Dear ladies and gentlemen,

In the current age of technology, where we rely daily on so many software systems, it is important to acknowledge the pioneers who shaped the way we interact with those systems. Today, we gather to honor one such pioneer, Prof. Joëlle Coutaz.

How we interact with software systems has evolved tremendously over the past decades. Let us rewind to the seventies and early eighties, when Prof. Coutaz started her research journey, and the computer mouse was still far from mainstream, despite the first prototype dating back to the sixties. Reflect for a moment on all the tasks you perform on your computer today, and imagine performing them without a mouse. Needless to say, the way people interacted with computers was vastly different back then.

Why I highlight the computer mouse so explicitly, is because it played a pivotal role in the career of Prof. Coutaz. Initially, her research focused on operating systems and networks. However, during a visit to Carnegie Mellon University in 1982, she used a computer mouse for the first time, which planted a seed of curiosity. As you all know, curiosity is at the heart of science and research.

She started experimenting with interactive software on some of the first personal computers with graphical user interfaces, such as the Xerox Alto. She even used her own money to buy a Macintosh—with no disk drive and a mere 128 kB of main memory—and attend the CHI conference. This inspired her to change her research focus. A bold decision, since human-computer interaction was all but a mainstream research area at the time.

Among her many contributions, Prof. Coutaz is perhaps best known for her invention of the Presentation–Abstraction–Control (PAC) model, which laid the foundation for modern software design patterns such as Model-View-Controller (MVC). These patterns dictate how programmers should structure their code and are omnipresent in software today.

Furthermore, she integrated multimodal interaction long before it became popular on devices such as smartphones, laying the groundwork for today's intuitive touch, speech, and gesture interfaces. Additionally, she introduced the concept of user interface plasticity, emphasizing the importance of adapting interfaces to the context of use while preserving usability.

Given its relevance to current societal challenges, I also want to highlight her work on digital behavior change, for instance, by creatively using Philips Hue lights as eco-feedback on energy consumption. Her family lived with such a system in their household for a decade, which is a testament to her dedication to the work and its real-world impact.

This offers just a glimpse into the contributions of Prof. Coutaz, who actively promoted a multidisciplinary approach, bringing together fields such as information and communication technology, software engineering, and social and human sciences. Since she first used that computer mouse in 1982, Prof. Coutaz has been continuously committed to advancing human-computer interaction as a field, earning recognition through numerous awards, and enhancing our interactions with software systems today.

Dear Joëlle,

I first got to know you about 20 years ago. Not in person, but through your papers, which were mandatory reading material during my student years. At that time, human-computer interaction was still limited to only a few courses at our university. Yet, those courses, along with your papers, inspired me to pursue a PhD in this field.

Today, we have multiple programs with strong links to human-computer interaction, such as our newly established Master in Software Systems Engineering Technology. Such programs, blending engineering aspects with a focus on the end users and how they interact with software systems, are only possible thanks to your pioneering work.

Moreover, your contributions are still an important driving force behind a lot of our ongoing research. Whether we are building smart multimodal assistants to support assembly operators, or intelligible software to configure smart homes, your foundational work remains a cornerstone. Your motto, *“You need to do what you feel is right and not systematically follow the comfortable path paved by mainstream research areas.”*, is a wise lesson to us all.

Therefore, I am honored to stand before you today, together with Nick, as promotors of your honorary doctorate from Hasselt University. Congratulations!

*- Prof. dr. Davy Vanacken & Prof. dr. Nick Michiels, Hasselt University - 28 mei 2024*