

Around the World in 380 Days

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Week 1: Berkeley Bound

Fixing the date for the start of a sabbatical is more an art than a science. Officially, sabbatical leave at the University of Maryland runs from August 22 to May 21, which corresponds roughly to the start and end dates of the Fall and Spring semesters, respectively. But that ignores the summers, which is when sabbaticals really start and end. So for the purpose of this diary, I've decided to tell the story by week (with weeks starting on Mondays), and to start with the first week in which I did something that I would not have done had it not been for my sabbatical. So the story starts on Monday, June 22.

It was a bit of an anticlimactic start, since nothing of note actually happened that day. Unless you count housecleaning, which for me is rare enough to be noteworthy! I spent part of the day at the University (of Maryland), meeting with a couple of faculty and a student, and then stopped in for the opening talk at the 2009 Digital Humanities conference (which happened to be on campus). Tuesday and Wednesday were more packed with meetings, preparations for my departure, and less time than I would have liked at the Digital Humanities conference.

Then on Thursday, at 5:50 AM, I was on the road. Some might say that the early departure was needed to beat the rush hour, but the truth is that it was really needed to arrive at the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio a couple of hours before closing time. In Washington, people rave about the new Udvar Hazy branch of the National Air and Space Museum, but that's because they haven't been to Dayton.

After the museum closed, it was on to Urbana-Champaign. Any good sabbatical should include visits to several universities, so the home of the University of Illinois seemed like as good a place as any to spend my first night on the road. The next day found me passing through Iowa City, home of the University of Iowa, but I was unable to reach a colleague there by phone or email, so I pressed on to North Platte, Nebraska. At the previous town, Lexington, it had been pretty clear that there was a line of thunderstorms ahead. As a pilot, I never get to fly through a line of thunderstorms (too dangerous), so I passed up the opportunity to stay in Lexington and pressed on to North Platte. On arrival in North Platte it turned out that most of the hotels were full – apparently because of the “dangerous” storm that I had just come through. I suppose everything is relative.

The next day included a stop to go jogging near Cheyenne (from which it turns out to be possible to run all the way to the Colorado border – it was about half a mile!), lunch in Laramie (across the street from the University of Wyoming – at a restaurant and bar called “The Library” – where the staff wore t-shirts that say “tell your mother the truth – you were at the Library”) and then on to Salt Lake City. The last day of the trip was by far the most scenic – they don’t call it the Great Salt Lake for nothing. Just across the Nevada border at the edge of the lake (in West Wendover) the casinos begin. And they

don't stop until you get to just north of Reno (home of the annual Reno Air Races, which I hope to make it to this year). Then on to Berkeley.

Renting a room sight unseen is a tad adventurous, but the last couple of months have been busy enough that flying to California just to check out a place to live simply wasn't in the cards. It turns out that the place is just as advertized. Clean, nicely furnished, with a bit of a view of San Francisco. And, most importantly, wireless Internet. The neighborhood's not the greatest – the nice shops Berkeley is famous for are quite a ways away. But the apartment is the entire second floor of an old house with quite a lot of character, and being on the second floor it seems safe enough. Time will tell. Maybe if the street were not called Alcatraz Avenue it would be less ominous ...

Which brings me to the end of week 1. This week has truly been an accomplishment of modern technology. Wake up one morning near Washington DC with an intent to drive to California. Less than four days later, arrive in California, and do so with a vehicle that can quite easily move me around the state. And do it for no more than half a week's wages at the average salary of a worker in the U.S. (which is darn close to what faculty get paid!). Simply amazing.

Week 2: Settling In

Never one to plan ahead, I sent Ray Larson (my host here at Berkeley) a note the night I arrived, letting him know that I was here. The next morning, my email contained a note from Ray letting me know that he would be in on Monday morning. So, still being on east coast time, I headed over to the University of California at Berkeley to see Ray on Monday morning. And found out just how far that was! Now I normally run three miles at least three times a week, so my working definition of "far" is "more than three miles." But, of course, you need to come back. It turns out that UC Berkeley is about a 50 minute walk – good exercise. And a 50 minute walk back – such good exercise that I would not be likely to do it voluntarily! But, of course, a one way trip would be a tad suboptimal ...

In addition to meeting with Ray, Monday was a good day to get started on the administrative details of a sabbatical here. The usual forms for things like a library card and building access turned out to be very well streamlined, so that didn't take much time. Michael Buckland happened by late that morning, so we had lunch together with one of his students, Ryan. Tuesday was spent catching up on some reviewing (foolishly, I had agreed to serve on the program committee of three different SIGIR workshops!). Wednesday, I had lunch with Judd, another doctoral student who I had met for the first time on Monday. And I went by the public library to check out my first book there (by Owen Garriott, about Skylab). Thursday, Fred Gey, a colleague from TREC, CLEF, and NTCIR, introduced me to one of his friends from Lawrence Berkeley Labs – I may give a talk there some time this fall.

Friday was a holiday (Independence Day, although a day early), so I headed out on a cross country trip to Treasure Island, Point Reyes, Muir Woods, and Tiburon. Point

Reyes turned out to be the high point of the trip. Nearly thirty years ago, I used to “coast out” over a navigation aid at Point Reyes, traveling at half the speed of sound, to scour the ocean for Russian submarines. On Friday, I walked the beach at Point Reyes at less than one percent of that speed, thinking about how much the world had changed. Tiburon was a close second, with the best steak I have had all year – maybe the best steak of the decade. Which, since it is the only decade so far this century, makes it the steak of the century!

Saturday, today, is the real Fourth of July. Which I celebrated by working on a proposal, jogging to the Amtrak station (which turns out to be a mile and a half from here) and watching the fireworks from my patio (it turns out the neighborhood is long on enthusiasm, and there must be an excellent fireworks purveyor nearby!). Not a bad way to wrap up my first week here. Actually, there’s one day left to go, but that’s predictably dedicated to that same proposal and to some reviewing. And then we’re on to week 3!

Week 3: Out and About

My second week here provided my first opportunity to get around to see some of the folks off campus who I hope to work with while I am here. The week started with a trip to H5, a legal e-discovery services firm in San Francisco. BART proved to be the best way to get there, and it also provided my first culture shock of the week. People I didn’t know struck up conversations with me. Nothing substantial – just “how’s the weather” sorts of things. The first time it happened, I thought it a bit odd. The second time, though, was a “no Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore” moment (strangers don’t speak on the metro in Washington, nor on the subway in New York where I grew up). By the third time, I started wondering if they thought it was I who was odd with my clipped responses.

Tuesday was the first International Computer Science Institute (ICSI) speech lunch that I had a chance to attend. It’s a very dynamic and engaged group; I’ll speak there in September, and it was good to get an advance look at their style. John Canny from CS was speaking, and listening to him recount his interests, coupled with what Judd had told me about strengths of the iSchool faculty here, left me thinking that this might be a great place to deepen my understanding of what they call here “information for development” (e.g., finding ways to leverage information access to help jump start less developed economies).

Wednesday I headed down to Monterey to visit the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) and the Defense Language Institute. The purpose of bringing my car out had been to make trips like this possible. You can get to Monterey and back in a day (it’s about 2 hours each way), but for this first trip I elected to spend the night so as to have plenty of time to get to know the folks there. I’ll be working with Craig Martell from NPS and Pranav Anand from the University of California at Santa Cruz on a new project that should start in August; Pranav came down on Thursday and we spent some time scoping out what we plan to work on. Strangely, the next time we meet we’ll all be in Washington for the kickoff meeting. Few things make less sense than paying Berkeley rent while attending Washington meetings, but that’s the way the world works sometimes.

Friday was my first opportunity to join Michael, Ray, Fred and their students for one of their regular Friday research group meetings. I expect that this will be my principal research group while I am here, so it was good to have this chance to start getting to know some of the students and what they're working on. Then on Saturday I was off with the dawn patrol, with a 6 AM flight out of Oakland to get back to the east coast to pick up my plane. With a small detour to Florida to drive my mom to Washington. Yes, you read that right. Two weeks after driving coast to coast in four days, I set out to do a mini-version – driving only about half as far. Sort of like the cool-down lap that sprinters run. Except it didn't work out that way ...

Week 4: Cars, Planes, and Newspapers

Anyone who has visited my house over the past 20 years can tell you about the newspapers. There are typically newspapers everywhere, and on the rare occasions when there aren't, then there are enormous stacks of newspapers that used to be everywhere. I subscribe to the Washington Post, and I just can't bear to throw out a newspaper before I've read it. Which isn't always possible. So it should be no surprise that when the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) created a new grant program for helping scholars search through old newspapers, I felt compelled to put together a team and send in a proposal. There was just one catch – the proposal was due on the second day of my drive from Florida to Washington. As it turned out, there was no second day.

By happy coincidence, mom and I were able to arrange to start off a day earlier than we had planned, on Monday morning. Up at 6 AM, out at 7, her place at 8, on the road at 8:30, and we rolled into Washington at 12:30 AM Tuesday morning. A few minutes with Google Maps might leave you wondering if that's actually possible. Ask any college student going to Spring Break and they will tell you it is. Of course, we were driving in the other direction (and hence with less incentive), and between us we averaged about four times the age of your typical college student. Just to keep the trip from getting monotonous, I spent half the time on the phone with England while colleagues there worked on the proposal that we planned to submit together. And since we made the trip in one day, we had all day Tuesday and half of Wednesday for me to do my part. It didn't really all happen in 3 days – we had been working on this for more than a month – but it sure felt like it did!

The rest of the week was spent gathering up all those newspapers and the like, moving furniture, and generally getting my house in shape for mom. By the time I left on Saturday afternoon, things were in comparatively good shape. Note the qualifier, however; if my mom blogs about her year in my house, you'll get the straight story ...

In the early days of aviation there was a flyer named "Wrong Way" Corrigan. Not really the callsign you want to earn as a pilot. But, sure enough, I started out for San Francisco in my plane by flying to Boston. Which, as any map will confirm, is the wrong way. Why go to Boston first? Quite simply, because it was the place to be.

Week 5: SIGIR

An academic conference is really three very different things that happen in the same place at the same time: papers, planning, and partying. The papers are the part that everyone talks about. What we call SIGIR (pronounced sig-eye-are) was more formally the 32nd Annual International ACM SIGIR Conference on Research and Development in Information Retrieval. If you're a search engine developer, it is indeed the place to be. The papers are the best and most current in the business – over 500 people send their best work there each year for consideration; fewer than 100 are selected to give talks. Which is still more talks than any one person could attend – there are three sessions going on simultaneously. So we had four people from our research group there to soak up as much as we could. But in the midst of all this, editorial boards for the main journals in the field meet, advisory boards convene for some of the major projects, and a host of other meetings and side events are scheduled for planning. And the evenings are devoted to partying. I helped to organize a day of professional development activities for Ph.D. students from around the world, worked with a recently graduated Ph.D. student (Scott Olsson) on the presentation of his paper and with a visiting scholar from China on a poster presentation, and spoke briefly at workshop on searching social media. Enough in one week to wear me out – SGIR is always that way!

Some people spend a long time traveling to get to SIGIR – for SIGIR 2010 I should be able to win the prize for that. On Friday morning, I left Boston by small plane, heading for SIGIR 2010, which will be in Geneva, Switzerland. Again, I went the wrong way; this time flying to California, where I plan to rest up and adjust to the time change for 6 months or so. Then on to Australia, where I'll take another 6 months or so to adjust to the time change. And then finally on to Geneva. I expect that few others will be able to report having taking a full year to get from Boston to Geneva without spending much time at home in between. Truth be told, I'll be back to Washington at least twice in the fall, so it's not quite as straight a trip as I make it out to be. But it's still a good story.

Flying a small plane is essentially a form of communion with the weather. The two fundamental factors in flying are when and where. If you decide where you want to go, the weather tells you when you can go there. The harder one for many people to get their head around is the reverse; if you decide when you want to go, the weather tells you where you can go. For my cross-country trip, the when was (mostly) decided; I would leave from Boston on Friday to go somewhere. That somewhere turned out to be Port Clinton, Ohio. Perhaps you didn't know there was such a place – before that Friday, I didn't either. But it has a nice airport, a nearby hotel, and some fine scenery. And there was flyable weather between Boston and Port Clinton. Saturday then was a short jaunt over to Waukegan, just north of Chicago, to wait there for Monday morning. Why wait in Waukegan for Monday? Read on ...

Week 6: Celebrating Aviation

The busiest airport in the world is, depending in when you ask, in either Paris or Atlanta. Except for one week each year, when it is in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Ten thousand

airplanes converge on Oshkosh each year, for no better reason than that 9,999 others would be there. As it happened, Monday, July 27, was opening day at Oshkosh. And at 7:30 AM, half an hour after the field opened, I rolled to a stop on Runway 27. 8,000 planes were already there (most having arrived the weekend before). Oshkosh is part airshow, part campground, and part high-tech bazaar. But mostly it is simply a celebration of flight. Nice of the SIGIR folks to have scheduled their conference so as to make stopping at Oshkosh on the way home possible!

Monday evening's forecast called for thunderstorms, so an early departure from Oshkosh was in order. That made it possible to get all the way to Minot, North Dakota that evening, after a gas stop in Fargo. Then on Tuesday on to Glacier National Park in Montana, with some spectacular scenery, and some spectacular weather after arriving that I was glad to be observing from the ground rather than the air! Wednesday saw a fuel stop in Eugene, Oregon (where it was 110 degrees) and finally arrival at the airport in Concord, California, just over the hill from Berkeley (where it was 65 degrees). A quick trip home on BART completed the trip. Surprisingly, nobody struck up a conversation.

From Maryland to Berkeley had been about 30 hours of flying over 6 days. Driving and flying the same trip in such a short time invites comparison. Driving had been work, with a little sightseeing, and one occasion to think about the weather. Flying was living with the weather; planning around it, rescheduling around it, and, quite often, flying around it (circumnavigating thunderstorms, which was necessary on four of the six days). But flying was as relaxing as driving had been stressful; it's hard to explain to those who haven't done it. When you drive, you are seconds from death constantly. When you fly, you are seconds from death twice each flight. The rest of the time, you are mostly looking at the scenery, and waiting for where you want to be to appear under you. And checking the weather.

Week 7: Berkeley Again

This was the week in which I got started on what I expect to be my principal research topic here: oral history. Berkeley is home to the world's second-oldest oral history program, the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO). On Monday, I met with the ROHO director, Richard Candida Smith. One idea that we agreed seems promising is to draw together my interest in linking newspaper stories with my interest in oral history, essentially using news stories to embellish the content of the oral histories. I spent a part of the week trying that out on a NASA oral history, since as a space geek I know the issues people talk about in that collection fairly well. I picked Rusty Schweickart's first interview because Rusty is one of the more colorful characters among the Apollo astronauts, and one of the least studied. This turned out to be both interesting and enjoyable, so I would not be surprised to see this blossom into a full-fledged research program during my time here.

Saturday was my first chance to visit Napa Valley. I lived near here for about four years back in the early 1980's, but never managed to find the time to visit Napa's wineries. What better time for a little wine tasting than during a sabbatical? It turned out that

Sutter Home winery's tasting room was the first stop on the cheapskate's tour of Napa (which involves finding all the tasting rooms that have no tasting charge). And, by happy coincidence, that's where I found a five dollar bottle of wine I really liked: Sutter Home Chardonnay. So I decided to splurge and buy a bottle to bring home.

Week 8: What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas

Week 8 started with a contradiction, and with a view. Every border of Berkeley has a sign, posted by the city, that declares Berkeley to be a "Nuclear Free Zone." This is a tad strange, but I am guessing that most cities don't need such signs. Berkeley does.

Perched high up the hill that defines the east side of the campus is the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory is one of the Department of Energy's network of national research labs. All the research there is focused on fundamental science, but without those signs who knows what they might work on! I gave a talk there on Monday. And yes, the view from halfway up the hill is pretty spectacular.

Berkeley's Fall semester wasn't scheduled to start until the middle of the next week, so what's a boy with a plane to do? Fly to Las Vegas, of course. So Wednesday saw me out dodging mountains again in search of luck and family. My aunt lives in Lake Havasu, and the real purpose of the trip was to visit her. And, by happy coincidence I learned from her that my cousin (her daughter) is living in Las Vegas. So it was family reunion time. We'll skip the part about what (might have) happened in Vegas, but in Lake Havasu I did get to not only see the London Bridge, which has indeed has moved to Arizona, but also to see the complete historical account of how it got there.

Week 9: Starting the Semester, Sort Of ...

On the way back from Lake Havasu, I stopped in San Diego to see the Air and Space Museum there. As it happens, that's where Rusty Schweickart's Apollo 9 capsule is. Then a quick stop at Santa Barbara for lunch, followed by a gorgeous flight up the coast at low altitude. And then back to "work" here at Berkeley. On Wednesday I visited Clearwell, another e-discovery firm. Then, according to the schedule on Berkeley's Web site, Thursday was the start of the semester. On Thursday, nothing happened. It turns out that the first day of classes here is a very different thing form the start of the semester (which is some sort of administrative milestone), and that everyone knows that. Except me.

So, to mask my disappointment, I had lunch at Fisherman's Warf and walked across the Golden Gate Bridge. Well, okay, halfway across the Golden Gate Bridge. But I walked back too ... so I walked far enough to have completely crossed the Golden Gate Bridge.

Week 10: Why 2,419 Miles is Not Nearly Far Enough

Monday was one of those days that reminds you how small this world really is. I had lunch with a friend in Berkeley, and then slept that night at home in Maryland. In between those two events I did what I usually do – sat in front of my computer for several

hours. Except this time the computer and I were moving at 500 miles an hour towards Maryland. The reason for the trip was to attend a principal investigator's meeting for a new research project, but it also provided an opportunity for me to catch up with what's happening back at Maryland. So I spent Tuesday afternoon at the University, Wednesday through mid-day Friday at the meeting (in nearby Virginia), and then hot back to Berkeley in time for dinner Friday evening. The moral of the story is that if you really want to get away, 2,419 miles (the distance between the San Francisco International Airport and Washington's Dulles International Airport) is simply not far enough.

It turned out that I made it back just in time for the 50th anniversary of the Berkeley Space Sciences Lab. For that anniversary, folks came back from around the world (one fellow I chatted with over coffee normally sits on top of a volcano in Hawaii. Looking up, when most of us would be looking down ...). The most interesting part of the event (for we computer folks, anyhow) was learning about the SETI@Home project, which the Space Science Lab runs. The key idea is that they get an enormous number of people to donate spare cycles on their personal computers to the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) by downloading a screen saver that grabs a piece of the problem off the Berkeley servers, computes on it for a while, and sends back the results. What's interesting is not that this is possible, but that it works. Their 3 million users together contribute more computing power each day than the world's largest supercomputer. It's not the world's greenest computer – it takes a lot of power to run all those separate machines – but it is the world's most powerful number crunching machine.

SETI@Home is open source, so if you want to set up StringTheory@Home you can. But there seems to be something special about E.T. – nobody else has been able to capture the public imagination as well as the original SETI@Home project has. Which just goes to show that it's not your technology that makes the most difference – it's what you do with it.

Week 11: The Real Beginning

Finally, eleven weeks into my sabbatical, Berkeley and I got in sync ... they were actually having a semester here at the same time that I was having a sabbatical here! On Monday, I had the opportunity to sit in on my first class, and on Tuesday, I gave a talk at ICSI that generated some good discussion. Wednesday saw me off at one of the local E-Discovery companies, Cataphora, learning more about how that industry is evolving. I am particularly intrigued by how the relationship between the e-discovery industry and academia has evolved – there seems to be a remarkably strong connection with research on computational linguistics, and (as best I can tell), a surprisingly weak connection with research on information seeking behavior. I still have a lot to learn, though.

Week 12: What Goes Down Must Go Up

One fact about Berkeley that is hard to miss is that it is built on a hill. Which means that bike rides from campus to home are easy, which is more than can be said for bike rides from home to campus! At Maryland, I try to go running three times each week. Here, it's enough to just go to work three times each week!

The most interesting thing that happened this week was that I had my first opportunity to participate in the weekly seminar here on Information and Communications Technology for Development (ICTD). That's "development" as in "international development," a real strength here at Berkeley. Before I left Maryland, I had worked with a team on a proposal to foster the development of academic libraries in Africa, so this is a topic of particular interest to me. Much of the time in this meeting was devoted to a report by Josh, a grad student who had spent the summer in Rwanda researching the ways in which people use their cell phones. He has data that I would never have even dreamed of trying to collect. This sabbatical is turning out to be an exceptional opportunity to expand my perspective.

Week 13: Not Quite as Fast as a Speeding Bullet

If I told you a story about eight guys who went out and bought old military jets, flew them to an abandoned Air Force Base in Nevada, laid out a race course, and staged a race, you might think I was at least stretching the truth a bit. But that's not even half the story. This is the Reno Air Races, held every year at the former Stead Air Force Base, which of course is in Stead (Nevada), a suburb of Reno. They have all kinds of planes racing, including biplanes, World War 2 training planes, and custom-built "formula one" racing planes. But nothing else comes close to the audacity of racing jets. If you've seen the movie Top Gun, you have some idea what I am talking about. Except that that kind of flying isn't really done – real dogfight training takes place way up high, not down among the mountains. Yes, the military does fly down low too, but when they do, they are just going from point A to point B and trying to avoid being seen on radar. But at Reno, the jets fly at 100 feet, at 500 miles an hour, in a constant turn, in a valley with mountains several hundred feet above where they are flying. And they do this for nearly 10 minutes, jockeying for position the entire time. If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed that it really happens this way.

I went to Reno the way you're supposed to – by flying. Unlike Oshkosh, only participants are welcome at Stead, so I flew into the main Reno airport. Which is a quick hour and a half from Concord, where I keep my plane. I flew over on Tuesday afternoon, and back Thursday morning. Wednesday is the first day of the Air Races, so the crowd was thinner than it will be over the weekend, and the sense of competition was not yet as strong – these are the early heats that establish the starting order for later days. But it was enough to get a sense for what this was all about, and it was surely worth the trip.

All play and no work makes Doug unemployed, so the Air Races weren't the only thing that happened this week, of course. I have a slew of half-done journal articles to work on, and one of my goals for this sabbatical is to finally get all of them submitted for review. This Friday, the first one went in. And, this Monday, I had the opportunity to see a very interesting panel discussion with three game designers. This was a part of a course on narrative that I am sitting in on while I am here. I hadn't previously thought of game design as narrative, but of course that's exactly what it is. It is an interactive form of narrative ... a narrative with the "reader" as participant. As a result, like other forms of

narrative, it has its own “rules.” If a sabbatical is best thought of as a chance to be exposed to new things, than this has been a great sabbatical week!

Week 14: More Than I Really Wanted to Know About Health Care

This week, I had the opportunity to contemplate the health care debate that's going on back in Washington with a tad more immediacy than I otherwise might when a tooth of mine informed me that it was time for a trip to the dentist. Of course, my dentist was, at the time, about 2,500 miles away back in College Park. So it was time to determine whether out here on the west coast I was one of the uninsured that everyone is talking about. Thankfully no, since this year my dental plan became national. Which led to the second question – how does a stranger in a strange land find a dentist? The obvious answer (look up the participating dentists in the plan's listing) wasn't too helpful – there were several hundred listed near Berkeley. Ah, a search problem! Good thing I am a search expert. So I set out to integrate other information sources (the Berkeley Parents Network is a great source of advice) with my dental insurance company list (result: Berkeley parents like dentists that my insurance company won't pay). So I began to understand better all the things we're debating – choice isn't all that it's cracked up to be. In the end, I threw a dart at the list (after printing it – bad for the computer otherwise!) and called the dentist that it hit. Who was kind enough to see me the next day, and a few days later to fix that troublesome tooth. But in the process I learned more than I really wanted to know about health care.

The other major event of the week was a protest. This was no small protest – this was a full-blown chanting, marching, picket-lining, sign-toting Berkeley-style protest, complete with news helicopters circling overhead. What interested me the most was who was protesting (the students) and what they were protesting (underpaid teachers). At the University of Maryland, the State had reduced faculty salaries (temporarily) last year, and they are doing it again this year. In response to concerns and suggestions from our faculty, this year the process is much better organized – for example, they put up a Web site to tell each faculty member exactly how much money they will lose. At Berkeley, this is the first year of temporary salary reductions. And efficient implementation was the furthest thing from anyone's mind. Protest is a tradition here at Berkeley, and I am seeing a new generation of protestors learning the ropes. They were well organized, well led, with well made arguments, and for the most part very well behaved. All of which was impressive to see. But I'm still trying to figure out why the students were protesting on behalf of the faculty! There is an argument to be made (they risk losing good faculty, which would adversely affect the educational experience here, California has long embraced a shared value of accessible excellence through public funding of higher education, so this is a matter that should be of interest to all citizens of the State). But there were no burning buildings, no students living in a tree for six months (as happened here last year when they tried to cut down a few trees for some new construction) and no sit-ins inside the administration building. Perhaps those are being saved for the next protest, about raising student fees? Still, it was an experience that would be hard to imagine having back at Maryland. And, after all, isn't that what sabbaticals are for?

This weekend was the first high school reunion my graduating class has ever held (which was scheduled for the 35.5th anniversary of our graduation – we never were ones for traditional intervals, I guess. Had it been at another time, I would very much have liked to attend. But in my last sabbatical I felt I had traveled a bit too much, which worked out well enough because I had a full year there. But this time I’m spending just half a year in each of two places, and essential travel already has that whittled down to about four months in each place. So I have already said no to four trips from here, and I am already starting to stack up no’s for trips away from Melbourne (and I’m not even there yet!). If someone told you that you could take an entire year off, go anywhere in the world, and do whatever you wanted, you probably would have a hard time imagining saying no to so many things that you would otherwise truly want to do. But there are few things in life that make less sense than paying Berkeley rents and having a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience Berkeley life as an insider and then tossing that all away to spend more time on airplanes (particularly other people’s airplanes!). So here I sit in Berkeley, thinking back to those four years in high school that did so much to shape my life and that ultimately led me to be here, rather than actually being there this evening.

Week 15: Dining with the Stars

Traveling around the world is done the same way you do everything else in life – one step at a time. You don’t need to know everything when you start – it is enough to know which direction to head and when to begin. The rest of it, you can work out along the way. In my 2007 summer trip around the world, I sorted out the airline tickets before leaving, but I was working out hotels and other arrangements a few weeks before getting to each place. In this case, with a much more extended time frame, I left Washington with literally no idea how I would actually get to Australia. This week, I finally sorted that out. The key pieces of the puzzle turned out to be two papers and the global economic crisis. The papers were accepted to the Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS), which – no surprise – is in Hawaii, in January. How the global economic crisis might need a little explaining, though.

Any good map will confirm your expectation that Hawaii happens to be in between Berkeley and Australia. So the obvious thing to do was to route my trip through Hawaii. What’s less obvious is that the global economic crisis also demands that I visit Fiji. That was pure serendipity. Originally, I had expected to buy a “Round the World” ticket on Star Alliance (the airline group led by United Airlines). But prices have been going up for those tickets, and they now cost nearly \$6,000. That’s more than my first car cost, and my second, and my third, and indeed every car I have ever owned (including the one I drove from Maryland to Berkeley)! So I went looking for alternatives. Which is where the global economic crisis comes in. It turns out that airlines are having trouble selling seats, so in some cases they have done away with those pesky rules that require you to fly round trip to get a really good fare. If you manage to find just the right routing, you put together a set of one-way legs that will take you around the world for about half the price of a “Round the World” ticket. But, and this is the key but, only if you go through Fiji. So this week I bought a ticket to Fiji, one that just happens to include a stopover in Hawaii.

The Dean here at Berkeley's iSchool has been writing about how Silicon Valley came to be the way it is, and how that example is influencing efforts to create similar dynamics elsewhere around the world. So I was particularly intrigued when an invitation arrived to the "Bay Area Natural Language and Speech Processing Barbeque." At Maryland we have research group events, department events, college events, and even university events. But I would be hard pressed to think of a National Capital Region NL(S)P barbecue. But here (at least according to what I have been reading), this is how things are done. So on Sunday I drove over to near Stanford (which is about as far from Berkeley as Dulles is from the University of Maryland) to do what one does at a barbecue, and also to see how it's done here. I can't imaging anywhere else where you could so easily bring people together from so many different environments – most notably, universities, search engine companies, and startups – and it made for a most enjoyable evening. Maybe Washington power lunches are in some sense similar for the people in that world. But for my world, this was dining with the stars.

Week 16: Halfway to Somewhere

A 380-day journey has its midpoint at 190 days, of course. But this is a journey in two parts, and the end of the first part is now closer than its beginning. So I am halfway to somewhere (which, the observant reader will note, is somewhere in Hawaii). Which provides a good opportunity to reflect on what I have experienced so far. Reflecting on that question, two surprising things come to mind. The first is that I did perhaps a bit too good a job of preparing for this visit. In my last sabbatical, I found the second semester to be more productive than the first for the simple reason that it took time to get connected to what was going on there. So here at Berkeley, with only one semester before moving on, I did my best to get started quickly. And perhaps I did just a bit too well at that – some of my days here are now just as full as my days were back at Maryland before starting this journey. Lesson learned: planning ahead is overrated.

My second surprise has been that the "great" weather in California is a marketing ploy. As I write this, I am sitting on the deck behind my apartment, overlooking San Francisco, wearing an arctic parka. This is the same parka that my father borrowed for a trip to Iceland. I feel somewhat obligated to sit out here on the deck while writing this, since I am paying Berkeley rents for the weather and the view, but I sure am glad I brought this parka!

On Monday, Jimmy Lin (one of my colleagues from Maryland) ran a workshop on cloud computing at the Computer History Museum down near Stanford. So I was up with the dawn patrol and out the door at 6:15 to participate. Fourteen hours later, I got home. An interesting experience from which I learned a lot, but also a good reminder of how nice it is to not to be doing that every day!

This weekend was "Fleet Week" in San Francisco. In days gone by, this was a much bigger deal, but since the Navy closed all of their bases here back in the late 1990's the celebration has become much more muted. This year, the Navy sent one ship and the

Blue Angels. The Blue Angels flew their C-130 (quite a large plane) under the Golden Gate Bridge, which was a sight to see. But their jets just made a few passes in front of the crowd for the photographers. Too much low-level turbulence, apparently, for their usual formation flying display. Still, it was fun to see them flying here. And cold.

Week 17: Rain!

Truth be told, my reason for coming to Berkeley in the Fall was the rain. Not the rain in the Fall; the rain in the Spring. It usually doesn't rain before November in Berkeley. Of course, the economy doesn't usually collapse in a way that has people talking about the Great Depression either, so as we found out this year, "usually not" and "never" are very different concepts. So, naturally, this week it rained. Not sprinkled. Not drizzled. Not even rain showers. Rain! All day. To imagine how people here reacted, just think about the first snow of the season in Washington. It was front page news.

The other big event of the week was a two-day visit by faculty and students from Kyoto University. It was a great opportunity to learn not only about their work (which was indeed quite interesting – they are doing some quite well motivated work on Web search), but also about the work of faculty and students here (from their presentations to the visitors). Berkeley's iSchool faculty has much in common with ours at Maryland – there are a substantial number of Assistant Professors, each with rich and diverse research interests, which makes for a very dynamic and energetic place. I also had the chance to see presentations by a few of the doctoral students here whom I had not yet met, and as a group they are doing quite impressive work as well. I suppose I had expected to find more differences than similarities, but that's not how it came out. Indeed, I've been reading a bit about the history of the iSchool here (they have an oral history program that goes back to the 1920's!), and there are some interesting similarities in the way their program and ours evolved over time. So it seems that 2,419 miles is not really that far after all.

Week 18: LA Story

I spent my last sabbatical in Marina del Rey, a small city on the coast just west of Los Angeles. This week I had the opportunity to return there to see what's changed. My first stop, however, was the University of California at Irvine. Irvine is home to one of California's three "iSchools" (the other two are at Berkeley and UCLA), so one of my goals was to understand how they construct the idea of an iSchool. What I found was different in some ways from my experience at Maryland, and more recently at Berkeley, but similar in others. We're different in that their iSchool grew out of CS (as was the case at Georgia Tech) rather than out of Library Science (as at Maryland and Berkeley), and that they are organized into quite distinct departments (as at UCLA and Rutgers, but not at Maryland or Berkeley). But we are similar in our strong attachment to human-centeredness. The birth of a new discipline is an interesting thing to watch, and to help in some small way to shape, and visits like this are an important way of coming to better understand that emerging landscape.

The next day, Tuesday, I spent at the University of Southern California. There I had a chance to visit with Shri Narayanan, who leads a remarkably productive speech processing group in the Electrical Engineering department, and with Sam Gustman, with whom I worked on a half-decade project to develop search technology for recorded speech. Sam has been working seriously on digital preservation for multimedia materials in recent years, and I was quite interested to learn where the hard spots were in that process (interestingly, the cost driver is handling the physical media). We also spent some time brainstorming search techniques for his unique collection, which connects to the oral history linking work I have been doing at Berkeley in some ways.

Finally, Wednesday was old home week at the USC Information Sciences Institute in Marina del Rey. The weather was wonderful (the prevailing winds blow the smog inland and keep the air at the coast fairly clean), many of the folks I worked with on my last sabbatical were around, the new crop of students is just as impressive as the students who I worked with there seven years ago, and there were many interesting projects going on. I gave the same “Who ‘Dat?’” talk there that I have given in many other places, but it was really a special telling of the story because several of the strands in that work got their start during my last sabbatical. I got some grief from my friends there for having scheduled this sabbatical 350 miles too far to the north, and I had to admit that perhaps they had a point. Not that Berkeley hasn’t been a wonderful opportunity to meet new folks and learn new things. But LA too has much to recommend it. Who knows – maybe I’ll be back there for my next sabbatical!

Week 19: The Importance of Good Lighting

Since I was a kid, Halloween has always been one of my favorite holidays. Well, it’s not really a holiday, although this year it did happen to be on a Saturday. So I stocked up on candy in preparation for the big day, only to discover at the last minute that the porch light was burned out. I had never really given much thought to the importance of porch lights before, but of course knocking on doors where the porch light is out is just not good Halloween etiquette. Which left me with quite a lot of candy.

Week 20: It’s True What They Say About Seattle

Seattle is famous for rain, and it certainly lived up to its reputation this week. We’re not talking drizzle, sprinkles, or even a shower or two – we’re talking what is colloquially referred to as raining cats and dogs. Noah (of Noah’s Ark fame) would have been right at home. I flew my plane up to Seattle in order to combine visits to the University of Washington and Microsoft Research with a trip to the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIST) conference, which was the next week in Vancouver. The weather for flight up was gorgeous, with a nippy tailwind that made quick work of the distance (which is almost as far as Florida to Washington).

Week 21: Good Weather, for Canada ...

Vancouver has a reputation for good weather, which is a bit strange when you consider that Vancouver's weather is pretty much the same as Seattle's. Vancouver benefits from having less challenging competition, however – it's easy to look good when most of the rest of your country needs snowmobiles to get around half the year.

Weather aside, the ASIST conference was interesting in several ways. ASIST is an “intersection” conference, where geeks like me come to talk with people whose principal interests center on practice, and particularly practice in the context of information institutions such as libraries. Much of what's best about ASIST happens outside the formal program – like many conferences, the value is as much in who you see there as in what you learn there. There were several faculty and students from Maryland at ASIST this year, which gave me a chance to catch up a bit on what is going on back home. But the real highlight for me was to see Gary Marchionini installed as ASIST's President. Gary was the first information retrieval researcher I ever met, back in 1993, and he has helped to shape the way I think about my career ever since.

Week 22: TREC

November is always jammed with conferences, but there's one that just can't be missed. Every year, just before Thanksgiving, a substantial portion of the world's information retrieval community flies to Gaithersburg Maryland, (traditionally) stays in a tired old Holiday Inn, and spends a week at the National Institute of Standards and Technology. Why? Because TREC is simply the place to be (after SIGIR, of course!).

TREC (the “Text Retrieval Conference”) exists for the simple reason that intuition regularly fails us. Said another way, it is easy to come up with good ideas, but it is also easy to come up with bad ideas, and it turns out to be remarkably hard for people to guess which are which! The solution, naturally, is to apply the scientific method by running an experiment and measuring the result. Which, it turns out, is easier said than done. In some fields, a brilliant scientist working alone in a dark room can still make progress. But in many fields, information retrieval among them, that time honored approach is being displaced by so-called “big science” – approaches that require complex apparatus that is expensive and requires specialized skill to create (think super collider, or Hubble space telescope). In information retrieval research (or at least in the part of information retrieval research that involves designing new automated techniques), our apparatus is called a “test collection,” and TREC is one of the places where test collections are made and used. In a very real sense, my research career started at TREC, and I have learned a lot from it along the way as well. So when the world flies to Maryland for TREC, that's where I should be. Even if, as in this case, I need to fly there too.

Week 23: Giving Thanks

This is one of those weeks when people are supposedly working, but in reality they are spending an inordinate amount of effort trying to get to wherever it is their family is. As it happens, I was already pretty much in the right place since TREC had brought me back to the east coast. So I spent the first part of the week visiting family in Maryland, then

spent part of the rest of the week visiting family in Florida. And then I did the quintessentially American thing of flying back to Berkeley on Thanksgiving day. Why quintessentially American? Because we are capitalists, believers in the market, and Thanksgiving day itself is when the fares are lowest. So it was off with the dawn patrol for a cross-country flight back to Berkeley.

Week 24: Maryland Again!

If someone gave you the opportunity to spend a semester at Berkeley, what you would do. Stay in Berkeley, right? Well, that's not always the way the world really works. All this "big science" requires big teams, and coordinating the effort of big teams sometimes requires getting on a plane to meet face to face. By an accident of timing, one of those meetings was scheduled for near Washington DC in the week right after Thanksgiving. For a variety of reasons, mostly again involving the peculiar interaction between capitalism and airfares, it turned out to be more reasonable to fly back to Berkeley for a few days than to wait out the delay on the east coast. Which is how I found myself back in a plane again five days after having landed in California. This was the first meeting of a new program, which is always an interesting time because it is when things are most open. For all the mystique around research as being where new things are "invented," it is really just like everything else – 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration – most of what we do is simply the hard and exacting work of seeing which ideas pan out and which don't. But at the start of a new project you get to not only decide what ideas you want to try, but also what it would mean for them to pan out. This is simultaneously very engaging (because we're the ones that have voluntarily stepped into the hot seat and taken on the task) and a bit intimidating (because nobody quite knows what it means to do it right). And, of course, because the teams are large and there are invariably people involved who you do not yet know well, these first meetings are also when you begin to form the professional relationships upon which your success as a team will ultimately depend. The bottom line is that you don't want to miss the first meeting of a new program – even if you need to fly around the world for it. Fortunately, all I had to do was fly one tenth of the way around the world, which is how far Washington is from California.

Week 25: Farewells

I suppose that it's appropriate to balance a new beginning by ending something, and in this case what was ending was my time in Berkeley. This was the week for farewells at Berkeley. Of course, sabbatical visits are as much about starting things as ending them, and much of what I have learned and done here will continue to influence my work in the years to come. But at the very least the process of beginning new things here is ending, and that's an occasion for thinking back on what was achieved. I can identify at least five noteworthy things. First, I know many people here much better than I did before, and of course that will pay dividends for many years to come. Second, and not in my original thinking, I have learned quite a lot about the research community that works on Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICTD). I have always had a generalized interest in that topic (where "development" should be read as

“international development”), but my time here has filled in that picture with both an impressive range of specifics and with a set of professional contacts that might make it possible to make contributions to that field in the years to come. Third, I have seen how another iSchool works from the inside, and I am bringing back ideas for both new things that we might try at Maryland, and for which of the things that we already do well may be unique contributions that we are best positioned to make. Fourth, as I had expected when planning the visit, I had the chance to do some work on oral history. This turned out to be far more richly connected to the iSchool than I had anticipated, however – sometimes you learn more from unexpected outcomes than from the expected ones. Fifth, I did indeed learn quite a lot about the structure of the e-discovery industry in Silicon Valley, as I had hoped to do. But in some sense those are the details – the big picture is that, as with my last sabbatical, much of the benefit was simply that I had stepped outside my day to day life and looked at the world from a different perspective. Which is, after all, what a sabbatical is really all about.

Week 26: Dashing to the Snow

The big event of this week, around which I literally built my entire travel plan between Berkeley and Australia, was a ceremony in Maryland to celebrate the graduation of Tamer Elsayed, my seventh Ph.D. student. Studying for a Ph.D. is remarkably similar to the apprenticeship process through which craftsmen learned their craft in days of old. And the hooding ceremony is how we mark the completion of that apprenticeship. The ceremony itself is simple: the advisor places something that looks like a cape (which we call the “doctoral hood”) on the graduating student. But the message is profound – each of us has learned from our advisor, and we now symbolically pass that on to the next generation. Indeed, the analogy to ancestry is more than coincidental – mathematicians have a “genealogy project” that keeps track of this “parentage.” During my last sabbatical I flew back to Maryland from California for a single day to hood my first Ph.D. student. So I was only too happy to fly back this time to hood Tamer. Alas, it was not to be.

As it turned out, the first stop on the way to Maryland was just north of Phoenix, Arizona, which was the site of the International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS). The abbreviation “IS” is horribly overloaded – at Maryland it means Information Studies, other places it means Information Science, and at still other places it means Information Systems. Indeed, I have always been in favor of calling it all “Information Stuff” just to avoid this proliferation of names. But among these, Information Systems really is a term of art – it most often refers to a business school’s technology department. And that’s what ICIS is all about. Which is how I, a developer of information systems who has been around for a while, managed to find myself at an Information Systems conference with more than 1,000 people where I only knew only 5 of them. And that’s only because 3 of them were from my own College at Maryland!

The mere fact that I was there has a lot to say about what’s remarkable about what’s happening at Maryland these days. I grew up in a place where IS meant Information Science, as in Library and Information Science. Of course, that’s a perfect fit for

someone like me who has an interest in information retrieval. But these days our interpretation of “Information Studies” (which we embraced as our new name in the late 1990’s) is exceptionally broad. We have people who work on libraries, archives, information support for education, and information retrieval, as we always have, but we now also have people who think of their principal community as information policy (one of our original motivations to think about a name change), as human-computer interaction, as digital humanities, as online communities, as (the B-School definition of) information systems, and more. And we have room for even more – it’s a big tent, and one that has been growing rapidly – we are now twice the size that we were when I started here, and much of that growth has come in the last four years. So we are very much still all learning from each other. And that’s why I was in Phoenix – to learn.

One of my mentors at ICIS was Ping Wang, an Assistant Professor in Maryland’s iSchool, a B-School graduate, and the principal investigator on one of the grants that helps to support my research. This is another great thing that I really treasure about Maryland’s iSchool – we have some really exceptional junior faculty, who are not hesitant to lead all of us in new directions. Ping and I were presenting a poster to which many people had contributed, and it was good to have this opportunity to work together in person after having been away so long. But the real value of ICIS for me was solidifying an idea that I had first been exposed to at ASIST the previous month: we’re all in this together. Information Stuff is among the most dynamic and important issues of our time, but whether you think of it as IS (systems), IS (science), IS (studies), IS (school), or even CS (computer science), the picture looks pretty much the same – as the comic character Pogo famously said (when surrounded by the Roman Legion, all pointing spears in his direction), we are surrounded by opportunity. I was frankly amazed to learn how much those opportunities look the same from the IS (B-School information systems) perspective as they do from the IS (iSchool) world that I more often frequent. We have much to learn from each other.

Sixty minutes after helping to present our poster I found myself in the air, dashing to the snow. Of course, the Bing Crosby version was dashing THROUGH the snow, but airplanes are good at dashing to places and bad at dashing through snow, so dashing to the snow seemed the wiser course. Studies over the years have shown that forecasts of snow are wrong more often than almost any other forecast, so a forecast of snow in Washington was by no means an assurance that snow would actually happen. But a forecast of bad weather of any sort was enough to either accelerate my trip or to slow it down, since little airplanes and bad weather do not mix well. I was taking this opportunity to move my airplane back to Maryland, and the way the forecast was developing it was prudent to plan to get there as quickly as possible. Since I needed to be in Phoenix for half the day on Thursday, my original plan had been to spend Thursday night in Wichita, Kansas (from which you can get to Washington in two legs in one long day). Which would have me in Maryland a full day before Tamer’s hooding ceremony on Sunday. But with snow forecast for late Friday afternoon in Washington, I elected instead to fly as far as possible. So it was a quick gas stop in Tulsa well after dark, and a very late arrival in Evansville, Indiana at what, truth be told, was actually early on Friday morning. After a bit of sleep, it was on to Washington ahead of the snow. At this point

in the story is where I would normally say that it didn't actually snow. But this time it did. Two feet! Which cancelled Tamer's hooding ceremony along with the rest of the graduation ceremonies, and just about everything else that had been scheduled in the Washington area for the next week.

During the Apollo 13 mission, one of their rocket's engines failed during their initial climb to orbit. It happened late enough in the launch that it did not prevent them from continuing on to the Moon. Jim Lovell, the commander, remarked to his crewmates that it seemed as if they had had their glitch for the mission and survived it. Which turned out not to be quite the whole story – two days later, their spacecraft exploded and they very barely made it home. All of us in Washington thought this was the snowstorm of the century, our glich for the winter, but as it turns out the century is not yet very old. Keep reading ...

Week 27: Christmas in Paradise

Someone asked me once why I stopped in India during my first trip around the world and I answered somewhat flippantly (and not entirely truthfully) because it was in the way. Well the same applies to Hawaii when you are trying to get from Washington to Australia, and what better time to leave Washington than right after a major snowstorm? So on December 23, I was off to Hawaii! The flights were pretty much on time, and I was jogging on the beach by sunset that evening. And, of course, calling home to make sure that everyone knew that. My real reason to go to Hawaii was for a conference, but the conference would not start for two weeks. And what better place to wait for a Hawaiian conference to start than Hawaii?

Week 28: Ringing in the New Year

When I was younger, the island of Maui was famous for “Maui wowie” which was reputed to be a particularly potent variety of marijuana. I did finally make it to Maui on this trip, only to find that the guidebooks no longer make mention of marijuana (if they ever did). The first day of the new year found me at nearly 10,000 feet, watching the sunrise at just about the highest point in the USA to which you can drive (you can actually drive 300 feet higher, but only if you get there before that parking lot fills up). I learned two things that morning: the sunrise over Maui is beautiful, and even in Hawaii it is cold at 10,000 feet. On my 77-day around the world trip, I had taken one photo every day. That sunrise, I took as many photos in 15 minutes. It truly was a memorable way to mark the start of a new decade. And the midpoint of my sabbatical!

Week 29: HICSS

During my first sabbatical seven years ago, I had presented a paper at the Hawaii International Conference on Systems Sciences (HICSS). When I got home, someone mentioned to me that my timing was appropriate – HICSS was at that time considered a “vacation conference,” and (reasoning that everyone needs a vacation occasionally) it was seen as perfectly appropriate to attend HICSS – once. This year, our faculty had four

papers here (two of which I had contributed to), so I was curious about whether things had changed. The answer turns out to depend on your frame of reference of the question. HICSS has always had some excellent work in some parts of the field (e.g. in “persistent conversations,” a topic of particular interest to me), and that continues. But after having been at ICIS I can now see “the field” at HICSS through a different lens. In the B-School side of IS, HICSS is indeed quite an interesting place. Not necessarily because it attracts the very best work (ICIS typically beats it on that score), but because it attracts the right people. So this was the second stage in what I expect will be a continuing education in the broader world of IS. With any luck, I’ll make it to HICSS for my third sabbatical too!

Week 30: The North Island

The names of places can be confusing. For example, the first time I tried to go from somewhere in Northern California to Hawaii, I passed up a free flight to Barbers Point (which turned out to be a “point” … an outcropping of land … that actually was in Hawaii) and flew instead to a place called North Island (which turned out to be on the north end of a peninsula in Southern California that wasn’t even really an island …). This time I finally got it right – this was my first visit to the North Island (of New Zealand).

It’s actually somewhat remarkable that I have never been to New Zealand before. I’m rather well traveled, and if you limit consideration to what might be called the “first world” – large countries with already quite advanced economies – there are only two I can think of that I have not yet visited – New Zealand, and Sweden. On this trip, I expect to make it to both. And New Zealand was the first of the two. As it happens, the center of the digital library universe is the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand, so the North Island was naturally my first stop. Arriving a bit early, I rented a car in Auckland and (true to form) drove in the wrong direction. Of course, you can’t drive very far in any direction in New Zealand, since you are never more than 70 miles from the sea. But the “Northland” turned out to be an interesting place, and well worth the trip. Then it was back to the south, overshooting Auckland to spend a few days in Hamilton. Which turns out to be the cultural home of The Rocky Horror Picture Show, but that’s another story.

While driving around the North Island, I learned a bit about the “Kiwi” character from their weather forecasts. Every hour, the radio announcer would read off a long litany of places that I had not heard of, and for each place they either pronounced the weather as “fine” or as “becoming fine.” No temperatures, rainfall details, or wind speeds – just “fine” or “becoming fine.” As my trip progressed, I learned where many of those places were, and occasionally I found myself in one of them when the weather was reported as “becoming fine.” Which, I learned through experience, meant “is presently awful.” But the Kiwi weather forecaster didn’t see it that way – after all, it is precisely when the weather is awful that it has the opportunity to become fine. This takes looking optimistically at the glass as half full rather than half empty to a level that I previously could not have imagined. Kiwi’s are indeed an optimistic lot.

Week 31: Not Quite Antarctica, but Close ...

To get to America's McMurdo Sound base in Antarctica, you first need to go to Christchurch, on the South Island of New Zealand. From there, they have nonstop flights on U.S. Air Force C-17 transport aircraft to McMurdo Sound, where at some times of the year you could connect by U.S. Air National Guard LC-130 to the South Pole station if you really wanted to. Since Antarctica is not on my itinerary, Christchurch will be about as close to there as I get to there on this trip. Sure enough (since it is summer in Antarctica, and hence the weather there is less awful now than at other times), there was a U.S. Air Force C-17 there on the ramp at the airport. And, from what I understand, another one on its way to Antarctica that very day. Somehow, being in a place where you could fly to Antarctica from seemed fairly exotic – I suppose it's a bit like being in Atlanta and noticing that they have flights to Florida if you have never been to Florida before ...

Of course, my real reason for visiting the South Island was considerably more academic – it turns out that the University of Otago in Dunedin is New Zealand's preeminent center for information retrieval research. I had worked with Andrew Trotman, the leader of the IR group there, last year as part of the organizing committee for SIGIR. So it was great to have this opportunity to visit with him. As with many such first visits, what I found was a mixture of the familiar and the novel. Familiar was the way in which faculty and students work together – Andrew has built a great lab group there, and information retrieval is now a remarkably strong part of his department's focus.

Less expected was what I learned about the way research is funded in New Zealand – in short, it is not. New Zealand invests quite heavily in what we would call research and development, but the investment is almost entirely on the “development” side (through tax breaks for corporate R&D investments). The investments in basic research are quite a bit more modest (substantial investments in faculty and student time, but little support for “big science”). If you had asked me before my trip what the difference between New Zealand and Australia was, I would have been hard pressed to name one. But the differences in basic research investments are night and day: in Australia, it happened that I arrived in the midst of proposal-writing season. In New Zealand, that's just not nearly as much a part of the academic landscape. Of course, Australia has five times the population of New Zealand, so in one sense it's not surprising that they can afford to devote more money to basic research. But it is easy to fall into the trap of believing that the way we do things in the USA is the “right” way to do things, so it is useful to have the example of New Zealand, where impressive digital library and information retrieval research is being accomplished without nearly as much investment in “big science.”

Week 33: It's Been a Long Way, But We're Here

Those words were spoken by Alan Shepard, the commander of the third Apollo lunar landing, as he stepped for his first time on the surface of the Moon. Berkeley to Melbourne isn't nearly as far, even if you go via Phoenix, Washington, Hawaii, Fiji, and New Zealand. But a month and a half is a long time to live out of a suitcase, so it was

nice to finally arrive here in Melbourne. Fittingly, I spent my first night here back in Washington, virtually speaking. The occasion was the first meeting of a new group that had received some funding from the Institute for Library and Museum Services (IMLS) to begin to codify what we see as “best practices” for the oral history community. It’s an impressive array of talent, and I was pleased to be invited to join. So I tried for the next best thing to being there: Skype. Seventy years ago it cost a hundred dollars a minute to make an overseas call; because I was still at the mercy of hotel Internet rates the cost today turned out to be around \$10 an hour, but with video. Which is way more than it would have cost if I already had things set up at the university, but it’s still pretty amazing. Now if we could just figure out how to do something about all those time zones

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Week 34: A Room with a View

I am writing this while sitting on my 9th floor balcony, overlooking Carlton Gardens and the city of Melbourne. In Berkeley, I had the advantage of a pre-arranged place to stay and a 6-month lease. Here in Melbourne, I had the advantage of being able to actually visit the places where I might live before moving in. It was a bit like those one of shopping shows where you get 15 minutes to run through a department store and take as much as you can. Imagine if you will a small number of well located places (3) that would rent for a period less than 6 months, each with a large number of rooms (one place handed me keys to 8 apartments), and each with a large number of people looking (since the semester was about to start, and I wasn’t the only person who had decided that would be a good time to arrive!). At one point, I was sitting in a room trying to imagine what it would be like to live there when another fellow, who had only one key (!), came in to look at the same room. He and I both seemed to like the apartment, which just about led to a foot race to the office to sign on the dotted line. Fortunately, the office had a good sense of humor about this (having surely seen it all before) and they let me stake a tentative claim but keep looking. The very next room I looked at turned out to be quite literally perfect – it is one of only 16 units here with a balcony, it has a lovely view, and its high up on the quieter side of the building. So in the end my fellow foot racer and I both got our first choice, and I get to write this on my balcony. But if I do something like this again, I should watch one of those shopping shows first to pick up a few tips!

Week 35: A Very Good Week to be in Australia

I hear they had a bit more snow in Washington this week. Four feet! The University of Maryland was shut down for the entire week by two storms that completely paralyzed Washington. We had a little rain here, which made the news because of some flash flooding. But, to paraphrase W.C. Fields, all in all I’d rather be in Melbourne. Originally I had been thinking of going to Melbourne first (for Maryland’s fall semester) and then to Berkeley. Fortunately, before making any arrangements I checked the climate data and swapped the two visits. The Beach Boys had an album called “Endless Summer” – United Airlines (and its airline partners) has actually managed to create it. So as Washington froze, I went to work in shorts and a t-shirt.

Over the past few years, I have become interested in what is popularly known as “globalization” – which is in large part (although by no means entirely) the study of how our societies are adapting to the consequences of exactly the sort of information technologies that I work on. This time here in Australia is the first time that I am outside the USA for an extended period since I have developed those interests, so I have been particularly keenly attuned to hear how Australians think about their place in the world. Of course, Australian society is as diverse as American society, so there is no such thing as a “typical Australian.” But if you have your eye out for it, you can see Australians thinking through this question in different ways, and engaging some of those people in discussion has been one of the particularly interesting aspects of my trip. This week was particularly interesting in that regard because this was my first exposure to Australian research policy. As in the US, there is a funding body for academic researchers (in the USA, the National Science Foundation; here, the Australian Science Foundation). But they behave very differently. Here, for example, they have made a substantial investment in drawing academic and industrial researchers together. The US indeed does some similar things, but the vast majority of government research funding in the US is either for basic research (from NSF) or from defense sources. Here, the defense investment is small, and the investment in commercial potential is thus relatively larger – in that sense, Australian research seems to more resemble the European model than the American one.

Melbourne is the capital of an Australian state called Victoria, so people refer to things here as Victorian. If that brings to mind quaintly dressed high society types with high standards for public behavior, you’re thinking of the wrong kind of Victorian. Except for the present lack of four-foot snowdrifts, much of what you see here is exactly what you would see in Washington DC or any other major city in the US. There are some intriguing differences (they have done away with pennies, for example, even though all the prices still end in things like .99). And some of the architecture is indeed Victorian (but not much of it; and it is more than offset by the museum right next door that looks like it has an inclined ramp for launching Harrier jump jets as its roof). Anyhow, if you overlook a few charming quirks, it is very much like anywhere else that you might think to be.

The highlight of this week was VALA. According to legend, VALA used to stand for the Victorian Association for Library Automation, but they changed it to just VALA many years ago. Which I suppose means that now the V in VALA just stands for V. Anyhow, it never was very Victorian, since none of the other states have such a conference. So the V really stands for A in practice – this is the Australian counterpart to ASIST. And it happened to be here in town my second week here. I learned of it late, so I was only able to make it there for one day, but it turned out to be a very interesting day. It was a well run conference, with about 1,000 people attending. The technical program was quite strong, with presentations on topics that are just now gaining currency in the USA (e.g., the implications of “cloud services” for resource allocation), and it was a good chance to start to get a feel for how things are organized here with an eye towards setting up a few visits.

Week 37: It Has Something to do with Beer

I don't completely understand the research culture here yet, but this week I did start to get a bit better sense for it. Up until now, everything seemed to revolve around coffee. Indeed, it seems hard to strike up a conversation without the person you have just dropped in on suggesting that you have a cup of coffee. One of the departments I am visiting has what is called a "tea" right before their weekly research seminar, but many people there are actually drinking coffee. Indeed, there's a bit of a coffee competition – that same department has installed three coffee machines as a way of keeping the staff happy and productive, and the folks from the University across town (which they call "the Uni") are envious. But this week, I learned that coffee is not the full story. The occasion for my education was two offhand comments, by two different people, that perhaps we should grab a beer together some time after work. At first, I thought this was like the "we should do lunch some time" comments that we say to each other without ever following through back home. But no, my polite affirmative response resulted in an email to a whole pile of individuals informing them that after work beers had been scheduled for that Friday and that they should be there. And, quite remarkably, every one of them was. Even the ones who don't drink. Seriously, this was a wonderful way to be welcomed. And I now can see that the research culture here involves at least two food groups – coffee and beer.

Week 38: Chicken on the Barby

One of the great things about this job is that wherever you go you know someone. Actually, that's kind of backwards – wherever you know someone, you go. But the result is the same. So it happened that I was invited by Sandra Potter to join her family – her dad Jim, her husband Anton, and her son James – for an authentic Australian dinner. Which, of course, involved cooking chicken on the barby. Now, I must say that one of the surprising things about living in Australia is that there are no Outback Steakhouse restaurants like there are in Maryland (and even in Korea, as I discovered during my last visit there). Of course, that makes sense – there's no "Benihana of Tokyo" in Tokyo either (although I hear they do have a "Benihana of New York" in Tokyo). So if you want chicken on the barby here, you need to get a real barbecue, some real chicken, and do it yourself. Which is exactly what happened at Sandra Potter's house this week. Most interesting, however, was not the chicken, but the politics. You see, the Queen is the head of state here. Not the Queen of Australia (there is no such thing) – the Queen of England. How do people here feel about that? Well, many of them kind of like it. Not because they particularly want some English Queen telling them what to do – that doesn't happen anyhow. But because that's just the way it works. And one thing we all like is for things to work. The key to the whole thing is the so-called "double dissolution," in which the upper and lower houses in the legislature (parliament) simultaneously stand for election in their entirety. It's a bit like a jump ball in basketball – you can't predict who will get the ball, so everyone is reluctant to force this kind of "jump ball" unless the outcome on some very important issue is really in question. Otherwise, people pretty much follow the party line of whichever party most recently got elected – even if you don't like the result, at least the result is a bit predictable, and modern economies thrive on predictability. The problem with a double dissolution is that it leaves nobody in

charge – someone needs to run the government. Enter the Queen. Actually, not the Queen herself, but the Queen’s representative, the “Governor General” (this gig used to go to retired generals, hence the name). So it is actually the Governor General who dissolves both houses of parliament and who, after an election, forms the next government.

The retired generals got out of the business long ago, and these days the Governor General is an Australian who is appointed by the Queen on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. Yes, the Prime Minister of Australia (Kevin Rudd, presently). So although it seems from the formal arrangements like the sun has not quite set on this little corner of the British Empire, in practice this is no more or no less strange an arrangement than our tradition in America that it takes 60% of the Senate to end debate on an issue. Democracies are very complex institutions, and the ones that work well over the long term have evolved complex and often arcane ways of dealing with difficult issues (as a review of the ways in which the impeachment power of the legislature in the US has been used will reveal). So it is not particularly surprising that things here are both complex and nuanced. What was surprising was how different they are from what works in America. I was reminded of the episode in the television series *The West Wing* where Toby is aghast that someone is trying to take the American political system and export it wholesale to some other country with no consideration at all to what it is about that system that makes it work in the American context. Television rarely rises to the level of great art, but that was a well made point. So it was wonderful to have this opportunity to learn through discussion over dinner about how such a different system fits so well with the way in which things work here.

Week 39: The Seventies

Interestingly, the very next week completed the circle by illustrating to me how the seventies were essentially the same everywhere. I came of age in the seventies, turning 14 at the end of 1970 and turning 23 at the end of 1979. So the way I think is inevitably shaped by what happened in that decade. And the seminal event was the impeachment of Richard Nixon. It was essentially a (relatively) peaceful overthrow of the U.S. government by the people – an amazing accomplishment of the founders who wrote our Constitution to have foreseen a need for such a thing, and an amazing accomplishment of our society to actually play the event out without completely tearing our nation apart (although the case can be made that it was a closer run thing than many people realize). In American politics, the result was the succession of Gerald Ford to the presidency (a story in itself, since he had not been elected as Vice President), and then the election of Jimmy Carter as “the man from Plains” – the ultimate outsider. By 1980, we were back to more of what America during the cold war had typically been like with the election of Ronald Reagan. So you could think of this period as anomalous in the American experience – a reaction against what had come before.

Amazingly (to me), Australia went through almost exactly the same thing. I learned this from Malcolm Fraser, who had been Prime Minister here in Australia during the seventies. Now, Malcolm and I did not meet for coffee (or beer) – he was on a book tour,

and came to Melbourne to hawk his new book, and I went to hear him speak. I was flabbergasted when he started to explain his philosophy – he was an Australian cross between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. There was some fellow as prime minister before him, of course, and that guy was a little fast and loose with the way he made decisions. Not unlike Richard Nixon. But when Malcolm Fraser got in, he did things more “by the book” – not unlike Gerald Ford. The key idea was that he didn’t want to do it like it was being done before – not unlike Jimmy Carter. In one moment, my idea that America’s experience in the seventies was unique came crashing down. It has been remarked before that great challenges call forth great men (Churchill is the oft quoted exemplar) and that the end of those great challenges result in great changes. So I suppose I should not have been surprised that we all lived through the same seventies together, and that that experience was reflected in the similarities in our politics. But I was.

The other thing that surprised me in Malcolm Fraser’s explanation of what his world had been like was the number of times he mentioned a state in Australia (such as Victoria), the United Kingdom, and the United States. The count was zero, zero, and four. No American politician could give an hour-long talk without mentioning an American state – they all have grown up in state politics, several of our states have economies larger than most countries on this planet, and the peculiar way in which states’ rights work in the US ensure that presidents think about states a good deal of the time. Zero. He was speaking in Victoria, which 100 years before had been not just the most prosperous state in Australia, but (with Victoria at the time as a sovereign entity) had been home to the richest city in the world (Melbourne). Zero. He spoke as the former Prime Minister of a country in which the personal representative of the sovereign ruler of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland had the legal authority to dissolve his government, and he didn’t mention that country once. But he spent about one fifth of his time talking about the United States of America, a country with (at the time) a population smaller than that of Indonesia (which is 8,000 miles closer, and which also didn’t get mentioned).

Why? Two reasons. One is that, during that period, the USA was, for better or for worse, a dominant force in world affairs (this was the time of the Vietnam War, which came to be as intensely unpopular in Australia, as it was in the America), and because Australia and the USA were in some sense cut from the same cloth – not only had we started life as colonies of the UK, but our later development was shaped by the same curious mix of emulation of, and rejection of, that tradition). In a sense, we are siblings. Indeed, we have even more in common than that – we are both continental powers in a way that our “parent” could never even aspire to. Australia is the purer continental power – it is the size of the USA, but it is the only continent-sized nation on earth with no land border with any other nation. But there is one key difference – the American population is 15 times that of Australia. And that is what makes us the “big brother” – we live in a world in which population size is not everything (witness Indonesia), but in which population size is an essential piece of a complex puzzle.

The most interesting thing about hearing Malcom Fraser speak was not to hear him speak about America, but to hear him speak about immigration. Australia is, today, a vibrant multicultural society. But that was not the case in Malcolm Fraser’s time. It fell to him

to decide what to do about the pressure for immigration from Vietnam, which at the time was what we would call today a “failing state.” To the great credit of Australia as a body politic, he was able to transform the society from the “White Australia” policy that everyone here had grown up with, to what we today would see as a “modern” immigration policy. I have heard it remarked that America is the most successful multicultural society that the world has ever seen. Let me tell you, we have nothing on Australia. Walk down the street here in Melbourne and you can see it with your own eyes. This is what America is, but even more so. In a few states in America, more than half the population does not self-identify as being of any one race. In Australia, that’s true of the entire country. Yes, we are siblings. And if it were not the case that the vast majority of this continent is desert, which of us is the “senior” sibling might be not at all clear.

Week 40: Sydney

(I’ve gotten a bit behind in my writing, so I will have to write the entries for this and the next two weeks later. This story includes Paris, an Ark, and a Jabiru, so it is well worth telling!)

Week 41: Meeting, Virtually

(Herein will be told the story of the SIGIR program committee meeting, which did not happen anywhere.)

Week 42: Speaking Geek

(Herein will be told the story of lecturing in computer science at the University of Melbourne).

Week 43: Wellington and Brisbane

The Australians are happy to see Americans arrive, and apparently even more happy to see them leave, since they don’t allow us to stay more than three months. Well, that’s not strictly true, but it is the case that my particular visa is limited to three months per stay. Curiously, there is no limit to how quickly I can come back, though! Essentially, this turns out to be a government program for encouraging travel to New Zealand. Which is exactly where I went when my first three months here in Australia were up. Having been to Auckland and Christchurch, that left Wellington as the natural choice. My first stop in Wellington was, curiously enough, the tax office. Not because I was behind on my taxes (although with April 15th coming up the thought did cross my mind), but because the tax office (formally, the Inland Revenue Division) was interested in hearing about what we have been up to in the TREC Legal Track – apparently eDiscovery is big in New Zealand as well. Then it was off to the National Library and Archives New Zealand. The National Library was just a drop-in visit, but at Archives New Zealand I had the opportunity to meet several of their staff to learn about what they are doing with digital and digitized records. The most interesting aspect of this visit learning that making their

materials available on the Web was helping them to see new demand for item-level access, for which their present metadata (which was originally intended for collection management) was not designed. They are attacking this problem in very interesting ways, ranging from long-term approaches such as thinking forward to possible future designs that can serve both collection management and end-user access, to near-term approaches such as trying “crowdsourcing” to generate item-level metadata for a photograph collection.

Wellington is a beautiful natural harbor that is closely surrounded by hills. Unsurprisingly the city long ago started climbing up those hills. Right at the very top is the University of Victoria (which people call Victoria-Wellington to avoid confusion with the state of Victoria in Australia where Melbourne is located). The campus has a very healthy student body and faculty that climbs that hill every day! And Victoria-Wellington is home to New Zealand’s only library school (which in both New Zealand and Australia more often calls itself an “information management” program these days). The faculty, although relatively small, is remarkably active in a broad range of initiatives, including a leadership role in the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), being one of the few programs outside the U.S. to participate in the Web Information Science Education (WISE) program of online course exchanges, and having an active role in defining the new Consortium of iSchools Asia-Pacific (CiSAP).

The rules of my ‘Round-the-World ticket don’t allow me to return to the same city twice, so from Wellington it was on to Brisbane (where, two and a half months from now, I will be back for the Joint Conference on Digital Libraries). Brisbane is a beautiful city, built around a river, but before I saw that I finally encountered THE SPIDER. On my last visit to Sheffield, Mark Sanderson had regaled me with stories of the spiders he encountered during his sabbatical in Melbourne (although he ultimately admitted that there had been only two). To date, I had seen only one spider in my apartment, so I was feeling as if I had not yet had the full Australian experience. Brisbane fixed that. Brisbane does not have small spiders, they have spiders as large as your fist. And, sort of like a welcome sign, those spiders weave their webs right in front of the place where you pick up your rental car. This was, without any question, the largest spider I had ever seen. Fortunately, none were found in the rental car (after an unusually thorough inspection), so then it was off to the river (repeat after me: drive on the left, drive on the left, drive on the left).

My first meeting in Brisbane was with Andrew Smith, the developer of Leximancer. Leximancer is a clustering and classification system that Andrew developed with social science applications in mind, much in the same spirit in which we are working in our NSF-funded PopIT project at Maryland. So when I arrived at my hotel I asked how best to get to the University of Queensland for my meeting with Andrew. As it turned out, the best way to get there was to take a boat up the river. Many years ago I was in the U.S. Navy, so of course I have seen plenty of movies in which the Admiral arrives at his flagship on a small boat (which, for an Admiral, is called his or her “barge”). Arriving at the University of Queensland’s jetty by boat, I simply could not get this picture out of my mind.

I spent the next day at the Queensland University of Technology, visiting with Shlomo Geva and Peter Bruza. Peter is one of the reasons that I am in Australia for this sabbatical – my conversations with him at the SWIRL workshop in 2004 helped me to realize how rich and diverse the Australian information retrieval research community is. Indeed, I had seriously considered coming to Brisbane rather than Melbourne for my sabbatical (as any right thinking person who had looked at the climatology data would) as a result of those discussions. In the end, I was swayed by the remarkable concentration of information retrieval talent in Melbourne, but Brisbane is certainly the equal of most places in the world (and at the very top of any list in which both the weather and the number of information retrieval researchers are given equal weight!). I had not had the opportunity to spend time with Shlomo and his students before, so this turned out to be a very interesting visit. And, fortunately, I will be back in June with an opportunity to continue that conversation.

Week 44: Footy!

It's a bit like soccer – a fast-paced game played on the move. It's a bit like American football, with tackling, although without any protective equipment! It's a bit like basketball, high scoring, and with something equivalent to free throws. It's a bit like rugby, both in the shape of the ball and in how you score a goal. And it's a bit like volleyball in that you can hit the ball with your fist but you cannot throw it. If it's anything like baseball, or ice hockey, I haven't found the analogy yet. But anyhow, the combination is uniquely Australian – Australian Rules Football – or "footy" for short. You can't come to Australia for any length of time without being invited by someone to come see footy. So it was that this weekend I get to see my first footy game.

It turns out that footy was invented here in Melbourne. The proud citizens of Melbourne commemorated that fact by building the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) right on that very spot. You read that right – a cricket ground – despite the fact that cricket was not invented anywhere near here. But the mere fact that it is a cricket ground does not keep people from playing footy there too (as with American football, footy is played in the fall – what they more properly call "autumn" here; cricket is a summer sport). So off I went to see two absolutely awful teams vie for last place. What better way to start my footy education?

Okay, here's how the game is played. You have to get the ball between two goalposts that go all the way down to the ground. You can kick it, throw it, or even drop it through, and if you do, you get 6 points. If you miss by a little bit, you get a very gentlemanly one point, but it quickly became clear that the crowd will not hold you in high regard if you get a measly point when you could have had six. The big surprise is that if you get tackled you are supposed to fumble (i.e., lose) the ball – if you don't, then you are treated as having hogged the ball without moving (despite the fact that a dozen of the other team's players are piled on top of you), and if you hog the ball you lose it. So you fumble it on purpose, and hope that your team happens to regain possession (which, of course, happens half the time and doesn't happen the other half). If you want to get the ball to your mate (the Australians use this to mean "friend" – in this case teammate –

although I still hear “spouse” every time they say it!) you can pass it (technically, you bump it like in volleyball, but many of the bumps look a lot like an underhand pass to me). Or you can kick it. And that’s where the elegance of the game comes in, because if you catch a kick everything stops. Between the time you catch a kick and the time you start moving forward, nobody can touch you. This creates marvelous Cinderella moments when someone leaps high to catch a kick, and then in essence everyone freezes (they don’t actually freeze, but they stop lunging towards you so it looks that way).

As you would expect, one of the two awful teams found a way of losing to the other one (by losing so many players to injuries that the other one repeatedly just about walked down the field and handed the ball through the goal). But going to the game was a very Australian thing to do on a Sunday afternoon, regardless of who won.

Week 45: The Kangaroos of Mars

Three times in my life, I have found myself standing at the place where something truly exceptional was happening. In 1972, I stood at Cape Kennedy and watched three astronauts leave for the moon. In 2006, I stood in the atrium at Google and watched the transitory interests of a substantial fraction of the planet’s population scroll by. And, this Sunday, I stood at one of the three junctions between our planet and our universe. I stood at Tidbinbilla, with Gordon Clee. Gordon is a member of the team that manages the enormous dish antennas that link our planet with the probes that we have sent into the universe. I understood this before I got to Tidbinbilla, but understanding it and feeling it are two entirely different things. As it happened, it was a capacitor that drove this point home for me. I studied capacitors, along with other electronic components, back in the 1970’s. They store energy, a bit the way a battery does, but for a much much shorter time. Gordon was showing me the control center for the antennas at Tidbinbilla, which is just outside Canberra, the capital of Australia. I mentioned the Voyager probes, which of course I knew NASA is still tracking despite the fact that they are now quite far beyond the furthest planet in our solar system. He and his colleagues there then explained how one of the Voyager probes had a problem with a defective capacitor that kept it from accurately tuning its radio to the proper frequency. Since that capacitor’s behavior is changing a bit over time, they need to change they frequency on which they transmit so that Voyager can continue to receive signals from Earth. So, every once in a while, they sweep across a range of frequencies to measure the precise frequency at which Voyager loses the signal. But Voyager is so far away that it takes the signal 13 hours to get there, and 13 hours to get back. The earth rotates, and we all sleep, in between the time they send the signal and the time it gets back – at the speed of light. The eerie thing about this conversation was that it was conducted in the just same “matter of fact” manner that I had used when ordering coffee at a nearby restaurant just an hour before. I have never had a conversation before with someone who routinely talks to things that are outside our solar system, and who does so so routinely that they talk about it in a manner no different than what you or I would use when ordering coffee.

At the end of our visit it was just getting to be twilight, and Gordon warned us that we should be careful not to hit a kangaroo while driving back to Canberra. Apparently the

kangaroos become active around sunset, and this is a real danger. I have to admit that after talking about communicating with what for all practical purposes is E.T., I actually started hoping that we would get to see some kangaroos just as a bizarre but somehow appropriate counterpoint to that discussion. Sure enough, 15 minutes later, two quite large kangaroos bounded across the street right in front of our car! Be careful what you wish for – from what I am told, hitting a kangaroo with your car can be even more memorable than talking to something that is out beyond Pluto. But these kangaroos were fleet of foot, and either we missed them or they missed us. So the day was perfect, with extraterrestrial spacecraft and terrestrial but other-worldly kangaroos competing for my attention.

Strangely, the events that lead to that day had actually started a decade or so earlier, during my last sabbatical. I knew Bill Byrne, who was then at Johns Hopkins, because of a mutual interest in searching speech. Bill introduced me to Bhuvana Ramabhadran, with whom we wrote an NSF grant on speech retrieval, which got funded. Because of my role in that project, I was invited to serve on a joint NSF/EU working group with Steven Bird. But, at the time, Steven was moving to Australia so Steven was the only member of that group that I never actually met. Fast forward seven years and here I am in Melbourne, where Steven is on the Computer Science faculty at the University of Melbourne, so we finally get to meet. I mention to Steven that I am going to Canberra and that I might like to get up to Parkes to see “The Dish,” of movie fame. He introduces me to David Nash in Canberra because David is from Parkes. Getting to Parkes proves to be both impractical and unnecessary because Tidbinbilla is right around the corner from Canberra and (as the people from the Canberra tracking stations all insist) that’s where all the action was anyhow (Parkes was only a receiving station, and the first pictures actually came through the Honeysuckle Creek tracking station near Canberra). And David introduced me to Gordon. If you’re counting, that’s six degrees of separation. Which, supposedly, is sufficient to connect any two people on the planet. And, at least in this case, it worked.

Tidbinbilla and the kangaroos were the highlights of the day, but it was a day filled with many remarkable things. Dave Hawking had met me at the airport and we spent the day together, discussing Australia, space history, alphabet soup (see below), and many more things. We punctuated this with some space history archeology at Honeysuckle Creek (the dish from there is now at Tidbinbilla and the Honeysuckle Creek site was razed but then marked as a heritage site, so you can tromp around where the buildings used to be and imagine what it was like). Then it was off to Booroomba rocks, for which you park some distance away and climb a bit, ultimately getting to a spectacular peak along a ridgeline. We had great weather, so it was a wonderful sight. Then it was off to Tidbinbilla, dodging kangaroos, and dinner with Dave and his wife. All in all, quite an exceptional day, and one that I will remember for a long time.

Week 46: Alphabet Soup

I wasn’t actually in Canberra to cavort with kangaroos or to talk to Mars – the real reason for my visit was to spend some time at NICTA, CSIRO, ANU, NLA, NAA and AIATSIS.

For an academic, ANU is the centerpiece of the story; it is the Australian National University. Canberra, like Washington D.C. in America (and like Brasilia in Brazil) is a city created from scratch to be the national capital. And the Australian National University was created there to be the premiere research university in Australia. ANU is now typically found at the very top of international rankings among Australian universities, although with the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney nipping closely at its heels. So it was fascinating to have this opportunity to learn what it is that makes ANU tick.

The answer turns out to be, at least in part, the rest of the alphabet soup. CSIRO is the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization. The U.S. really has no equivalent agency—it is as if our National Science Foundation actually conducted scientific research on its own behalf, rather than principally organizing the funding for science. We do see this in some parts of our scientific establishment in the U.S. (for example, in the National Institutes of Health), but in general the U.S. the research culture is both less centralized and more “outsourced.” CSIRO is thus an interesting example of other ways of doing things. In information retrieval, CSIRO is at the center of the story of how Canberra has become one of the most significant centers of information retrieval research in Australia, and indeed in the world.

The key to that story turns out to be that it is hard to draw sharp lines between CSIRO and ANU. Indeed the CSIRO Information and Communications Technology (ICT) research center and the ANU Computer Science Department share the same building. But, as is true everywhere, real connections are made by individuals. CSIRO and ANU have done remarkably well in that regard, with faculty, postdocs, and Ph.D. students having shared affiliations that in a very real sense wire the two organizations together. The net effect reminds me in some ways of the ways in which we use joint appointments at Maryland to draw units with complementary expertise together. This is not always easy, but here in Canberra it works well.

The new kid on the block is NICTA—National ICT Australia. NICTA is an audacious effort to transform the playing field by placing Australia at the first rank of centers for ICT research, in the same spirit as what drives Silicon Valley in the USA. The fundamental driver in the vision for NICTA is that attracting the very best people to do their research here in Australia is essential if the country is to realize this vision. Indeed, information retrieval research turns out to illustrate this point well. Arguably, the two foremost information retrieval researchers in the world today are Keith van Rijsbergen at the University of Glasgow in the UK and Bruce Croft at the University of Massachusetts. Indeed, those are the only two currently serving leaders of academic research groups to have won the prestigious Salton Award from the professional society of information retrieval researchers (ACM SIGIR). Both were educated in Australia. Why, then, did they leave the country to pursue their career overseas? NICTA fundamentally exists to address whatever it is that is the answer to that question.

Of course, there’s more to the alphabet soup than ANU, CSIRO and NICTA. Australia is also home to some of the world’s most innovative cultural heritage institutions, and

Canberra is where many of those institutions can be found. NLA is the National Library of Australia, and that's where I spend the morning of my first full day in Canberra. Two examples serve to illustrate some of the exceptional things that are happening there. First, like many countries, Australia is building a bridge between the present and the past by digitizing many historically significant newspapers. We usually think of digitization as a process done my machine; not so here, however. Surely the machine has a role – the newspapers are scanned, and then the scanned newspapers are run through Optical Character Recognition (OCR), no differently from anywhere else. And then the magic happens – ordinary Australians (and, indeed, people anywhere) can correct the errors in the OCR. Not in all of the OCR, of course, but rather in the parts of it that they each individually care the most about. This kind of “crowdsourcing” is all the rage these days – it is how Wikipedia is built, for example. But Australia is leading the way in bringing these tools to market in the context of culturally significant materials. That makes NLA’s newspaper project particularly interesting. The other particularly interesting process I learned about at NLA was the way in which they index their oral history collection. Oral history is the name given to the creation of recorded interviews for academic purposes, and reuse of these materials has always been problematic for the simple reason that audio is hard to index. The most common approach, transcription, is dreadfully expensive (perhaps \$100 for every hour of spoken content). At NLA, oral histories are indexed by having the interviewer write up a summary of the interview that can be time-synced to the recording. This cuts the cost by perhaps a factor of 10. There is some loss of fidelity, of course, but this way of making the cost-benefit tradeoff has significant implications for the scale at which access to these unique materials can be provided.

The second stop on my Canberra cultural heritage tour was AIATSIS, an organization whose acronym puts a few too many vowels together to come tripping easily off the tongue. AIATSIS is the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Straights Islander Studies. It was their recorded audio that drew me there – audio that spans a broad range of the more than one hundred languages here in Australia. Indexing these materials is challenging because in many cases there are few speakers of a particular language. Even recognizing what language is on a recording can be a challenge, and perhaps one that technology can help with.

My last stop was at the National Archives of Australia (NAA) to meet with Adrian Cunningham. NAA has been a world leader in thinking through how best to manage the tectonic transition in the way records are kept from an era in which paper was (almost) all that mattered to an era in which digital records are becoming increasingly pervasive. For practical reasons, archivists spend a significant amount of time thinking about how records should best be managed at the point of their creation, and of course that has been the focus of significant effort for digital records in recent years. But records actually reach the archive long after their creation, so existing digital records from the “gap years” before strong digital records management practices had been worked out that are now arriving in “heaps” (what Australians say when then mean “lots and lots”) pose an important challenge that needs to be addressed in parallel with establishing best practice for newly generated records. I had not previously thought of this as a “gap years” phenomenon, but of course that’s just what it is.

Week 47: Super

One of the nice things about sabbatical is that from time to time you can do things that are completely different from what you would normally do. I like to take at least one course in each place I visit, and here I am taking two, one on international development and a second on financial planning. This week was my first chance to attend the financial planning course, which meets only during the second half of the semester. The topic this week was superannuation, which is the Australian term for what we would call a retirement fund. Of course, nobody calls it superannuation – in conversation it is simply “super.” It’s actually pretty well named – Australia is widely recognized for having one of the best retirement systems in the world. The problem, which every developed economy faces to one degree or another, is that we are essentially a bridge generation. Our parent’s generation generally espoused the idea that they wanted their kids to be better off than they had been, and on balance it has worked out that way (in the U.S., and in Australia as well). Although we often speak of our Social Security system in the U.S. as if we were contributing to a retirement fund for our own future, that program has in large part actually been a mechanism for intergenerational transfer of wealth through which our parent’s generation gains some benefit from the societal wealth that they helped to create. One of the main reasons that this has worked as well is it has is that our parents had a lot of babies – what we call the “baby boom.” And therein lies the problem.

Three things will be different for our generation. First, we did not have a lot of babies (to which I have contributed by having none so far). Second, there is every reason to believe that advances in medical science will result in us living somewhat longer than our parents. And third, and in the U.S. the most serious of the three issues, we’ve been spending our money about as fast as we make it. The net effect of these three factors is to unbalance the present system for providing for people in their old age.

Everyone has seen this coming for a while, but Australia has found a particularly effective way of dealing with it. In the US, we essentially have a two-tier system: Social Security provides some benefits to everyone, and then tax incentives encourage those who make enough money to save some of their money for retirement rather than spending it. Australia has a three-tier system, with both of our tiers, and a middle tier in which the government mandates by law that every employee save a certain fraction of their income for retirement (currently this is about 9%, with a proposal now to eventually raise it to about 12%) that they can then invest as they wish. This is the same effect that would be achieved in the U.S. if some level of contribution to a 401(k) plan were mandatory, rather than voluntary as they are now. They call this “mandatory superannuation.” The net effect is a natural set of adjustments: later generations of retirees will have more in their “super fund,” and thus (using a “means testing” process that is based in part on the size of that fund) they will be eligible for less from the bottom-tier safety net (which they too call Social Security). Of course, the cost of this process is that everyone has less money to spend now – the ability of the political system here to pass such a law in essence amounts to a national decision to substantially increase the saving rate. Indeed, the per-capita savings that have accumulated in retirement

accounts is presently higher in Australia than anywhere else in the world. Similar ideas were proposed a few years ago in the U.S., but the idea didn't gain traction there. So, as was also true in the health care debate, it is useful to see how other countries have done things. Essentially the world is conducting a set of "natural experiments," and we can learn from what we see working, and not working, as we look around the world.

Week 48: Tasmania

Australia is essentially two large islands, one of which (the Australian continent) is very very large, but almost entirely desert, and the other of which (Tasmania) is just modestly large, but almost entirely forest. Flying from one to the other is therefore a study in contrasts. Perhaps the best analogue to Tasmania in the U.S. would be Martha's Vineyard – not far from Boston, but just completely different. I was in Tasmania this week to visit Christopher Lueg, who I met through the JASIST Editorial Board on which we both serve. You know that you live in an unusual world when you can meet someone in Vancouver and set up a lunch for six months later in Tasmania. But that's what happened.

Christopher is on the faculty of the University of Tasmania, which turns out to be a very interesting place at several levels. Most interestingly, it is the only place I know of in which programs in Computer Science, Information Systems (in the business school sense) and Library and Information Science (LIS) can today be found together in the same department. At the National University of Singapore, CS and IS are together in the same school, but as separate departments. At the University of Hawaii, CS and LIS are in the same department. But, to the best of my knowledge, the University of Tasmania is unique in bringing these three programs together in one department. This turns out to be a bit of a trend in Tasmania; the State Library and the State Archives are similarly integrated there, something that is not at all common (although New Zealand is now trying something similar). These kinds of creative arrangements arise because the population (and thus the scale of public financing) in Tasmania is relatively small, thus encouraging consolidation. The net effect, however, is to create a laboratory from which we all can perhaps learn a thing or two. If you make it to Australia, I would highly recommend including a visit to Tasmania in your itinerary.

Week 49: Professor

There's something special about 10,000 hours in the human experience – across a very broad range of activities, that's about how long it takes to acquire the experience normally associated with being thought of as being an "expert." For U.S. academics, this corresponds (very roughly) with the point at which a faculty member is considered for promotion from Assistant Professor to Associate Professor, which is usually (again, in the U.S.) associated with the award of tenure. Associate Professor is, however, only one step in a career path that includes many branching points. But all of those branching points go through the same next step – what people call "full" professor, but what is formally simply known as Professor: This week, I took that step – I learned that, effective with the next academic year, I have been promoted to Professor.

A colleague remarked to me several months ago that going on sabbatical while my promotion case was being considered was a wise move – it keeps you from obsessing over the results once you have gotten to the point where your input is done and the various committees and letter writers are considering the case. It turned out that he was wrong – in this wired world you never are really gone. And it literally took two minutes to get the good news from Maryland to Australia once the decision had been made. I never cease to be amazed by how small our world has become.

Milestones like this are also an occasion for looking back to better understand the path that led me here. It is often said that success has many parents, and that is certainly true in my case. Four come to mind immediately. First, my parents, who nurtured a curiosity in me that has never faded. Second, Don Hefkin, who at a formative stage in my career led by example in ways that they write textbooks about; this was where I learned what it means to be a professional. Third, Nick DeClaris and Bonnie Dorr, my dissertation advisor and co-advisor, who helped me to learn this new world of academia – completing a Ph.D. is more like the apprenticeship to enter a guild in days of old than anything else in the modern world that I can think of, and there is simply no substitute for learning from those who have walked this path before you. Fourth, the two exceptional academic organizations that I have been fortunate to work in: Maryland’s iSchool and the University of Maryland Institute for Advanced Computer Studies (UMIACS). The mentoring process does not end when you graduate – that is really when it begins. The process was cumulative—each step made the next possible. In the end, this success is theirs fully as much as it mine.

Week 50: Why Melbourne?

This week was the beginning of the end. The event was marked with my farewell address – a tradition that I began during my last sabbatical at USC-ISI – in which I gave a talk at the end of my visit about my time here. The talk was in one sense a recap, in another an appreciation, and in a third a practice talk for a talk that I will give when I get home about what I have learned here. Although I did talk about the four research projects I have been involved with here, one of the most interesting parts of the talk was my attempt to explain why it was that Melbourne is one of the world’s great centers of information retrieval research. It turns out that I got the answer right, and wrong.

It is a story in three parts. There’s the pre-history of information retrieval research Melbourne, in which Keith van Rijsbergen was on the faculty of Monash University, with Bruce Croft as one of his students. Both eventually left for Cambridge, however, and I don’t know of any direct connection between that time and what exists here at present. In the second phase, Peter Poole and Rao Kotagiri of the University of Melbourne and Ron Sacks-Davis of RMIT created a joint Collaborative Information Technology Research Centre (CITRI) between the two universities. Ultimately, this center brought together Alistair Moffat of Uni Melbourne, Justin Zobel of RMIT, and Ross Wilkinson (who was employed by CSIRO, but working in the same building as CITRI). The rest, as they say, is history. In 1998, the ACM SIGIR conference was held outside the US or Europe for

the first time—in Melbourne. Six years later, the Australian information community was so robust that they could invite a dozen people from around the world to a beach resort near Melbourne to ponder the future of IR and still manage to outnumber the visitors with an impressive group of information retrieval faculty and students from around Australia. Indeed, today RMIT alone has nearly a dozen information retrieval faculty and postdoctoral researchers, which may well be the largest assemblage of academic researchers in this discipline anywhere in the world.

The key to the prominent position of Melbourne in information retrieval research is not that people no longer leave here – of course, some do; it is that they produce world-class information retrieval researchers here faster than those people leave, and moreover that there is now a bidirectional flow, with people coming here from elsewhere because quite simply they see it as the place to be.

Week 51: Big

The University of Maryland has a fairly large library science education program, with about 350 students. Charles Sturt University’s library science program is considerably larger, with 1,500 students. Where is this enormous university? Wagga Wagga.

“Wagga” is a small town (population about 75,000) halfway between Melbourne and Sydney. This is a pretty big country, though, so “halfway between” means five hours by train from each. Theirs is probably the second largest library science program in the world. By coincidence, I got to meet one of their students, who just happened to be there that day. Most days, there are no students there at all.

How can this be? Quite simple—the Internet is radically transforming education in our field, and Charles Sturt University had embraced it early for the simple reason that they had no other choice. As a result, they now not only have by far the largest student body of any Australian library science program; they naturally also have by far the largest faculty – by a factor of three. A visit to Wagga is, therefore, in some sense a visit to our future. What does that future look like? Interesting.

Like most faculty in major research universities, I learned my trade in an apprenticeship model. Universities are one of the last bastions of the guild systems from the middle ages, with apprentices (Ph.D. students), journeymen (postdocs and Assistant Professors) and master craftsmen (the tenured faculty) passing down their trade from generation to generation. So imagine my surprise when I met with the director of the Ph.D. program at Charles Sturt, who personally supervises 9 Ph.D. students, none of whom live within a hundred miles. I have sometimes mused about whether a distance education Ph.D. program would be possible; while I was musing, the faculty at Charles Sturt has actually been creating one. There’s no question that doing a Ph.D. this way is different from doing it in what we colloquially call F2F (face-to-face), but there is no longer any reason for us to just think about this abstractly – as a profession, we now have some experience that we can look at. And the same is true for professional education at other levels – we can learn a lot from what places like Charles Sturt, San Jose State, and South Carolina are doing.

Week 52: Australia's iSchool

Finally, very near the end of my visit, I made it over to Monash University to meet with Sue McKemmish. Sue is one of the world's foremost Archives researchers, and she recently completed a few years as Associate Dean for Research for the Faculty of Information Technology there. So we had much to discuss. The most interesting aspect of my visit, however, was learning that the Faculty of Information Technology is a stealth iSchool. It's an iSchool in the sense that there's a close integration of social informatics and information technology. Indeed, that close integration applies to teaching as well as research: students in their Masters program take the same information technology core courses, and then they can elect to focus on library science or archives for the rest of their courses if they wish. And it is a stealth iSchool in that they haven't set out to trumpet that fact by, for example joining the iSchool caucus or the Consortium of iSchools Asia-Pacific (CISAP). I spent my entire time in Australia wondering why no iSchools had yet emerged there, only to discover this one at the very end, 15 miles from where I started!

Week 53: The Shout

In some ways, Australian is a language all its own. Immediately after my farewell address, which I had concluded with a brief remark about my promotion, someone asked by email "when's the shout." Not wanting to appear dense, I naturally checked Wikipedia to find out what "a shout" is. And, equally naturally, Wikipedia had the answer. According to Wikipedia, to "shout" is to buy a round of drinks for your friends. And I have made many friends here. So I scheduled the shout for the next payday, which turned out to be June 11. Coincidentally, that was my last Friday here. And, equally coincidentally, it turns out that June 11 is the Friday immediately before the Queen's Birthday holiday (the Queen was not actually born on the date of the holiday, or indeed anywhere near the date of the holiday, but some previous queen was born somewhere around then, so that seems to be good enough with everyone here to merit a holiday!). So a few people had already started their hodaymaking by the time the sun set over the yardarm at ye old Irish Pub on that Friday. Not to worry, however, since a shout was more than enough to draw out most of the information retrieval community here in Melbourne, as indeed I have come to anticipate. Good thing it was a payday.

Ye old Irish Pub is, more formally, The Corkman Irish Pub. It was apparently built immediately adjacent to the University of Melbourne campus a hundred or so years ago when the need to this type of support for research was first recognized. Over the years, it has seen its share of shouts, I'm sure. It turned out to be quite a fine sendoff, at least the parts I remember ...

Week 54: On the Road Again

Finally, the time came for me to leave. Leaving Melbourne was a lot like leaving Berkeley, except that I had to give away a lot more stuff. I arrived with one small (carry-on-sized) suitcase and one medium-sized backpack, and that's the way I left. Learning to

speak Australian right up to the end, almost the last thing I did was to watch the movie Gallipoli, a drama that builds up to the calamity that Australian troops endured in Turkey during the First World War. I'm writing this entry a couple of weeks later, by coincidence in Turkey, and just a couple of hundred miles from Gallipoli.

Then it was off to the Gold Coast, where I had reserved a very nice beachfront "holiday apartment." So what does one do at the beach? Write a paper, of course. It's a sad fact that you sometimes just have to go and hide if you want to get some writing done. There was so much going on in Melbourne that it seemed I needed a new hiding place. And Surfers Paradise on the Gold Coast turned out to be just the right place. So Sunday the paper went in, and I was able to go and enjoy the beach – for a day anyhow ... until the ASIS&T conference paper reviews were due ...

Week 55: JCDL

The bookend on my trip to Australia was the Joint Conference on Digital Libraries (JCDL), which conveniently was held in Surfers Paradise. This was the first time JCDL was being held outside North America, and it met together with the International Conference on Asian Digital Libraries (ICADL). As a result, the conference had much more of an international flavor than has been typical in the past. That focus fit well with the workshop that Javed Mostafa and I and a couple of other colleagues organized there on Digital Libraries for International Development. That workshop turned out to be a really interesting event, with participants from nine countries (Australia, India, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, Taiwan, and the USA). I hope to do some work on this topic over the next few years, so it was a wonderful learning experience. And Javed earned the ironman award for spending more time in transit than in Australia!

Week 56: Giza++++

For some reason, researchers who build systems for translating documents from one language to another are fond of Egyptian themes. By far the most common name for translation systems is Rosetta, after the stone found in Egypt that was inscribed with the same text in three languages that turned out to be the key to understanding the meaning of hieroglyphics. The first widely distributed system for statistical machine translation was then called Giza, and that started the race to find the coolest Egyptian name for your system (of which some of the best known are Hiero, Moses, and Pharaoh). The current version of Giza is known as Giza++, which in geek speak roughly translates as "one better than Giza." Well, if that's the way we count, this week was Giza++++, when I landed in Egypt and got to see the real Giza, the real hieroglyphics, and some real (mummified) pharaohs; only Moses failed to make an appearance.

As usual, half the fun was getting there. In this case, through Bangkok, which was perhaps a tad more adventurous a place for a stopover than I had anticipated when setting up my itinerary. Bangkok is well connected, and thus many round-the-world itineraries go through there. Indeed, on my last round-the-world trip I had stopped there too. On

that occasion, I had been a bit amused to read in the local paper an editorial complaining about how the administration that had been overthrown in a recent coup was, in the opinion of the editorial writer, being shown too much leniency. After all, the writer asked, if we're going to show leniency, why bother having a coup in the first place? I thought at the time that seemed like a rather odd thing for a free press to be advocating. What I couldn't see at the time was that this was simply one symptom of a society that was in need of an effective process for reconciliation of competing views. That became much clearer to all of us about a month before my stopover in Bangkok when the "red shirt" protestors (who continued to support the government that had been deposed in that coup) took to the streets, with considerable bloodshed resulting. As it turned out, by the time I got there Bangkok was completely back to normal. But it was a good reminder of how very fortunate we are to have other ways of resolving such issues back home. We face similar challenges from time to time – the civil rights struggles, the Vietnam War, Watergate and the 2000 presidential elections were all trying times for our society, but in each case ways of addressing the issues were eventually found. When we bemoan the lack of civility in our political discourse, we would do well to bear in mind that a heated and sometimes vitriolic debate is far better than some of the alternative ways for resolving such conflicts.

The occasion for my trip to Egypt was to visit with Kareem Darwish at the Microsoft Innovation Center in Cairo. Kareem was my first Ph.D. student, and it was great to have this opportunity to catch up with him and to meet some of his colleagues at Microsoft and at Cairo University where he is on the faculty. Then it was off to pyramid hopping. I am more the technology tourist than the art aficionado, so two aspects of the trip were of particular interest to me: the ways in which the writings of the ancient Egyptians have made it from the past to the present, and what we know about how the ancient Egyptians actually built things. It was reassuring to learn that both scribes (the early counterpart of word processing software) and engineers were held in high regard (since in some sense I am an engineer who builds systems for scribes). By far the most memorable aspect of the trip, however, was simply sitting looking at the Nile. As a child, people of my generation learned about the Nile in school as a cradle of civilization, and for those of us who went to Sunday School there are also vaguely remembered but powerful stories that involve the Nile, reeds, and babies in baskets (okay, so in a sense Moses did make it into the story ...). For all my tromping around pyramids, learning to tell depictions of pharaohs from depictions of gods, and learning about the research environment in Egypt today, the one thing that made the greatest impression on me was the sailboat ride that a group of us took on the Nile my first evening there. It was literally like being a kid again.

Week 57: 8 Flights in 12 Days

My trip home is paced by the timing of JCDL (in Australia), which defines the start, and SIGIR (in Switzerland), which defines the end. Just before SIGIR is the annual conference of the Association for Computational Linguistics (ACL, which this year is in Sweden). That left me with a couple of weeks to get from Australia to Sweden, through Egypt. Now any right thinking person might have flown from Brisbane to Bangkok to Cairo to Istanbul to Stockholm, which is the fewest flights that can make that route work.

But round the world tickets are, up to a point, insensitive to the number of flights. So I actually wound up flying from Brisbane to Bangkok to Cairo to Luxor to Cairo to Istanbul to Izmir to Munich to Stockholm. And the trip certainly started off in style, with an upgrade to Business class leaving Brisbane. It was an appropriate way to say farewell to Australia, which is certainly a country with a lot of style.

Luxor actually makes sense in that itinerary – it is the tourist capital of Egypt because two of the three great ancient Egyptian civilizations made their capital there. The surprise might be Izmir. As it happens, my mother had visited Turkey, and she put Ephesus on my “must see” list. And Ephesus is just south of Izmir. Today I made it there. And I concluded that if you are going to see both Ephesus and the pyramids, you should see Ephesus first – the pyramids just are a hard act to follow. That said, Ephesus was interesting for its biblical connections – Saint Paul apparently gave a rousing speech there (and got run out of town), and the Virgin Mary is said to have lived out her days there. One of the most interesting aspects of the town was the port, which is now 8 miles inland behind a hill. If you need some evidence that the environment isn’t stable over long periods, just think what it takes to grow a mountain and 8 miles of land over the term of recorded history. As you might imagine, they had a few earthquakes along the way.