liz danzico

interaction innovator

For a person with a blazing brain, whose online calendar looks like a mighty brick wall, and whose vision is directed several years into the future, Liz Danzico manages to stay intensely calm. The job titles that describe each temporal brick aren't on many career counselors' lists—not yet, anyway. Some of those words and phrases are user experience consultant, usability analyst, information organizer, and wrangler of 200-word essays (for A Brief Message, the design-themed website she launched with Khoi Vinh in 2007). This fall, the Interaction Design MFA program she co-founded (with yours truly) at the School of Visual Arts will debut, packed with students keen to conquer not just the web but every interactive medium. How did she get here? Danzico, who is passionate about words, images, ideas, and behavior, has been making all of them quietly and gloriously compatible for years. She's been a user experience consultant at Happy Cog, an experience strategy director for AIGA, a design teacher, the editor-in-chief of the pioneering site Boxes and Arrows, and leader of the information architecture teams for the Barnes & Noble website and Razorfish New York. She is also a prolific user of Twitter. I took advantage of a free moment and asked Danzico about her vision of the program—and the world of interaction itself.

[LEFT] A recent entry on A Brief Message.
[RIGHT] Site for MFA in Interaction Design.

STEVEN HELLER
Print *contributing editor, author, co-chair of the Designer as Author program at the School of Visual Arts*

LIZ DANZICO
Co-founder and chair of the MFA in Interaction Design Program at the School of Visual Arts; editor of A Brief Message; user experience consultant for Happy Cog

Let's start with your definition of interaction design. / Interaction design shapes the behavior between people and the interactive products and services they use. That behavior can be observed in something ordinary, such as the way people change the volume on their iPods, to something complex, such as the way people choose one rental car service over another. It can also be seen in something private, such as the way people use keyboard shortcuts with their favorite applications. Interaction design is thought of as a relatively new field; it's only been within the last two decades that it has

Wireframes for W.W. Norton's site, for which Danzico was the information architect.

taken on an identity as a professional discipline. But people have been designing interactions since well before the last century. The field, therefore, still overlaps with other fields and gets associated with many other areas. It does, in fact, have its roots in industrial design, cognitive psychology, and interface design. People naturally associate interaction design with web design, mobile design, and software or application design—fields reliant on technology. Interaction design doesn't have to be reliant on technology, although technology very often plays a role. / In the spirit of full disclosure, I must acknowledge that I asked you to develop the new MFA in Interaction Design at the School of Visual Arts. My rationale for the program is to raise the standard of design in this field. What's your rationale? / Interaction design is crucial to solving the critical issues faced by society today. We have a unique opportunity to craft a program to prepare students to anticipate trends, not just react to them, so they can learn how to humanize the resources available to them. Students should come away from the program prepared to creatively solve not just problems of today, but of tomorrow. This program is a proactive one, its courses designed to prepare students for challenges they'll face as professionals. / What are the fundamentals of this field that are unique and important to teach? Interaction design is closely related to a number of different disciplines, and the interaction designer's role is to be a facilitator among them. Students must become experts in how humans relate to one another as well as to the products and services they use. They must also understand the role of aesthetics and the changing nature of technology and business. Equally important, students must be well versed in design, since interaction design is about problem-solving and creating emotional resonance. Likewise, an understanding of usability is crucial, particularly now, as increased access to technology creates the potential for extraordinarily complex products and services. Expressing ideas—whether verbally, digitally, or physically—is fundamental for a dialogue to emerge between a person and an object. / How do you plan on raising this particular bar? An interaction designer must be equal parts designer, anthropologist, technologist, writer, and business strategist. We intend to educate students so they can in turn inform the business and design worlds about the role and importance of interaction design. This program is meant to create bridges to the business and design worlds, to give students a platform to begin this dialogue immediately. / How do you integrate good design and good information presentation? As with any project, it would depend on the needs of the audience, the intent of the business, the technological capabilities—if applicable—and the role of design to communicate to that audience. Once one has an understanding of this triad of users, business, and technology, one can begin to understand how to structure information appropriately. / Collaboration is even more critical in this new field than ever before. So, can there be the lone genius—the solitary individual that serves as a form-giver? / Absolutely. Apple, for instance, whose products have been praised for interaction design and business innovation, is directed by one individual who shapes the vision and form. This is an exception, but it's a model that works. Each new product, however dramatic its form or solitary its genius, now affords the market a new set of challenges. An object is no longer just an object. It must be relevant, dynamic, and responsive—with accountability—to its audience in a way we've not seen before. While the lone genius may still have a place, collaboration is a crucial part of product development, as interaction designers must join forces with multidisciplinary teams—including industrial designers, technologists, and strategists—to create the final product. Further, after a product is released, interaction designers need to consider the feedback of audiences—meaning designers may have to collaborate with consumers as well. / Presumably, in addition to "training" a new generation of interaction designers, you want to venture into the future. What does the future have in store for this field? The next few decades promise to offer landmark opportunities for interaction designers in a few key areas. The first is gestural interfaces. Consider just a couple of recent examples, the Wii and the iPhone. Never before have interfaces—what are called touchscreen and gestural interfaces—afforded such opportunities for interaction designers to change the behavior of people in their everyday lives. For the first time, people are touching devices directly to manipulate information. There's a level of intimacy that's new. And with the growing complexity of technology, our relationship to these objects has the potential to get even more complex. Interaction designers must find ways to humanize and simplify these relationships to make these experiences easy and enjoyable. Then there are "distributed" experiences: Every day, we watch user experiences becoming more fragmented. Consumers are creating their own products and services; value is being placed on users creating experiences themselves. Meanwhile, the rise of distributed content and delivery platforms is affording data a place of significance in consumers' lives as never before. Data itself may become a recognizable product, and interaction designers will have to learn to contribute distributed value to a product or service that they don't control, instead of having control over the entire user experience. Next, seams: We're going to see a rise in "beautiful seams," a term coined by Mark Weiser when he was chief technologist of Xerox Palo Alto Research Center. Consumers will increasingly be able to configure their own systems and organize their own user experiences; the seams should reveal

> STUDENTS MUST BECOME EXPERTS IN HOW HUMANS RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER AS WELL AS TO THE PRODUCTS AND SERVICES THEY USE.

where these connections take place. The role of the interaction designer might be to design the experience at these seams, perhaps, and to understand how crafting the seams brings together the entirety of the experience. Adam Greenfield, Steve Portigal, Dan Saffer, and others are doing research to show us where interaction designers might focus next. And finally, advocacy: In some ways, the near-term future for interaction designers will continue to be about strengthening the foundation for the field, establishing the field as an area of practice, and furthering its visibility as a community. This advocacy will be an ongoing effort. / Some of my print colleagues argue that aesthetics are left out of the picture in favor of information architecture and making the most functional wireframes. Would you argue this point? Information architecture and the activity of creating wireframes should be a distinct step in the design process, not one taken in lieu of aesthetics. Information architecture should contribute to enhancing the user experience between people and the products and services they use by making the access to information useful, usable, and desirable. Typically, the role of wireframes should be to inform how a designer might approach shaping the visual design of a product—they should not impede that process. If they do, the wireframes are not doing their job. / Would you agree that the level of design practice on the web is inferior to that of print? And if so, is it a fair comparison? If you compared print to web design as if they had the same intent, then indeed, the web might be considered an inferior medium in some respects. But the intent and audience for online design isn't comparable to that of print. When discussing the requirements for a website, designers might consider questions about an audience's mode of use that are far different from the ones that affect print designers. Should users be able to subscribe to the content? Should they be able to view it on their mobile devices? How long will we offer them access to content from the past? The answers to these questions will inform the presentation of the design online so that it can be presented in a way that meets the requirements, and behave in a way that meets the needs as well. Print is intended to be read or viewed, and a discussion about that text will happen at a later time. A website, on the other hand, should engender a conversation immediately. Its role, then, is closer to that of a discussion in real time rather than the role that written text plays. Affordances, therefore, must be put in place to allow these conversations to emerge, whether they enable the smooth distribution of content, the easy contribution of comments, or enable users to simply copy and paste content onto their blogs. / What about success? We have metrics for determining what works in print—what about on the web? Metrics of success for print versus the web remain different. We're still at the early stages of determining how to measure success online, and our tools for doing so might still be inferior. That said, analytics tools that measure how visitors use design online are becoming more sophisticated, and they'll have much more to teach us in years to come about how to improve or adjust our design practices so that we can match our processes to modes of use. / I remember the bad old days—although some may see it otherwise—when we were transitioning from hot type to cold in print design, and the kinks were not yet ironed out. Do you see this as a similar period in screen-based design? Consumers, according to Kevin Kelly in a *New York Times* piece in late 2008 ("Becoming Screen Literate," November 21, 2008), are becoming more comfortable with a ubiquity of screens. Screens are everywhere—gas pumps, ATMs, iPhones, seats of planes. Designers' audiences are growing and becoming more sophisticated as screen literacy is spreading. And we know the experience is imperfect. The larger population has moved from being a "people of the book" to being a "people of the screen." There is no better time than now to iron out the kinks. P