers who took care to explain and motivate their recommendations, probably more than in other conferences, and then during the symposium with renowned senior researchers and the other young researchers, who showed a lot of enthusiasm and involvement. No doubt that such an experience will help these young researchers not only to improve their work in a tremendous way but also to develop strong relations with other teams.

Last but not least, it was decided to consider a set of seven papers of especially high quality (among which were the two papers that received prizes) and resubmit extended versions to a special track of the *AI Communications* journal. This will also give their authors another experience of major importance.

Considering the success of this first edition, the STAIRS symposium will remain in the future as a biennial event affiliated to the European Conference in Artificial Intelligence. The next symposium will occur in Valencia, Spain, in August 2004. Because STAIRS is the only international conference in AI specifically dedicated to Ph.D. students, it will not be open merely to European submitters; on the contrary, the organizers hope to broaden the audience with contributors from all around the world. If you are in the early stages of your AI research career, please do consider submitting your first results to STAIRS-2004![2]

## Note

1. For further information on STAIRS-2002, please have a look at stairs2002.univ-lyon1.fr/.

2. For further information on the next ECAI and STAIRS conferences, please stay tuned to www.dsic.upv.es/ecai2004, where more information will be posted in the coming months.

## Reference

Vidal, T., and Liberatore, P., eds. 2002. *Proceedings of the First Starting Artificial Intelligence Researchers Symposium.* Amsterdam, The Netherlands: IOS.

**Thierry Vidal** received a Ph.D. in AI in 1995 from the University of Toulouse, France. He had worked on the robotics and AI team at LAAS-CNRS in Toulouse, under the supervision of Malik Ghallab. From 1996 to 1997, he was a guest researcher on Erik Sandewall's team in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Linköping, Sweden. Since 1997, he has been an associate professor at ENIT in Tarbes, France, working on the automated production research team. His research interests are temporal reasoning, constraint satisfaction, uncertainty management, resource allocation, conditional planning, robust and multiagent scheduling, and reactive control.