Researchers creates software to explore Shanghai’s past

The digital time traveler

By Zeng Zhiwei

Sitting on a sofa, Christian Henriot’s eyes are glued to the computer screen in front of him. His fingers dance along a video game controller, but he is not playing a video game. He is presenting the latest of his software, Immersive Virtual Shanghai (iVS), a Google Earth-like program that allows people to travel around a 3-D map of Shanghai in any year from 1855 to 1954.

Henriot, the primary designer of iVS, is a French professor who has been conducting research on Shanghai for the past 50 years. He brought his work to the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai to seek cooperation and transformation the software into a free mobile application by spring of next year. If there is enough interest, the software can also display other information about Shanghai besides changes to the city’s appearance. It can use color to show real estate prices at different times and population density—the darker the color, for example, the higher the price.

As the city expanded, the race track has been moved again and again. The third time, it was moved to what we now call People’s Square. "It was the only area where the highest prices were kept intact," Henriot added. "The first racetrack in Shanghai was somewhere near the Bund," Henriot said, as he pointed at the computer screen.

The software is still in its early stages. The database is still small and more than 60 hours a week. Many people have asked him why he does it. "I love it. It’s a professional hobby." Henriot sometimes works more than 60 hours a week. Many people have asked him why he does it. "I love it. It’s a professional hobby."

The challenges ahead

The iVS project requires a lot of work. Henriot sometimes works more than 60 hours a week. Many people have asked him why he does it. "I love it. It’s a professional hobby."

When you love something, you just don’t care," he said. Henriot has always dreamed of showing the evolution of Shanghai in an easy and accessible way. New technological developments gave him the opportunity. Henriot has always kept up with technology. It is important to him. "The younger generation accesses information much differently than how we did. So we have to adapt. We need customers," he said.

Technology is not much of a headache for Henriot and his team. "Information about Shanghai is not difficult to find. But not all the pictures are good enough," Henriot said.

Henriot hopes to find more pictures and data so they can improve iVS. Still, 4,000 pictures are more than enough to show the tremendous changes in Shanghai’s development over the years. The software is still in its early stages. The database is still small compared with what Henriot’s wants it to be. One of the reasons why Henriot wanted to participate in the Shanghai Expo was to build awareness for the project so more people could contribute.

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Christian Henriot presents iVS at the Shanghai Expo. Photos: Courtesy of Christian Henriot.