

Dr. Robert Jacobson



Robert Jacobson obtained his Ph.D. in planning from The University of California in Los Angeles, and was a researcher at the Fulbright at the Media Studies at the Roskilde Universitetscenter in Denmark. He holds two master's degrees from the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Southern California, and from the Department of Motion Pictures/Television at UCLA, where he also concluded his graduation studies. He is a senior consultant of the SRI Consulting in Menlo Park, CA, founder, president and CEO of Worldeign Inc. He is also co-founder and ex-associated-director of the Human Interface Technology Laboratory at The Washington Technology Center in Seattle, and former general consultant and director of The Utilities and Commerce Committee of The California State Assembly. Previously, he also acted as senior consultant at The Assembly Office Research. Being a specialist in virtual reality, Dr Jacobson conducted several researches, published many books, game innumerable speeches and taught several subjects on the theme. He also had a Q&A column at the VR World.

Questions

1. When, where, how and why did your interest in information design emerge? Why did you choose it as your main research area?

I became interested in information design – though not by that name – in the late 1950s and 1960s when, as a child and teenager, I frequently visited Disneyland. It was clear in every feature, from the attractions to the tickets to the events to the parking lot (with its monorail shuttle), that a lot of thought had gone into the presentation of information for visitors. Later, working in advertising, I had the fortunate experience of working with art directors who had the ability to convert ideas into effective visual communications. I developed an appreciation for the design of information, in an idealized form. It was validated by the Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT) Exhibition in 1969, sponsored by the then-new Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and various foundations, when artists and technologists worked together to create (among other things) unique expressions of ideas and concepts employing information displays of novel varieties. Of course, as a graduate student, the phenomenon of strolling the library shelves suggested the dimension of the persistent challenge of organizing and making accessible more and more data accumulating in our information-rich culture.

2. Could you historicize on your research interests/projects?

Besides my early work in advertising, creating very novel presentations for pro bono social causes, I also worked (in the 1970s) with the first portable video, documenting people's lives and stories. This was an eye-opening early experience with technology-enabled ethnography. (It informed my MA thesis in Television, published by Praeger in 1977 as *Municipal Control of Cable Communications*, advocacy for public control of the emerging cable television medium.) For my PhD, I studied environmental psychology with an eye to doing a thesis that defined "information environments," their formation, and their consequence for human experience, comprehension, and action. My Fulbright research project in Scandinavia, which was not completed for extraneous reasons, was going to study how new cellular telephony was empowering transborder communities in the Nordic Arctic Circle. In the 1980s, as a legislative policy advisor within the California

Legislature, I put policy-oriented information-design concepts developed in Australia and Canada into practice. instituting an “open policymaking” process in California to deal with fast-changing information and telecommunications policies. (This became the subject of my thesis, published by Ablex in 1989 as An “Open Approach” to Information Policymaking.) It was around this time that I became familiar with the formal information design profession as it was being developed in the UK and elsewhere in Europe.

For the next 10 years (1990s), I focused mainly on technology for the presentation of information – virtual worlds (or “virtual reality”) technology, and online methods of communication prior to and following the emergence of what we know today as the Web. In 1998, still feeling as if we weren’t getting to the essence of things, I asked 20 designers working in various communicative modes to tell me what information design was all about. The result was my edited anthology Information Design, published by MIT Press in 1999. Following ID’s publication, feeling that formal information designers had great but unrealized potential to alter how human beings connect with their world, I turned my attention to the design of experience itself. I now publish the weblog, Total Experience, on Corante.com and am preparing to write a book on designing for experience that consolidates my thinking about these issues for the last 30 years.

3. On the previous decades, the main concern of information design was to develop systems that were effective, easy to learn and use. This decade seems to have brought a new perspective for system design and evaluation: experience design. Do you think there is a paradigm change or both visions tend to co-exist?

Systems, intentionally designed or inadvertent, create experiences. To design for the experience rather than to improve the system imposes a paradigm shift. Of course, the prevailing paradigm and the new paradigm can coexist – they coexist now – but it’s doubtful that a single designer can be faithful to both paradigms. I’ve chosen to adopt the new paradigm.

4. Information design research and praxis have produced a wide range of user-centered design methods to assess systems usability and other functional requirements. Do you believe these methods could be applied to experience design or we now face new methodological challenges?

Definitely, new methodologies need to be developed. Existing information design methodologies, and the research to support them, focus on incremental improvements to the delivery of information and ultimately, enhancement of knowledge. Knowledge is a cognitive process. Experience is a more complex process with spiritual and social dimensions (at least), besides cognition, and inevitably, resulting action (or deliberate passivity). Delving deeper into the nature of experience reveals the relatively thin knowledge we have about the nature of experience and how to design for it.

5. What distinctions do you make between information design, interaction design and experience design?

Information design is about the presentation of information. Interaction design is about the exchange of information between a person or persons and a system. Design for experience – not “experience design” or even less, “user experience design,” since experiences can only be engendered, not designed – is about creating conditions for a person or persons to have desired experiences (although the results are not always intended), since experiences, unlike stark information or interactions, come laden with historical legacies and are affected by factors beyond the control of the designer.

6. Web designers claim to be working on a media that fosters interactivity and therefore experiences when compared to printed media or television. Do you think experience design is already a reality on the web?

I think the claim is fatuous. Working on the web is most often like working in a catalog, except that others can do the same – so if there is anything unique to web design, it’s the social milieu that accompanies being online. Most of the resulting “experience” is about cognition. The web is only one component of the information environment, and even a smaller component of a larger social environment. The “experiences” it engenders are partial and small. Web design is

only one component of the larger, more complex, and holistic discipline of designing for experience.

7. Practitioners usually complain that academia does not produce knowledge that is directly applicable to their reality. Do you think information design practitioners are benefiting from the knowledge "generated" by research in this area?

Academic research about information design per se may be limited; it certainly is for designing for experience per se. But if one casts one's net more broadly, examining, for example, academic research (that is, research conducted academically, by peers and according to canons of research – not necessarily in Academe, as an academician!) about spirituality or environmental psychology, there's a wealth of applicable findings. Designers must take seriously the meaning of interdisciplinary practice and force themselves, if they use research as the basis of their work – which seems only the right thing to do, unless they are accomplished intuitives – to examine multiple streams of research that have something to say about human experience and thus, how to design for it. In general, I'm not a big fan of design research as it's been institutionalized. It's too mechanistic, too purposive, engineering-like in its goals. It constricts the designer when it should be freeing up the designer to work in the experiential domain.

8. Could you anticipate some of the issues to appear on your forthcoming book on experience design?

The first and foremost challenge is developing a convincing definition of experience as it pertains to design, and designing for experience as a discipline for which theory exists or can be developed and which can be professionalized – i.e., for which canons, theories, and standards of practice can be developed and shared with successive generations of practitioners.

The next challenge is to do what I've stated in No. 7 above, to search broadly through the pertinent research and demonstrate its applicability to designing for experience without reiterating the research and over-complicating its presentation.

Collecting cases of designing for experience and presenting them as examples embodying "best practices" means being able to characterize the field itself and then identifying practitioners whose work fits those characteristics. Since few designers currently define themselves as holistic designers for experience, I'll have to solicit participation from designers and other professionals in diverse fields (e.g., landscape architects) who may not see themselves or their work in the same way.

Lastly, I need to define my audience and write/create for it accordingly. I need to design the presentation – in print and probably on the web – to create the virtual environment, in the head of the audience, to get my meanings across with the least confusion or contention.

I'm writing my proposal simultaneously with answering these questions. They're very apropos the challenges posed by my prospective publisher. Thanks for the chance to think my responses out loud. Although I'm sure my answers will undergo expansion and refinement, for the moment, this is where I stand on things. I only hope that the changing exterior environment – numerous ecological, political, economic, and cultural crises that now afflict all of us on a global basis – doesn't so alter the landscape in which authors must work that completing this book becomes even more difficult. Unfortunately, much though they might prefer to live in the world of ideas, authors – and designers – live in the worlds of nature and humanity, and are subject to their conditions as much as anyone: a subjective lesson in what it means to be the audience for intended experiences!

Bob Jacobson
Tucson, Arizona USA
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bluefire@well.com