Blade runner rolls to new realities

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A Frenchman in Canberra warns against patents and ID cards. By Cynthia Karena.

SOMETIMES the experience is more important to Pascal Vuylsteker than the achievement.

The 38-year-old French in-line skating computer scientist from Canberra's Australian National University used to volunteer for the PariRoller, where thousands of people skate through the streets of Paris every Friday night.

"Paris streets do not belong to the cars any more," Mr Vuylsteker says. "The crowd takes them back. Rollerblading is good for exploring the world from a unique point of view."

This passion for exploration led Mr Vuylsteker to a career in research, where he tries "to see things differently, transforming abstract ideas into realisation. Research gives me the freedom to think.

"I started with my first computer in the 1980s. I started to imagine and guess what I could do - what is the potential? What are the limits?"

Having a roller-ball: Pascal Vuylsteker straps on his blades.
Photo: *Chris Lane*

Now his field of interest is virtual reality. With a masters degree from France in physics engineering, mathematics and computer science, Mr Vuylsteker is now part of ANU's eScience team, where he can "rebuild the world from scratch and explore it".
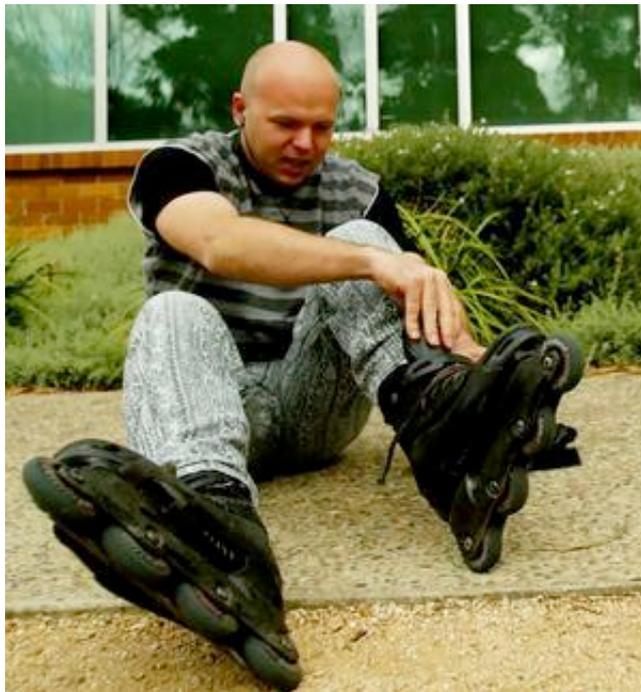
Mr Vuylsteker's latest project is rebuilding the world using a camera combined with a global positioning system to create panoramic images of scenes that are "stitched" together, so people can navigate within bigger, fuller images.

"You already can find photo sharing websites like flickr with a huge number of fully indexed pictures freely available to all. If you cross those two concepts - photo sharing and automatic (location) of photos - you start foreseeing exciting applications.

"In theory, you could reconstruct the three-dimensional world from two-dimensional pictures. If you have two different pictures of the same building, you can extract 3-D information from those 2-D pictures."

Despite his passion for research, the one thing that would make Mr Vuylsteker quit the game is the patent system. "It is important to realise that the patent system protects only the big guys who have money and lawyers to submit patents all around the world," he says. "If you want to obey the rules, you have to spend days checking if someone has a patent for anything you will implement. For example, Amazon's 1-Click patent (means) that if you want to develop an e-commerce-based website and give your clients the opportunity to record their credit-card number only once, the data being recorded on your website, you have to pay some royalties to Amazon.

And "Microsoft owns a patent for the mouse click, so everybody is breaking a patent every day. And

the day you end up making a bit of money with your ideas, a lawyer will knock at your door asking you to pay."

He admires Tim Berners-Lee, director of the World Wide Web Consortium, because he didn't ask for any patent when "he developed the concept of the web (by) giving a hypertext layer to the internet".

Mr Vuylsteker advises researchers and students to use open formats for all their documents because it's important to be able to freely exchange data between different applications and not depend on one particular company.

Lecturing students has taught Mr Vuylsteker to clarify concepts in his own mind and to argue his point of view convincingly. It's a skill he picked up in the 1990s when he was in charge of internet development at the French Broadcasting Institute in Paris, lobbying to develop the internet in France.

Lobbying for the internet was hard, because the French were used to Minitel, a pre-web, centralised online service accessed through telephone lines. People could already make online purchases, make train reservations or search the telephone directory.

"I remember a guy from France Telecom said the internet would disappear in France because they would release the Minitel 2 with colour screen and an integrated credit card reader."

The future now for Mr Vuylsteker has turned to more "frightening" scenarios.

"The big losers of the war against terror all around the world are individual rights, especially the right to privacy. There are some laws both in France and in Australia to protect you against abusive use of personal information, but they are often not good enough or too old. The new ID card in Australia will have all your personal information centralised in one unique place. It is potentially dangerous."

Mr Vuylsteker's advice for in-line skating applies equally to dabbling with databases: "Wear your protection - accidents happen."

NEXT LESSONS

· Sometimes the experience is more important than the achievement.

· Explore the world from a unique point of view - go rollerblading for example - and see things differently.

· Share information with open formats, rather than being dependent on one company's proprietary software.

· Learn how to argue your point of view convincingly. Be clear and use simple words

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