The Memphis Plenary

Jesse James Garrett

I recognize that being chosen to deliver the closing plenary is an honor, and I do not intend to repay that kindness by giving you a product demo.

I will not be participating in five-minute madness this year. You may consider this my 45-min madness.

This is a different kind of talk for me. First of all, I have no slides! I kind of feel like I'm working without a net here. I can't throw in the occasional visual pun to keep you guys paying attention. Secondly, I have no idea how long this talk is. I just finished it just before this began, so basically when I'm out of things to say, I'll stop talking. Hopefully that will be sooner than you expected, and not later. Third, I've decided not to take questions at the end of this talk. My preference would be that if you have questions, don't pose them to me. Pose them to each other. Publicly, if you can.

So if I run short, we'll just go straight into five-minute madness and then we'll all get to the bar that little bit sooner.

Okay, now: first-timers, please stand up.

[audience applauds]

I don't think we do enough to recognize the importance of new voices in this community, and at this event. Those of you who were here last year may recall my comments from five-minute madness last year, where it seemed like maybe I was a little bit too hard on the first-timers for not being more active participants. What I was really trying to do was scold the old-timers for not doing more to make the

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first-timers feel welcome, and so I hope that those of you who are first-timers this year have been made to feel welcome by this community.

Now, before you sit down, I want to apologize to all of you, because there's a great big chunk of this talk that is not going to mean very much to you—because I'm a ten-timer and I've got some things to say to my fellow ten-timers. So, I'll just get that out of the way. I hope you've enjoyed the rest of the conference—and now you can sit down.

So yeah, in case you guys haven't heard, this is the tenth IA Summit. I don't know if word got around about that. This is my tenth IA Summit. Anyone who was at that first Summit will recount for you the strange energy in that room: academics and practitioners eyeing each other warily, skeptical of what the other had to contribute. There was turbulence. (Hi Peter!) But it was productive turbulence.

I can't say I've seen much turbulence at these events since then. Which ought to make all of us nervous, because the opposite of turbulence is stagnation.

In his opening keynote, Michael Wesch quoted Marshall McLuhan: "We march backward into the future." When I saw this quote, it reminded me of the old quip that generals are always fighting the last war—which is why I think we've been stagnating. What war is the field of information architecture fighting?

The war we still seem to be fighting is the war against information architecture itself as a valid concept, as a meaningful part of design practices.

Almost everything you see about the IA community and IA practices—the mailing lists, the conferences, the professional organizations, the process models, the best practice patterns—they're all optimized to answer two questions: Is this stuff for real? And is it valuable? And the answer to both questions is always, invariably, an emphatic "yes."

IA is real. And IA is good. And that's what we all agree on: some IA is better than no IA. But is there such a thing as "bad IA"? I mean, is it possible for an information architecture professional to do a thorough, responsible job, following all the agreed-upon best practices, and still come up with a bad solution?

I don't think anybody knows the answer to this question. Because we're still fighting the last war. We're still trying to defend the answer to that question: is IA good? Is IA valuable?

Now, if you are about my age (and most of you seem to be, which I'll come back to in a minute), your grandparents grew up in the Depression. And if your grandparents are like mine, this was an experience that shaped their behavior for the rest of their lives. They save everything: any little bit of leftover food, or a loose scrap of fabric, or a button or a screw. They save everything, because the notion of scarcity was deeply imprinted on them when they were young and became such a fundamental part of their worldview that decades later they're still hoarding all this stuff even though the Depression's been over… well, it took a break anyway.

Here are some of the most common terms from past IA Summit programs: taxonomy, thesaurus, controlled vocabulary, metadata, faceted classification, navigation, content management—and then there was that one year with all the talks about tagging. Like my grandparents, we cling to these things because they are what saved us. They are the tools by which we proved that yes, IA is real, and it is valuable. But

that war is over. We won. And now it's time to move on, because those comfortable, familiar things represent only part of what information architecture can be.

So it's time to leave the nest. Thank you, Lou and Peter. Thank you, library science. For getting us off to a great start. For giving us the tools and knowledge to win a place for IA in the world. There will still be a place for library science in IA, but it's only a part of our larger destiny.

Thank you to ASIST. Thank you to Dick Hill, and Vanessa and Jan and Carlene. This field would not be where it is without your efforts at these events, year after year. But I'm curious—show of hands: who here has ever been to any ASIST event other than an IA summit? [audience raises hands] Who here is an ASIST member? [audience raises hands] A smattering at best. ASIST has been sort of a benevolent host organism for the incubation of IA, but the relationship between ASIST and IA beyond IA Summit hasn't really gone anywhere.

Okay, I'm debating how to do this… Name the five best-known information architects. [audience calls out various names] Now: name a work of information architecture created by one of these people. [silence] Is that a sign of a mature profession?

The names you know are notable for what they say about their work, not for the work itself. They're not known for the quality of their work (and I'm including myself in this category).

Moreover, do you know good IA when you see it? And can different people have different ideas about the qualities of a good solution or a bad one, based on their philosophical approach to their work?

One thing I'm really surprised we don't have yet, that I had expected to see long before now, is the emergence of schools of thought about information architecture.

Will there ever be a controversial work of information architecture? Something we argue about the merits of? A work that has admirers and detractors alike?

We have lots of ways of talking about our processes. In fact, if you look back at these ten years of the IA Summit, the talks are almost all about process. And to the extent that we've had controversy, it's been over questions of process: Is documentation necessary? If so, how much? Which deliverables are the right ones? Personas, absolutely essential, or big waste of time?

What we don't have are ways of talking about the product of our work. We don't have a language of critique. Until we have ways to describe the qualities of an information architecture, we won't be able to tell good IA from bad IA. All we'll ever be able to do is judge processes.

Another thing that you'll notice from looking back over ten years of the Summit is that talks are ephemeral. I was at all those summits, and I remember maybe a tenth of what I saw—and I saw less than half of what was on the program. I'm known for being down on academia a lot of the time, but they do have one thing right: you have to publish in order to create a body of knowledge.

I think I'm pretty good at what I do. But you guys are going to have to take my word for it. Because you don't know my work. You only know what I say about my work.

I think I'm pretty good at what I do. I hope I'm getting better. I hope that my best work is still ahead of me. But I'm not sure. And I'm not sure how I would know. I've been coming to the Summit for ten years, and I've been doing this work, in some form or another, for close to 15. And as I've watched my professional peers settle down, get married, start families, become managers, I've found myself wondering about creative peaks.

In the field of mathematics, they say that if you haven't made a significant contribution by the age of 30, you never will. It's a young person's game. 33 is young to be publishing your first novel, but it's old to be recording your first album.

When do information architects hit their creative peaks? Let's assume that I'm at about the median age for this group. Just assume most of you are my age, and there are about as many older than me as younger than me.

Now, if I'm at about the median age for an information architect now, when will that change? Will the median age keep going up, as this group of people ages? Presumably, at some point I'll be one of the oldest guys in the room.

Alternately, what if information architecture is something that you don't really get good at until you've been doing it for 20 years? Then we really have something to look forward to, don't we?

Here's another thing I thought we'd be hearing more about by the time of the tenth IA Summit:

You guys heard of this thing called neuromarketing? Man, this stuff is cool. They take people, they hook them up to MRIs—you know, brainwave scanners—and then they show them TV commercials. And they look at what parts of their brains light up when they watch these TV commercials. Then they do a little bit of A/B testing, and they can figure out how to craft a TV commercial that will elicit things like a feeling of safety. Or trust. Or desire.

So yeah, my first reaction when I saw this stuff was: Wow, I gotta get my hands on some of that! We've only just scratched the surface of what we can do with eyetracking and the marketers have already moved on to braintracking! But then my second reaction was: Wait a minute. What are we talking about here? A process designed to elicit specific patterns of neural activity in users? Back in the 50s, they called that "mind control"!

Now in a lot of ways, we're already in the mind control business. Information architecture and interaction design both seek to reward and reinforce certain patterns of thought and behavior. (Just ask anybody who's tried to wrestle any 37 signals app into functioning the way they want to work, instead of the way Jason Fried thinks they ought to be working.)

So there's always been an ethical dimension to our work. But who's talking about this stuff? Who's taking it seriously?

I don't hear anybody talking about these things. Instead, what everybody wants to talk about is power, authority, respect. "Where's our seat at the table?" Well, you know, there are people who make the decisions you want to be making. They're called product managers. You want that authority? Go get that job. Don't ask them to give that authority to you.

"When are we going to get the respect we deserve?" I'll tell you how it's going to happen. Somebody in this room, right now, at some point in the future is going to be the CEO of some company other than a design firm. They'll develop all of those right political and managerial skills to rise to that level of power. And they will institute a culture in their organization that respects user experience. And then they're just going to start kicking their competitors' asses. And then gradually it will happen in industry after industry after industry. That's how it will happen. But it will take time.

I had the thought at one of these summits a few years ago that we would know we had really arrived as a profession when there were people who wanted to sell us stuff. Because, you see, I grew up in the United States, where you don't exist unless you are a target market.

And here at this event this year we have companies like TechSmith and Axure and Access Innovations and Optimal Workshop. And we thank them for their support. But where's Microsoft? Where's Adobe? Where's Omni?

We aren't a target market for any but the smallest companies. The big ones still don't understand who we are. We're still a small community, struggling to define itself.

In 2002, in the wake of the last bubble burst, I wrote an essay called "ia/recon".[1] In that essay, I tried to chart what I saw as a way forward for the field out of the endless debate over definitions. In the essay, I drew a distinction between the discipline of information architecture and the role of the information architect, and I argued that one need not be defined by the other.

Seven years later, I can see that I was wrong. The discipline of information architecture and the role of the information architect will always be defined in conjunction with one another. As long as you have information architects, what they do will always be information architecture. Seems pretty obvious, right? Only took me seven years to figure out.

But that's okay, because what is clear to me now is that there is no such thing as an information architect.

Information architecture does not exist as a profession. As an area of interest and inquiry? Sure. As your favorite part of your job? Absolutely. But it's not a profession.

Now, you IxDA folks should hold off for a moment before Twittering your victory speeches—because there's no such thing as an interaction designer either. Not as a profession. Anyone who claims to specialize in one or the other is a fool or a liar. The fools are fooling themselves into thinking that one aspect of their work is somehow paramount. And the liars seek to align themselves with a tribe that will convey upon them status and power.

There are no information architects. There are no interaction designers. There are only, and only ever have been, user experience designers.

I'd like to talk about each of these three words, in reverse order, starting with "design." Now, this is a word that I have personally had a long and difficult history with. I didn't like this word being applied to our work for many years. I thought it placed us in a tradition—graphic design, industrial design, interface design—where

[1] Garrett, J. J. (2002). ia/recon. http://jjg.net/ia/recon/.

our work did not belong. I also saw the dogmatism endemic to design education as poisonous and destructive to a field as young as ours. I still find the tendency of "designers" to view all human creative endeavor through the narrow lens of their own training and experience to be contemptible and appallingly short-sighted.

But I'm ready to give up fighting against this word, if only because it's easily understood by those outside our field. And anything that enables us to be more easily understood is something we desperately need.

Now, let's talk about that word "experience." A lot of people have trouble with this word, especially paired with the word "design." "You can't call it experience design!" they say. "How can you possibly control someone else's experience?" they demand.

Well, wait a minute—who said anything about control? Treating design as synonymous with control, and the designer as the all-powerful controller, says something more about the way these designers think of themselves and their relationship to their work than it does about the notion of experience design.

"Experience is too ephemeral," they say, "too insubstantial to be designed." You mean insubstantial the way music is insubstantial? Or a dance routine? Or a football play? Yet all of these things are designed.

The entire hypothesis of experience design (and it is a hypothesis at this point) is that the ephemeral and insubstantial can be designed. And that there is a kind of design that can be practiced independent of medium and across media.

Now, this part makes a lot of people uncomfortable because they're committed to the design tradition of a particular medium. So they dismiss experience design as simply best practices. "What you call experience design," they say, "is really nothing more than good industrial design." Or good graphic design. Or good interface design.

This "mediumism" resists the idea that design can be practiced in a medium-independent or cross-media way. Because that implies that there may be something these mediumist design traditions have been missing all along.

If our work simply recapitulates what has been best practice in all these fields all along, why are the experiences they deliver so astonishingly bad? And let's face it, they are really bad.

One big reason for it has to do with this last word, one which I think has been unfairly maligned: the word "user." You guys know the joke, right? There are only two industries in the world that refer to their customers as users. One is the technology business and the other is drug dealers. Ha ha, get it? Our work is just as dehumanizing as selling people deadly, addictive chemicals that will destroy their lives and eventually kill them! Get it? It's funny because it's true.

No, it's not. I'm here to reclaim "user." Because "user" connotes use, and use matters! We don't make things for those most passive of entities, consumers. We don't even make things for audiences, which at least connotes some level of appreciation. The things we make get used! They become a part of people's lives! That's important work. It touches people in ways most of them could never even identify. But it's real.

Okay, time for another show of hands: who here has "information architect" or "information architecture" in your title, on your business card? Raise your hand. [audience raises hands] Almost as many as we had ASIST members.

Okay, now let me see those hands again. Keep your hand up if there is also someone in your organization with "interaction design" or "interaction designer" in the title.

[hands go down]

Almost every hand went down. I see one hand, two hands. Three, four… five.

This is what the interaction design community recognizes—and what the leadership of the IxDA[2] recognizes in particular—that the IA community does not.

In the marketplace, this is a zero-sum game. Every job req created for an "interaction designer" is one less job req for an "information architect" and vice versa. And the more "interaction designers" there are, the more status and authority and influence and power accrues to the IxDA and its leadership.

They get this, and you can see it play out in everything they do, including refusing offers of support and cooperation from groups they see as competitors, and throwing temper tantrums about how other groups schedule their conferences. Meanwhile, the IAs are so busy declaring peace that they don't even realize that they've already lost the war.

This territorialism cannot go on, and I hope the IxDA leadership sees an opportunity here for positive change. These organizations should be sponsoring each other's events, reaching out to each other's membership, working together to raise the tide for everyone.

There is no us and them. We are not information architects. We are not interaction designers. We are user experience designers. This is the identity we must embrace. Any other will only hold back the progress of the field by marginalizing an important dimension of our work and misleading those outside our field about what is most important and valuable about what we do. Because it's not information, and it's not interaction.

We're in the experience business. User experience. We create things that people use.

To use something is to engage with it. And engagement is what it's all about.

Our work exists to be engaged with. In some sense, if no one engages with our work it doesn't exist.

It reminds me of an artist named J. S. G. Boggs. He hand-draws these meticulously detailed near-replicas of U.S. currency. It's gotten him in trouble with the Secret Service a couple of times. They're near-replicas—they're not exact, they're obviously fake. They're fascinating and they're delightful, in and of themselves, as objects.

But here's the catch: For Boggs, the work isn't complete until he gets someone to accept the object as currency. The transaction is the artwork, not the object that changes hands. As he sees it, his work is not about creating things that look like currency it's about using art as currency. It's the use—the human engagement—that matters.

Designing with human experience as an explicit outcome and human engagement as an explicit goal is different from the kinds of design that have gone before. It can be practiced in any medium, and across media.

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[2]The Interaction Design Association. http://ixda.org/.

Show of hands: Who here is involved in creating digital experiences? [audience raises hands] Okay, hands down. Now: who's involved in creating non-digital experiences? [audience raises hands] More hands than I thought.

Now, do we really believe that this is the boundary of our profession? And if we don't, why are there so many talks about websites at conferences like this one?

Don't get me wrong, I love the web. I hope to be working with the web in 10 years, in 20 years. But the web is just a canvas. Or perhaps a better metaphor is clay—raw material that we shape into experiences for people.

But there are lots of materials—media—we can use to shape experiences. Saying user experience design is about digital media is rather like saying that sculpture is about the properties of clay.

That's not to say that an individual sculptor can't dedicate themselves to really mastering clay. They can, and they do—just like many of you will always be really great at creating user experiences for the web.

But that does not define the boundary of user experience design. Where it really gets interesting is when you start looking at experiences that involve multiple media, multiple channels. Because there's a whole lot more to orchestrating a multi-channel experience than simply making sure that the carpet matches the drapes.

We've always said we were in the multimedia business. Let's put some weight behind that. Expanding our horizons in this way does not dilute our influence. It strengthens it.

So if we're all user experience designers, and there are no more information architects, but there is still such a thing as information architecture, what does it look like?

Well, let's take a closer look at engagement, and think about the ways we can engage people. What are the varieties of human engagement?

We can engage people's senses. We can stimulate them through visuals, through sound, through touch and smell and taste. This is the domain of the traditional creative arts: painting, music, fashion, cooking.

We can engage their minds, get them thinking, reasoning, analyzing, synthesizing. This is where fields like scholarship and rhetoric have something to teach us.

We can engage their hearts, provoke them in feelings of joy and sadness and wonder and rage. (I've seen a lot of rage.) The folks who know about this stuff are the storytellers, the filmmakers, and yes, even the marketers.

And we can engage their bodies. We can compel them to act. This is the closest to what we've traditionally done studying and trying to influence human behavior.

And that's really about it. Or at least, that's all that I've been able to think of: Perception, engaging the senses. Cognition, engaging the mind. Emotion, engaging the heart. And action, engaging the body.

Mapping out the interrelationships between these turns out to be a surprisingly deep problem. Every part influences every other part in unexpected ways. In particular, thinking and feeling are so tangled up together that we practically need a new word for it: "thinkfeel."

There are a few other factors, sort of orthogonal to these, that influence experience:

There are our capabilities: the properties of our bodies, the acuity of our senses, the sharpness and flexibility of our minds, the size of our hearts. Our capabilities determine what we can do.

Then there are our constraints, which define what we can't do. The limits on our abilities, whether permanent—someone who's having a hard time reading because they have dyslexia—or temporary—someone who's having a hard time reading because they've had five bourbons.

Finally, we have context. And I have to admit that I'm cheating a bit on this one because I'm packing a lot of different factors up into this one category. There's the context of the moment: babies crying, dogs barking, phones ringing. (Calgon, take me away!) Then there's personal context: the history, associations, beliefs, personality traits of that individual. And there's the broad context: social, cultural, economic, technological.

But these three—capabilities, constraints, and context—are really just cofactors, shaping and influencing experience in those big four categories: perception, cognition, emotion, and action.

Our role, as user experience designers, is to synthesize and orchestrate elements in all of these areas to create a holistic, cohesive, engaging experience.

So how do we create user experiences that engage across all of these areas? Where can we look to for expertise? Where's the insight? Where are the areas for further inquiry?

Perception is already pretty well covered. We've got visual designers and, sometimes, animators. In some cases, we've got sound designers. We've got industrial designers, working on the tactile aspects of the products we create.

Action, again, is pretty much what we were doing already. I defined action as engagement of the body, which may sound strange to many of you when I say that we've really been doing this all along. But if you think about our work, when we talk about behavior, we are always talking about some physical manifestation of a user's intention—even when that manifestation is as small as a click. (And the interaction designers claim to own behavior anyway so I say let them have it.)

Because the real action is in these last two areas, cognition and emotion. This, to my mind, is the manifest destiny for information architecture. We may not have fully recognized it before because the phrase "information architecture" puts the emphasis on the wrong thing.

It's never been about information. It's always been about people: how they relate to that information, how that information makes them think, how it makes them feel, and how the structure of that information influences both things. This is huge, unexplored territory.

We must acknowledge that as user experience designers we have a broader place in the world than simply delivering value to businesses. We must embrace our role as a cultural force.

Here's Michael Wesch quoting Marshall McLuhan again: "We shape our tools, and then our tools shape us." Think about that for a second. "We shape our tools, and then our tools shape us." When McLuhan said "we," and when he said "us," he was talking about the entire human race. But not everybody's a shaper, right? The

shapers are the people in this room, the people in this field. We shape those tools and then, the experiences that those tools create shape humanity itself. Think about the responsibility that entails.

I believe that when we embrace that role as a cultural force, and we embrace that responsibility, this work—user experience design—will take its place among the most fundamental and important human crafts, alongside engineering and architecture and all kinds of creative expression and creative problem-solving disciplines.

At last year's five-minute madness, I said that the experts who give talks at events like this one were making it up as they went along. But, I said, that's okay, because we all are.

I take that back. We aren't making it up as we go along. This is not a process of invention. This is a process of discovery.

What we are uncovering about people, about tools and their use, about experiences—it's always been there. We just didn't know how to see it.

This discovery phase is far from over. Ten years isn't nearly enough time. There's more that we can't see than is apparent to us right now.

For my part, and for you as well, I hope there's always more for us to discover together.

Thank you all very much.

Jesse James Garrett is a design leadership coach whose career in human-centered design includes co-founding the first UX consultancy, Adaptive Path, and writing the foundational book *The Elements of User Experience*, whose iconic five-plane model has become a staple of the field. His work has been published in more than a dozen languages and he is a frequent keynote speaker on making designers and organizations more human-centered in their work.