<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Designing today’s web” - Luke Wroblewski</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The IA of /Culture” - Martin Belam</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Navigating the Digital Spice Route” - Terry Ma</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Extending the Storytelling - Blending IA and Content Strategy” -</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boon Sheridan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Pervasive IA for the Sentient City” - Andrea Resmini and Luca</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosati</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iPads, kids and design lessons for adults - Wouter Sluis-Thiescheffer</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp; Brian Pagán</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Understanding the Nature of Resistance” - Alla Zollers</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haakon Halvorsen &amp; Kjetil Hansen - “Does a Rich GUI Make the Bank</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richer?”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Dahlström - “Designing for Everyone, Anywhere, at Any Time”</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Truth and Dare – Out of the Echo-Chamber, into the Fire” - My</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critique of Jason Mesut</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Rise and Fall…and Rise Again of Information Architecture” -</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Royce</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Fill in the IA gap” - Mags Hanley</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Designing today’s web” - Luke Wroblewski

Luke’s talk was all about how the shift to mobile usage of the web means that if you aren’t thinking mobile, you are probably doing it wrong. In fact, you are doing it wrong. He had a set of stats about mobile usage, suggesting that 50% of internet access in Africa, India and Asia was bypassing the desktop web, and that the figures in the UK and US were rising as well - around a quarter of users in those two developed countries only accessed the web on a mobile.

Luke jokingly referred to people “losing limbs” as we fought the war that ended up with everybody converging on 1024x768 as a standard size to design for. Smartphones throw away 80% of that real estate, meaning that you have to throw away 80% of the crap you put up on your homepage or web page just to fill the space. His examples of Expedia telling you your flight times on one massive textually dense page on the web, and showing you the information as the sole focus of a tiny mobile screen, were persuasive. One creates “angst” said Luke, whilst the other “delights me and makes me love Expedia”

I disagreed a little with Luke when he talked about “real identity” forcing better community behaviour from users. He cited TechCrunch’s jealousy at Quora having a well behaved community discussing pretty similar issues, whereas their own comment area was a troll-infested cesspit. I think that identity and software design clearly influence community behaviour, but you also have to ask about the way those conversations are framed. Quora is a space where questions are asked and people are willing to help answer. TechCrunch posts some pretty punchy stuff and asks people to react. It is no wonder their communites developed differently. You usually get the community interactivity you ask for - so if you are being provocative, you can expect people to be provoked.

Still, we are about to find this out for real with the Guardian’s new Facebook app, which will have two conversations for each piece of content - one on Facebook using Facebook sign in, and one back on the Guardian site with our own community standards and guidelines.

Luke argues that all software in the future will have to become social in order to compete - which reminded me of Paul Adams’ excellent keynote at the UPA conference earlier this year: “Social by design” as a disruptive force. Luke also stressed that it is easy on the web to fall into the trap of thinking that you are just competing with the people in your “vertical”. You aren’t, he said. You are competing with everybody else on the web. If Google+ launches, he argued, and takes up five minutes of everybody’s time, then that is 5 minutes less time they have to spend with you. The beautiful thing about the rush to mobile, he added, was that mobile web usage had opened up whole new areas of time for companies to compete over.

One of the most interesting anecdotes was about Netflix. Luke explained that they had two camps in the company - one pressing for a unified experience, and one pressing for a custom solution for each platform. He explained that in testing, it was the custom tailored solution that always won. Which makes you wonder how the former camp manages to survive.

He took three key indicators as to whether you should be designing a specific interface:

• Mode of use: e.g. lean back, on the couch
• Input method: e.g. mouse, touch, remote control
• Screen-size: e.g. wall-mounted, desk, lap, hand

Luke posited that each unique combination (for example the iPad is on the couch, touchscreen, and lap-sized) needs a new interface, or at least a new interface consideration.

He used the new Boston Globe design as an example of responsive design, and pondered the challenge it poses for designers. There is no way you are going to make 15 layouts for every page. It means that designers probably have to get a bit more uncomfortably closer to the developers than they would like, and that developers probably have to learn a bit more about design than they would comfortably like. I’m all for this - I think anyone making digital products with teams in silos is missing out on a massive opportunity to improve them by harnessing the talents of all of their team.

Luke finished by conjuring the spectre of: “A zombie apocalypse of every kind of device accessing the internet. Headless devices. Smart devices. It is going to make today’s cross-channel design challenge look simple”. He cited Tom Coates, who used to say that it was cheaper to leave the LCD clock in every electronic consumer device than specifically design it out, and argued that the same was becoming true for the ability to access the internet over wifi. Luke thinks it is no longer possible to “future proof” designs or technology, because the rate of innovation and change is so fast. Instead he has been part of a group advocating for “future friendly” design, based on principles of data exchange and core functionality, rather than filling up pixels.
“The IA of /Culture” - Martin Belam

For those of you that don’t know, the Guardian is a left-leaning serious newspaper based in the UK. It was first published in Manchester in 1821, and we’ve been publishing on the web since November 1995. We’ve got quite a large website now - with 1.37m articles at the last count. We publish roughly 400 pieces of new content every day, and we’ve recently launched a US edition, as we expand with a New York based digital office.

Today I want to look at a case study of a rolling project that has lasted around 18 months at the Guardian called “Arts mutualisation”.

Mutualisation?

Well, in the UK, there is a tradition of the “mutual” organisation. A group of consumers gather together and all agree to purchase a certain type of service from one provider, and the funds they spend in return allow that company to provide the service. The Guardian’s editor, Alan Rusbridger, has suggested that this might become a sustainable model for journalism in the future - where news is produced not simply as a consumer product, but in a way that benefits and involves the audience, and allows them to benefit the news organisation.

When exploring the idea, Rusbridger has typically used an example from the arts. He argues that on the opening night of a major new production in London, the Guardian will send Michael Billington, our distinguished theatre critic of many years. However, as authoritative and learned as he undoubtedly is, Michael surely can’t be the only voice worth hearing from that audience. Many other people who have made the effort to attend the opening of a new production must also have interesting critical perspectives to give.
In presentations, Rusbridger has sometimes used this picture by Alastair Muir to illustrate his point.

Taken at Dave St-Pierre’s *Un Peu de Tendresse Bordel de Merde*, earlier this year, our editor says wouldn’t it be brilliant out find out what the couple in the bottom right-hand corner of the photo thought. Or the rather excited chap in the middle.
The challenge for us, therefore, was to work out how we could transform our site into a space where these kinds of conversations and discussions could be facilitated - “Arts mutualisation”

You see, there is a major problem in the way that the press covers arts and cultural life. Nearly all reviews are based on experience of the performance or recording or book in a pre-release, preview or advanced timeframe. This means that at the time you review a movie, it is pointless asking for audience reviews, because they haven’t seen it yet. At the time you review an album, probably the only people who have heard it will be those who have illegally downloaded it in advance. And the problem is particularly critical in books, where often serious tomes are reviewed in advance of their publication in hardback, when they won’t become commonly stocked in major stores until the paperback editions follows later.

You can visualise the problem as a pyramid. A few critics, with access to the means of mass publication, are able to review a few cultural works, often in advance of the audience being able to experience them.
We wanted to make three changes to that pyramid.

At the level of the critics, in an era of widespread self-publishing via the web, we wanted to increase the range of voices on the Guardian website.

At the level of works, we wanted to increase the number of works that were being reviewed and discussed. The Guardian simply doesn’t have the resource to cover every theatre opening, gallery exhibition, music release or book in the UK, let alone internationally.

And, by enabling a broader discussion, we hoped to grow our audience.

Pointing at things

One of the immediate questions was, if we are going to facilitate all of these new conversations and reviews, where do we “hang them”? Where do they belong? If I write a review of Kraftwerk’s “Radioactivity” album, how do we link it to other reviews of that album, or other reviews of Kraftwerk, or other reviews of artists related to Kraftwerk.

Inspired by the world of linked data, permanent URIs and beautiful unique identifiers, we decided that robots must be the answer.

(Although, in fairness, if you’ve known me for a while, you’ll be aware that I’ll often suggest “Robots are the answer!” to just about any query)

Using MusicBrainz as a key

To get the project started, we gave some developers some time to see what they could come up with in terms of an automated music page. We gave them a very rough brief - no more than a sketch on a whiteboard, and set them to work.
They amazed us by very quickly building a prototype of a page that aggregated information about an artist from every imaginable source, including Amazon, YouTube, Last.fm, Gigulate, Soundcloud. And, of course, using our API, the Guardian’s own music content. Not only did they make a series of pages for the demo, they built the system in such a way that simply adding a new MusicBrainz ID onto the end of the URL would refresh the page to feature that artist, with the data aggregated on demand.
Rihanna

Robyn Rihanna Fenty, known by her stage name, Rihanna, is a Barbadian singer. Her song "Umbrella" was one of the highest-selling songs of 2007 and her 3rd album "Good Girl Gone Bad" was critically acclaimed, helping propel her to superstar status. She has attained six Billboard Hot 100 number one hits and is the second Barbadian artist to win a Grammy Award. She is also a cultural ambassador for Barbados.

- Official Homepage: http://www.robinnrihanna.com/

Top albums

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- Lady Gaga
- Kelis
- Ciara
- Leona Lewis

Videos from YouTube

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- More comments

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- News
- Brown shifts focus from 'bigotry' to economy
- Sport
- Lucy Mangan
- Music
- 'Don't ask if Ryo Music are reforming'

Free P&P at the Guardian bookshop
Having seen the potential, we set out to build something similar for our books site. We bought in a whole set of data about Books.

And struggled.

**What did we do wrong?**

We ended up designing and trying to build the books site for what seemed like an eternity. One of the fundamental issues we faced was that the domain model for books is fiendishly complicated, and we never really got to grips with it. We also made some mistakes in the process of the project.

**Ignored previous experience**

After we’d got a little way into the project, we were joined by a new team member, who had been involved with similar work on another website. They explained that using the ISBN as the key identifier was going to give us a whole world of pain. I didn’t listen. You see, books go in libraries. And IAs are the librarians of the internet. So how hard could this be?

To their credit as a person, they have resisted the temptation to say “I told you so” to me every single time they have seen me since.

Unlike MusicBraninz IDs, ISBNs have been around for years and years, and are rooted in the physical world of retailing physical books. They were not designed as a digital identifying system, and consequently they do that very badly indeed. You can’t group editions around a single work, and most books have multiple editions. And sometimes publishers change the cover without changing the ISBN. And you can’t identify the elements that make up anthologies. And they also give ISBNs to audiobooks on CD. And to pop star calendars. And to a company that specialise in doing print-on-demand versions
of Wikipedia pages. And to the cardboard promotional displays that go in shops to hold books. In short, as an unique identifying system, they are one of the worst that I have ever come across. And I've been an IA for a long time, and seen a lot of bad classification systems.

**Too few developers in too big a team**

At times the project team consisted of three people “making” things by writing code. And around fifteen people telling them what to make. Fifteen people can change their minds about what they want much faster than three people can make it.

With that level of development resource, we were always going to be at a disadvantage to services like Amazon or LibraryThing or Anobii who have bigger dedicated development teams.

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**Obsessed over design details**

We spent a long time stuck in a vicious loop of constantly refining the visual design on paper. With a large group of stakeholders, design reviews were done weekly, really slowing down the product definition process. And all the time we were pushing around theoretical pixels, we were losing time when code could have been written.
Big bang launch

Having failed to meet several launch deadlines, we still ended up going for a “big bang” launch and reveal of the new pages and functionality. We would have been much better off gradually and incrementally adding features to the site.

What did we do right?

It wasn’t all doom’n’gloom however. There were some things that we did really well, and we learned and improved our product development process as we went along.
Lists: Objects, properties, actions

One area of the site where development went very well was with our “lists” functionality. This was built as a standalone app, and we worked hard to model it. I used an “Objects / Properties / Actions” map to specify the IA of lists. For example, a “List” is an object which has the properties “Unique URL” and “Name”, and the actions that can be performed on the “List” are “Add book”, “Remove book”, “Re-order list” and “Clear list”.

I find this way of mapping out functionality to be really helpful in clarifying exactly what needs to be built. It also, once you think about which three action buttons would appear on a mobile version, helps you prioritise functionality.

On the Guardian site users can now make lists around books and music, and we hope to add more community functionality and serendipitous discovery around lists in the future.
Gave the developers a chance to be creative again

For the SXSW Festival, we paired up some of our developers with journalists like Rosie Swash and Jemima Kiss, and sent them off to do "stuff". One of the things they worked on was a refined version of the linked data music artist pages, this time based around who was playing at the festival. There was much less involvement from the design or UX team - instead there was simply an opportunity for the developers to code something that would work in the production environment.

We’ve then moved on to launch those pages for real, and got back into the habit of rapidly iterating and adding functionality. It means that sometimes our audience has complained that the work seems "unfinished" - for example we launched artist pages, then album pages, then a way to search through them. I’m comfortable with releasing things that don’t quite add up to the full product - it isn’t as if the Guardian website is starting from scratch. However, it seems that there is some education work to be done on the web audience about the benefits of agile software processes, as well as in boardrooms.

Increased direct community engagement

The new designs have brought our community activity to the forefront of our website. The Books front has a panel that calls out recent community interaction, and the weekly “Tips, links and suggestions” thread makes a place where the community can converse directly with staff. Overseen by one of our “community co-ordinators”, it is a model that we are beginning to export around the rest of the site.
Comment is free, our online home for opinion and debate, now has a similar panel, as does the new music front which we launched just this week.

What are we not sure about?

There are some areas of the project where the jury is still out...

Beware of “Panda”

If you’ve seen Mike Atherton’s talk “Beyond The Polar Bear”, you’ll know that the BBC has claimed some great SEO success with densely interlinked automatically generated pages about food, music, sport and television & radio programmes. We expected to see the same. Actually, we now think that the addition of these pages are potentially an SEO danger for our site.

Look at it this way - as I mentioned earlier we have 1.37m pieces of original quality content on the Guardian site. And prior to this project, the site consisted 100% of that type of content. Throw in the automatic books and music pages - and suddenly those 1.37m URLs are potentially swamped by 3m artists and 8m books. On crude numbers alone, the original content on our site begins to look like the exception rather than the rule.
We’ve ended up excluding the automatic pages from search indexing, as we think they risk tripping Google’s “Panda” update algorithm, and damaging the authority of our domain name within search.

**Searching for search**

With the discoverability of the pages limited from the outside world, our own navigation structures become more important. We’ve taken two different approaches to search. On the books site, you can search by author, title or ISBN, and the results are delivered on a standalone SERPs design. This is a full-text search with partial matching. On the music site, search is restricted to artist names, and the results are delivered inline on the right-hand side of the page. Due to technical constraints, neither the automated book or music pages appears within the main Guardian site search. Making this more consistent will require more technical resource.

It is a fascinating example of where a concern for overall UX consistency and coherence in a visual design can be subsumed by the agile methodology of valuing “working code” above all else, especially in projects that work in silos. Given the user story “I want to be able to easily find the page of an artist I’m looking for”, the search box in the right-hand side of a music page is a perfectly good piece of working software. However, if you rephrase the user story as “When I type the name of a band I am interested in into the Guardian’s search box, I want to find all the pages on the site about them”, we’ve clearly got some way to go.
Maybe it wasn’t a technical problem anyway?

Over this summer, the Guardian Books blog ran a brilliant series called “Summer Readings”, where members of staff could write a piece about a specific book they remember reading during a summer. It brought contributors into the book site who normally write for other areas, and gave users a series of reflections on a wide range of book genres. Each of the blog posts linked through to one of the relevant automatic pages for that title. Did that link alone stop it from being a “top-down” editorial exercise though? The Books blog audience themselves were not invited to participate.
Now, I totally understand why that would be the case. The production process would have been onerous. A smaller book blog might get a handful of submissions, and whack them up online in a WordPress theme, regardless of any bad spelling or obsessions with self-published vampire novels.

The Guardian can’t do that. At the very least all of the submissions would need to be sub-edited for howling spelling errors, and, as we have learned the hard way from reviews posted to our brilliant Children’s Book site, checked for plagiarism. And that is before you upload them into our CMS, keyword tag them, make a contributor profile, write a standfirst, schedule them, then promote them...

Maybe the technology aspect of “mutualisation” has been a distraction from the much harder transformation needed to workflows and editorial processes, and we got distracted by the promise of shiny robots?

Conclusion

I always like to finish a talk with some concrete lessons - so here are the five things that I think are worth taking away from this case study.

1: Know what is important

A failure to set clear project goals is one of the easiest ways for digital projects to go astray. On the “arts mutualisation” project we’ve clearly met the goal of having lots of new automated pages. But is that the thing that will achieve the stated aim of making the Guardian’s cultural coverage less “top-down”? It certainly facilitates new types of interaction on the site, but it remains to be seen how widely they will be adopted. both by the end users and during the content production process. With more measurable metrics, faster iterations, and more data-driven decisions, we might have ended up building different functionality.

2: ISBNs are evil

Just to be clear: ISBNs are fucking evil.

OK, to be fair, they aren’t evil. They are just ill-suited to a digital world.

The evil bastards.

3: Trust good developers

I always argue that the software developers are your key allies on any project. You can design the most amazing interactions and user flows in the world, but it is the way that the code handles them that will ultimately define the true “user experience”. Bring developers into project meetings early. If they are telling you something is hard, listen to it as a warning sign. If they are telling you that they can take a shortcut if only you change this tiny thing here, make sure you really weigh up the benefits and costs of making the small change. Above all empower developers to make decisions and give them the space to be creative. Coding to an ill-informed rigid spec must be one of the most soul-sucking jobs there is. Being invited to be inventive with software must be one of the best. Make sure your developers have the latter job.
4: Listen to all of the team

Your job description might say that you “own” the user experience, or “own” the information architecture of a web service, but you are never going to “own” all of the relevant experience for any given project. Use the members of the project team around you for the knowledge and skill that they bring to the table. Don’t dismiss people because of their age or gender or that they have less overall experience than you - if they have domain expertise, you would be a fool not to learn from it.

5: Get the model right

I think the single biggest lesson for me out of this project was the absolute importance of getting the model right when making a web service. At the Guardian I’ve been very lucky because the domain-driven design of our CMS, and the focus that having an API gives us, means that for content our “model” is very tightly defined. For books, the model of author, work, edition, translation, anthology, compilation, abridged and so on is horribly complicated. Music was simpler, but even mapping the relationship between John, Paul, George and Ringo is complex.

If IA means anything in a world where simply everyone is UXD, then getting this fundamental right is our thing.
“Navigating the Digital Spice Route” - Terry Ma

Terry Ma used the metaphor of the “spice route” in the 13th century as a lesson for how western companies can tap into the eastern market. As Terry pointed out, this is a market of 3bn people.

The old challenges were physical - distance, means of travel, language barrier. Fast forward 800 years and some, like distance have gone, but some like language still remains. The problem now is the focus on information.

Terry outlined ten “experience principles”, including:

**Always work with local knowledge.** Check with local diplomats, use local market experts, and use local papers and magazine. Treat information on the internet with caution. Examples shown included getting details of Middle Eastern dress wrong during a pitch, or finding images from Getty claiming to be of a Saudi man when the dress isn’t Saudi.

**Cater for multiple demographics.** The “Tier 1” demographic of China is an area with 65 million people - when you think you are targeting China, you need to be more specific about “which” China you are targeting.

**Respect is a different concept in the East.** Don’t assume everybody does business in the same way - China is more based on relationships than transactions, the Middle East is more hierarchy oriented.

**Understand the language.** All of them. Terry pointed out that asking her “Do you speak Chinese” is wrong - Cantonese, Mandarin, Traditional and Simplified need to be accommodated on a website. Hong Kong and Taiwan, for example, have different typography and dialects. As she says, “It looks similar to most people”.

**Typography is crucial.** Written Arabic is more than just letters, it is an expression of Arabic culture. Arabic pages have to be totally reversed, pagination order has to be reversed. Chinese being written vertically is more of a calligraphy style than the norm on the web. Content needs to be localised too. Terry identified IBM as having a great execution - with a UK site that focuses on the current Rugby World Cup, which the Chinese site is totally ignoring.

**Pay attention to visual language** - choose images to appeal to local culture. China sees red as a colour of good luck. The Gulf has an obsession with gold in design. And Flash and “Skip intro” still exist in these markets. Sites are also designed for clicks - what looks overwhelming to UK designers overlooks that in Chinese it is quicker to scan dense information than it is to type in.

**Use the right platform.** There is superfast speed in Kapan and Korea, but snail-paced connections in parts of China and India. Also identify the right payment preferences - the credit card is not a mainstream medium because of a reputation for fraud and a cultural perception that you are spending “future money”. Alipay is emerging as PayPal-style middle men, and Taobao was described as “eBay plus MSN”, used by many big brands.
Take censorship seriously - and imagery selection. In Islamic countries there is a lot of sensitivity around images of women. Terry says “when in doubt, show scenery”. Although Terry did also show a picture of pole-dancing in Saudi Arabian dress...

She finished by going back to the spice analogy - getting spices right in a dish is about picking, mixing, blending and trial & error.
“Extending the Storytelling - Blending IA and Content Strategy” - Boon Sheridan

“I've spent the last 12 years doing things that I didn’t know what they were until someone told me afterwards - IA, content strategist, user experience designer.”

Boon says that like most UXers, he is naturally lazy, and seems to spend his life doing duplicated work which he wishes he could reduce. He also repeatedly encounters a big problem with content strategy deliverables. Typically these are a spreadsheet. They can be very rich in data, and incredibly useful, but they struggle to tell a story, and have no “Wow!” factor. Except when clients sometimes go “Wow! I paid how much for this?”.

Boon argues that all of the different disciplines that make up the family of UX should borrow types of deliverables from each other. Nobody “just does site maps” or “just does wireframes”. He also isn’t a fan of the agile-driven mantra that deliverables are not worthwhile. He said:

“People say ‘don't do the deliverables, do the work’. I’m not sure when deliverables became evil”

Boon suggested two types of lo-fidelity “blended deliverable” that could be used early on in projects, which bring together aspects of content strategy, IA and product strategy.

1. **Audience personas**

Boon identified a problem where often a content strategist will be gathering lots of data about the existing content in a business, and a user researcher will be gathering lots of information about the audience, but they work in parallel and don’t confer. He proposed, before detailed research delivers “personas” that both can work to, they collaborate on broader “audience personas”.

Audience personas are the broadest range of folks that you'd want to talk to e.g. students, housewives, or they could be “prospects global” or “salesmen with version 2 of the product”. These are not a detailed persona, but a deliverable that gathers together for an archetype the key messages they need to hear, how a business speaks to them, and what they need from the business.

A key part was also identifying the existing content that is already aimed at them. Starting to match up your existing content types to your audience persona saves time later in the project, as you can quickly establish that, for example that “our prospects love success stories in blog posts, but hate white papers because they are too long”. You can use this to focus where you research efforts should be - both qualitative and quantitative.

2. **Content flows**

This is the idea of showing flows from content type to content type. If they read a white paper, do they get to a demo next? If they come from Twitter, do you interrupt them with a sign in form when following a link? These help set expectations on who has to do what next in a project by helping to establish answers to questions like “How much content do we have?”, “Do we know where it is supposed to go?” and “Who is responsible for it?”
They take the format of a very high level diagram, e.g. Twitter logo leads people to a podcast series, which encourages joining a LinkedIn group, which leads to a question/answer in a discussion and so forth.

It means you can interrogate the rest of the business about problem areas, for example, saying: “You seem to be expecting a lot of podcasts here, but we haven't haven't updated one for two years. Maybe we need to fix that?” or “We’ve got lots of white papers, but they are not incorporated in this flow. They don't live in a vacuum though, so let’s investigate where the traffic to them comes from.”

Design for disagreement

In the course of his talk, Boon mentioned a throwaway anecdote he had seen presented by Kevin Chang about “designing for disagreement”. He was describing how a product idea had been knocking around inside Twitter for a while, but nobody could really pin down what it was. It took a few people getting into a room to thrash out a straw-man design for the functionality for everybody to start saying “Oh no, that wasn’t what I meant at all”. The design itself wasn’t important, it was the fact that it teased out what people were really imagining.

This is definitely a useful technique. A similar one that I use is to “draw a meeting”. After sitting through a big group of stakeholders discussing some product ideas, I'll often rush off and really quickly sketch up some rough ideas - then circulate them and say “Is this what you were talking about?”. It works in a way to almost capture “the minutes” of what was being discussed, and to quickly start working out what kinds of further research we might need to commission.
“Pervasive IA for the Sentient City” - Andrea Resmini and Luca Rosati

“Everything we do in the digital space is more a less a consequence of the fact that we are brilliant monkeys” - Andrea Resmini

Cities are not just buildings, they are emergent systems. They were built mostly for defence, but the unintended consequence was that we developed “civilisation”. 50% of the world population lives in cities. But the question is, can we apply “information architecture” to a physical place? We often get lost because of bad UX in cities.

We can now perceive our cities as an information flow - for example the Wall Street Journal project to map check-ins on Foursquare. Luca reminded us of the classic information-seeking behaviour model of “Directed/Undirected” and “Active/Passive” search, because this are not anchored in a specific digital context. This are how people find and process information in the physical world as well. People tend to follow the principle of “least effort”, so we might only spend 1% of time actively searching for information, but 80% of information finding is ambient.

If you think about the city as a living or processing system, Andrea added, you realise that a lot of the information that might help our laziness is actually there. We already have apps and mobiles and websites, and we have lots of interactions with sensors and cameras even if we don’t know it. Typically though, city IA has been top-down. You have maps, and plotted navigation. Signs, for example, are static directions to the places that someone else thinks you will be interested in. But bottom-up, or “desire paths” emerge all the time - for example taking short-cuts around street furniture or road layouts that erode a bit of lawn, and make a clearer signal to the next person that the short-cut is available.

This happens digitally too, said Andrea. Think about Twitter, he argued, a relatively dumb technology that has evolved into a complicated communications infrastructure thanks to user-driven initiatives like hashtags and @replies.

He showed an example of where New York is trying to bring that top-down and bottom-up together. The New York Bike Share scheme is trying to crowd-source the location of where the bike stands will be, by allowing citizens to specify their ideal locations on a map. They might not listen in the end, but at least they have the data to ignore.

Something that particularly caught my attention was when Andrea referenced Scott Jenson, talking about the myopia of apps - specifically around the issue of bus stops.

“Right now, if I want to see when a bus will arrive nearby, I need to get the city bus app (native or web based, it doesn't matter). Then, I have a fairly complex task to find not only the bus line I want to take (if I even know the correct one), but also which particular stop I'm at. Even the best-designed apps will require significant effort and understanding to do this.

In my opportunistic cluster model, the bus stop I am standing in front of *is* the app. I open my phone and I'm looking at what *this* bus stop has to offer. It's the purest form of progressive disclosure: it shows me the immediate, obvious information
needed, but with some small bit of functionality near the bottom for the full ‘city bus app’ experience. This is the complete opposite of the current app experience today.”

I sympathise with that. The experiment to make countdown information about bus arrivals available by TfL is impressive, but at this trial stage it has some really frustrating annoyances - for example, I can get two different buses home, but they leave from two different bus stops at Walthamstow Central. Because the bus stops are so close together on the map, it is incredibly difficult to select them individually, and there is no way to get a uniform view of which bus stop will get me to my ultimate destination faster.

I really enjoyed this talk, and it reminded me of a couple of other great presentations I’ve seen on similar themes about sentient cities and objects allowing us to live our lives more efficiently. You might be interested in:

- “Making ‘The Internet of things’ real for the mainstream” - Claire Rowland & Chris Browne at EuroIA 2010
- “Urbicomp & the new new media” - Chris Heathcote at London IA
iPads, kids and design lessons for adults - Wouter Sluis-Thiescheffer & Brian Pagán

This talk was about how tablets are making children more important as consumers of digital content, but also explored the problem that content providers haven’t caught up with what they want. Kids love tablets, and they love them more than phones or computer. They are, firstly, more available - parents are much more likely to hand over a tablet rather than a work laptop or the much more personal phone. Tablets are also a very social family device. A diary study from when the iPad first came out showed that 44% of use was on the couch in a social setting with the family, and apparently 70% of iPad-owning parents let their kids use them. Or perhaps, more accurately, are forced to let their kids use them due to their relentless pestering. My two year old is not adverse to shouting “Daddy! Daddy! Angry Birds! Angry Birds!” at me whenever she sees the iPad in my hand.

Tablets are also significantly easier for kids to use than other computational devices. Firstly, because of the large screen-size, you don’t need the fine motor skills you require to work on the smaller smartphone screen. And, importantly, action and perception happen in the same place - it isn’t the same as the mouse/monitor paradigm where the child has to make the link between the mouse movement and the icon on the screen - it is more like the real world, and a child already understands how to move around objects.

There are barriers though, caused by bad UX. In app stores, for example, it isn’t clear to parents what the answer to their main questions about any app will be: “Will my child be able to use this?”, “Will they enjoy it?” and “Is the content suitable?”.

Design within apps is also an issue. Children under 6 can’t read reliably, and presenting choices with text lists and categories is not a good UI for children who can’t grasp the idea of hierarchies. They can also spend money by accident - Wouter and Brian showed an interface in a colouring app, where hitting random text items on a list gave the child a 90% chance of initiating a purchase dialogue - and a simple “Yes/No” set of options at that stage gives them a 50% chance of spending money. I’m also firmly convinced, from experience, that a lot of in-app ad click-throughs are generated by the unerring ability of children to spot them and tap them!

The talk went on to point out that we have all been designing for adults for a very long time, and have built up a body of assumptions based on our observations of user behaviour. As soon as we are designing for children, however, these assumptions are a hindrance. We need to re-examine our understanding of human factors to focus on young people, and even perhaps take part in participatory design sessions with them. They showed a video clip of a boy talking about how, if you were at home sick, you could still be in school lessons. His design solution, a hologram that could play football - “and of course he scores a hat-trick” the boy said - was impractical. However, what was valuable was that all the solutions the children were talking about were ways of recreating the social aspects of the school experience - they appeared to take it for granted that the lessons and educational components of the day would be delivered to them. This changed the focus of the project in question.

There were some tips on running user testing sessions with children. Under 3 and they do not have sufficient verbal capability. Between three and six, their answers can be unreliable (although I wasn’t entirely clear that this is much different with adult user testing...
session participants). You need to be careful about incentives - paying children seems somehow a bit weird. And you have to take care of privacy issues - the kids won’t bat an eyelid about being recorded, but their parents will almost certainly fret about where the recording might end up. And one final tip - keep the sexes apart. Below the age of 9 mixed gender groups hate each other - because “boys smell” and “girls are silly” and so on - and won’t do activities together. Above the age of 13, they are far too interested in each other, and you’ll have trouble keeping the sessions on track.

I was reminded of an anecdote that Hubert Anyżewski told about testing with children when I saw him present at the Polish IA Summit. My notes from that talk said:

“Their first attempts at developing the game fell completely flat when shown to children in testing sessions. They had, he said, made too many assumptions about children being childish and easily amused. Instead, research showed that even young children identified with characters like Hannah Montana and Ben 10. The game was accordingly recast away from the initial fairytale world it had been set in, and the avatars assumed by the children made more mature and aspirational. Doing user testing with 7 year olds isn’t without issues - after about 15 minutes of the session, most of the kids were bored and playing games under the table rather than paying attention to what was being asked of them.”

As part of the talk, Wouter & Brian showed a clip of a two month old playing with an iPad, and contrasted it with a clip of a two year old doing the same. Seen side-by-side, it was clear that the two month old wasn’t really interacting with the device in a meaningful way at all - but was reacting to stimuli and exploring their world with uncoordinated random movements, as they seem fond of doing at that age. The clips sparked a good exchange in the room and on Twitter about whether this idea that children this young were going to be learning to interact with a virtual environment at such a young age was a good thing, or whether it even represented a shift at all. Personally, my feeling is that these children will grow up with networked touch-screen devices as the background radiation of their lives, in the way that I did with the telephone and the TV.
Alla explained that when she started out, she wasn’t particularly good at getting buy-in for her designs, and discovered that most designers will know how difficult it can be. One of the reasons she ascribes this to is that as designers, we are really consultants, regardless of whether we work in-house or for an agency or for ourselves. If you are not the one ultimately able to make the decision, all you can do is advise, recommend, and seek to influence. One of the best ways to do this, she said, is to get your clients or boss or stakeholder to take part in the design and research process. You have to remember that whilst you may have developed a great empathy for your users through research, it is difficult to feel empathy through just reading a report or seeing some slides.

Alla did some exercises with the room, including asking us to write down the name of a recent project where we met resistance. “Which one?” chirped up someone in the audience, to the sound of the hollow laughter of recognition.

Resistance is a natural response by people, Alla argued. It was important to recognise that resistance usually indicates that there is a problem that somebody does not want to deal with or has been avoiding. We should be sympathetic, and realise that almost certainly the person will not admit the real problem. It might be that a decision will put them in a difficult position politically, or their boss is the real obstacle and they don’t want to face a difficult conversation, or it could be that they feel their job role and function is diminished by the presence of the UX discipline within the business. Alla suggested that setting yourself the goal of making them describe the problem out loud can help move things forward. She suggested asking questions like "Do you have doubts about x?", which might tease out “No, it isn’t x, but I’m worried about y.”

She also demonstrated that two people pushing against each other in opposite directions get nowhere, but by allowing your own resistance and pushing back to alternate, you get movement, and you can often end up in a better place. As Dylan Evans put it on Twitter: “Turn your client into a pendulum - let them push, wait, then push them back.”

One of Anna’s final reflections was that “doing design in the easy part, it is dealing with people and their feelings that is the hard part.”
Haakon Halvorsen & Kjetil Hansen - “Does a Rich GUI Make the Bank Richer?”

Haakon and Kjetil were presenting a case study of a redesign process for Sparebanken Vest, the third largest and second oldest bank in Norway. The old graphic design didn’t really have that “classic Western Norway look”, although, to be honest, coming from the UK, I think I’d have been hard-pressed to identify something that did have the “classic Western Norway look”. I’d just be looking out for trolls lurking in the background.

They explained that the problem with the banking sector is that is very little natural content which has good phot imagery to go with it. Unlike estate agents, who can use houses, or travel sites with their gorgeous destination photos, banks only have numbers. So there is a disconnect between the content and the fact that banks tend to fall back on cheesy stock imagery of people standing around computers, pointing at the screen. Or two hands shaking. Sparebanken Vest decided to make an asset of their location, and so the redesign features huge widescreen imagery of people and places in Norway.

Haakon and Kjetil went on to explain what a challenge it was to make banking “fun” visually. For most people, online banking is a necessary evil, not an exciting web destination. To impress the client, though, they showed lots of mock-ups of how the site could be, complete with plenty of polish and drop-shadow. Banking will be fun, the designs shouted.

Haakon and Kjetil had a nice line in self-deprecating humour. At one point, when showing a loan calculator form interface they explained: “We haven’t translated this into English, because, frankly, it isn’t that easy to understand in Norwegian.”

They showed how they had redesigned the form to make it easier to use, and put a compelling call to action on the bank’s homepage. Instead of a banner ad or promo slot saying “Calculate your loan”, they had incorporated the first steps of the process into the main page. It meant that users were encouraged to start fiddling around with it.
Anna Dahlström - “Designing for Everyone, Anywhere, at Any Time”

Anna argued that the old mantra that “Design for everyone and you design for no-one” was dead. Instead, she believes that with the proliferation of devices and the multiple contexts that people use in digital products, you have to make services that will work for people anywhere, at any time, whoever they are.

She cited the example of trying to buy a bath when she and her boyfriend were refurbishing their flat. It was a difficult digital experience because most retail websites assume you already have some foreknowledge about the type of bath you want to purchase. Since they were starting their bathroom from scratch, they needed to know about plumbing options, and there was very little to help them choose their purchase.

Anna explained that whilst we should still have primary personas, we need to make sure that a service at least pays attention to secondary personas, of people who may have little domain expertise in the area you cover.

Looking at the issue of responsive design, Anna explained that she was not a great believer in wireframing up every possible combination. She preferred taking a modular approach, which allowed her to concentrate on key user journeys and key components.
“Truth and Dare – Out of the Echo-Chamber, into the Fire” - My critique of Jason Mesut

Before starting his EuroIA talk, Jason Mesut suggested that if you kept a count of the number of people he offended, you might win a prize at the end. He also asked for people not to tweet his soundbites out of a context - a tweetable soundbite in itself - and asked for a public critique of the talk at the end. Here is mine...

Positive

- I love challenging talks at conferences - I thought, for example, Cennydd’s closing talk at the IA Summit was a masterpiece. Jason was in similar territory - pushing against the status quo.
- The “Don't believe the hype” segment, where he played Public Enemy over an auto-advancing set of slides of current buzz words like “responsive design” and “content strategy” was inspired.
- “You can't just reorganise a company because the website is shit”
- Arguing that you’ve got to be prepared to put yourself up for criticism if you also want to be “on the circuit”
- “EuroIA helped me become a manager”

Negative

- He put up a slide with the faces of some UX rock stars, when he complained that they were “setting us up for failure”. I didn’t think all the faces on the slides deserved the criticism, and he could have made the same point with some placeholder images and allowed the audience to fill in the blanks.
- He really should have stayed in hospital to look after his girlfriend longer rather than hot-foot it to EuroIA.
- The dancing

Interesting

- Suggesting that UCD is a losing bet, because more non-UCD’d products hits the market and are a success than UCD ones. I think I’m in the camp that says that whilst some UCD techniques can be “stone soup-ish”, getting a business to shift to UCD and evidence-based decision making is as much about weaning them off bad and damaging habits as it is about convincing them to use new ones.
- “There is no universal truth in UX. Anybody who tells you otherwise? They are lying, and you should burn them on Twitter or something”
- Daring people to either commit to getting involved in working in strategy, or concentrate on being a great UX practitioner, but not to try and do both.

Missing?

- The words on the slides for anyone without a clear line-of-sight to the bottom left-hand corner of the screen.
- There was a lot about the people Jason doesn’t want to hire - I’d have liked to hear about what it was that caused him to choose the people he has done.
My very favourite thing though...

Arguing that the UX bubble will burst soon enough, but in the meantime we should be refusing to play over-inflated day rates to people without the requisite experience, and make sure we are giving our best and most exciting projects to permanent staff, those who are committed to carving out a career and sticking with a product and design life-cycle that is more than a three month contract. Having recently been recruiting for people to join me on a permanent basis at The Guardian, I can only say amen to that.

Judge for yourself

You can view Jason’s slides at http://www.slideshare.net/jasonmesut/truth-and-dare-04
“The Rise and Fall...and Rise Again of Information Architecture” - Bob Royce

One of my favourite talks was more heavily focussed on software engineering than anything else on the conference programme, which put a big smile on my face. Bob Royce took us IAs through the computer science heritage that has got us where we are today.

He believed that a lot of the early uses of the term IA in the 60s were in terms of “meaningless data” - i.e. just storing bits and bytes for retrieval rather than thinking of the human context of use. There were, he said, other streams of computer science work doing what we would now recognise as IA, but they didn’t call it that.

Bob cited Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s view that “ours is a world about which we pretend to have more and more information but which seems to us increasingly devoid of meaning” but said he loves the idea of helping people “navigate through all the information out there to get meaning out of it. We take raw material and use it to create structure.”

Having recently co-founded a business - The Understanding Group - Bob said he was worried when he went to the IA Summit earlier this year and heard people suggesting it should change name to the UX Summit. Had he started the wrong business? He saw a clear distinction between them.

Both IA and UX are working towards the same task, he said, to build relationships between two sets of users: the people behind the website, and the people they are trying to communicate with. UX, Bob argued, is focused on the point where the people meet, and the IA, he believes, is focused on helping the people behind the scenes gather their thoughts, and structure what they want to say in order to develop the relationship with the user.

Bob’s view was that the most significant development to come out of the Xerox Labs for IAs was not the GUI, but the concept of Object-oriented programming. The idea of modelling all of the actors in a system, including the people, the computers, and the data structures, is very powerful. IAs have readily adopted OOP language like “use case”, and produce deliverables very much like class diagrams.

In Bob’s view, it was regrettable that the early HTML palette of the web was so limited. It meant that we spent years not being able to use all the learnings from graphic design about presenting information to users, exacerbated by the early idea of separating presentation from content, and giving users control of things like font sizes and colours in their browser. He argued that during the development of the web, the IA role should have had a stronger voice in defining the visual presentation of information, as well as the structure.

He reminded us that a reference librarian is taught “Don’t present data, present answers” - we should be aiming for the UX to recede into the background. It isn’t about the device or the design, it is about getting the right information to the right user at the right time in the right context.

I do worry, as I’ve said before, that a lot of IAs don’t appreciate their computer science heritage as much as their library science background. Bob put up a picture of the
Vannevar Bush concept of the Memex from 1945, and asked how many people knew it. Only a couple of hands went up.

And I'll never understand people who want to design digital products but who are not curious about programming or even getting to grips with the bare bones basics of HTML & CSS - a bit like wanting to design amazing cars without ever having driven.
“Fill in the IA gap” - Mags Hanley

Mags admitted that she was worried for our profession as IAs. She had been helping Lou Rosenfeld run a workshop, and he confessed to her that he was using some of the same material from when they had previously worked together ten years earlier. It then transpired that much of that content was still necessary and brand new to the people in the room. Mags explained that she now often sees people who call themselves IAs, who have made great looking prototypes with software tools, but who can’t name or articulate why they’ve chosen things like “supplementary navigation”, or opted not to employ “facets”. She worries that as much as we are encouraged to be “t-shape” people, with broad knowledge but in-depth skill in a specific area, there is, as Leisa Reichelt put it during our predux evening, “an IA-shaped hole in our t-shape”.

To illustrate her point, Mags gave a brief history of IA in books - starting with Richard Saul Wurman and “the polar bear”. These books were pretty much self-contained, and covered the whole IA domain space. We’ve now got publications that have a focus on just one aspect of the discipline, like those published by A List Apart and Rosenfeld Media. Mags explained that our publications and discussions about IA have gone from being broad, to being narrow, to being narrower still. “And that’s OK”, she said, “because I don’t mind us being a field of practice. But what I really don’t like is when we don’t know our practice.”

Mags put us through our paces with a little bingo card test, to identify the IA structures on the screen in a series of screengrabs from websites. I must say that I was incredibly nervous about failing a public test set by someone who used to be my boss - especially when it transpired that quite a few of the examples she used were from the Guardian website. But I think I did ok.

Mags talked a little about her experience when she first worked at the BBC, on a content-modelling project for the BBC’s local and regional sites. She explained that they had got so deep into the content modelling, that at times they had lost the bigger picture of how the users would interact with the system. Being the Australian in a team of women, Mags got assigned the sport models - and so come up with intricate representation of speedway and wrestling and horse racing.

Of course, once the system was in production, the journalists and web producers on the ground quickly realised that they could produce a sports report not by using the intricate model, but by using the “generic article” object, and shoving a fact-box into it with all the juicy sporting details. It is a classic example of how, if you fail to sell the benefits of production tasks, users will find ways to avoid them. Eventually, the local journalists only started using the correct sports report model when they realised that it meant there was a chance that their content would be picked up and included in the main national BBC Sport site. Carrots and sticks - often the secret of getting things done at the BBC.

At the Guardian we could now face a similar situation with the extensive tagging of our content, which is done by hand, and is, let’s be honest, a little bit tedious to do. However, it is absolutely crucial to the way we structure or site, our apps, and the content presentation of our API. For that reason we have presentations and articles like “Tags are magic!” trying to explain the benefits of a system that might otherwise look like yet another bloody obstacle to getting an article published.
I thought one of the ideas that Mags neatly encapsulated was the difference between IA then - *ten years ago* - and IA now. IA then, she said, was about the fact that we understood what was in the boxes, and then we drew the arrows to connect the boxes together. And that was about it.

Now there is a significant difference in that so much of our role is about the context in which people encounter this information - on different devices, with different social sign-ins and persistent identities, and with time and location known.

One constant though, Mags argued, is that we still must be “the glue between the editorial, the business stakeholders and the developers - nobody else is that glue. We understand the users, we should understand the technology, and we understand what the design of the product should be.”

Mags identified some areas where she thought IAs should be concentrating their research and learning - sense making, information seeking, and cognitive science. She also urged us to continue to look at databases, APIs, modelling processes and the semantic web. “We don’t just model and work with unstructured information anymore”, she said. “Don’t let the developer community be the only ones having a say on standards and how this works.”

Finally, Mags implored us to “find our voice” as a community - to make sure we treat ourselves as the equals of disciplines like IxD and Content Strategy, and to continue to practice pure IA, talk about it, and be proud of it.

**A personal thank you**

I must say that if Matt Jones, Tom Dolan, Lee Harker, Jem Stone and Tom Coates were the reasons that I first started blogging, then Margaret Hanley is without a doubt the reason that this blog ended up being about IA. If I hadn’t met her, I don’t know that I would have become one. I nearly joined her BBC IA team when it was formed, but subsequently got the chance of working directly for her when she was Executive Producer on the core group of products within the BBC’s New Media department in 2004 and 2005. In her closing plenary talk at EuroIA she said that she was proud to be an information architect. I’m proud to have become an information architect because of Mags. Thank you.