Big Architect, Little Architect[1]

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First came the primordial soup. Thousands of relatively simple single-celled web sites appeared on the scene, and each one was quickly claimed by a multi-functional organism called a "webmaster." A symbiotic relationship quickly became apparent. Webmaster fed web site. Web site got bigger and more important. So did the role of the webmaster. Life was good.

Then, bad things started to happen. The size and complexity and importance of the web sites began to spiral out of control. Mutations started cropping up.

Strange new organisms with names like interaction designer, usability engineer, customer experience analyst, and information architect began competing with the webmaster and each other for responsibilities and rewards. Equilibrium had been punctuated[3] and we entered the current era of rapid speciation and specialization.

Survival of the Fittest

As all of these new life forms struggle to define their roles and relationships in a competitive environment, the dialog can become quite heated. Consider a recent

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[1] According to Peter Morville, the article "was named after one of the first books (he) ever read: Big Dog, Little Dog by P. D. Eastman".

[2] Morville, P. (2000). Big Architect, Little Architect. Argus Center for Information Architecture. https://argus-acia.com/strange_connections/strange004.html.

[3] Punctuated equilibrium. http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/PUNCTUEQ.html.

posting on the CHI-Web Mailing List in which Jared Spool, a dominant member of the usability engineer genus attacked[4] the customer experience genus, stating:

> I personally think the current "customer experience" movement is a crock of sh*t. I think it's all a FUD (fear, uncertainty, and doubt) campaign to get executives to shift their consulting dollars. (*) "i" omitted in consideration of communications decency filters

These battles can be very upsetting or very humorous, depending upon your perspective at the time (i.e., if you're the one being attacked, you're less likely to think it's funny).
Before we take any of these struggles too seriously, we need to remember a couple of facts:

1. Evolution (so far) has not led to a single-species world. There will be room (and need) for many types of web design professionals.
2. The food supply (i.e., money available to support the increasing number and complexity and importance of web sites) will continue to grow rapidly for the foreseeable future.

So, we all need to lighten up.

The Role of the Information Architect

This brings me to the central and very serious topic of this article. I have recently witnessed attempts to curtail the role of the information architect, with the obvious sinister objective of reducing our precious food supply. This is not funny.

It all began in March, when Jesse James Garrett created a very good visual model[5] to illustrate the elements of user experience.

As with all good tools, shady people quickly found ways to subvert Jesse's visual for their own evil purposes. Despite the fact that Jesse explicitly states on the visual itself that "(t)his model does not describe a development process, nor does it

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[4] The original comment is still available via the Wayback Machine at
https://web.archive.org/web/20011222162657/http://www.acm.org/archives/wa.cgi?A2=ind0006e
&L=chi-web&D=0&P=183

[5] Garrett, J. J. (2000). The Elements of User Experience.
http://www.jjg.net/elements/pdf/elements.pdf.

define roles within a user experience development team", I have seen people trying to squeeze the role of information architect into the box for information architecture on Jesse's visual.

These people say things like:

> We don't need to involve the information architect yet. Their role doesn't begin until after we've defined user needs, site objectives, functional specifications, and content requirements. See, look at Jesse's diagram.

or

> The information architect shouldn't be involved in the design of navigation systems. That's the interaction designer's job.

We must challenge these *architect-in-a-box* threats or face a future nearly as bad as the prospect of being stuck into little blue folders.[6]

In Defense of Diversity and Fuzziness

There is a core to the practice of information architecture that involves the structure and organization of information systems that provide intuitive access to content and applications. However, interpretations of the role of the information architect vary depending upon the organizations, the projects, and the people involved.

At one end of the spectrum, the Little Information Architect may focus solely on bottom-up tasks such as the definition of metadata fields and controlled vocabularies. At the other end, the Big Information Architect may play the role of "an orchestra conductor or film director, conceiving a vision and moving the team forward," as described by Gayle Curtis, Creative Director at vivid studios.

While this diversity and fuzziness drives some people crazy, I think it's a good thing. In the rich, dynamic environment of web design, it would be foolish to draw thick black lines between and around professional roles and responsibilities.

Some projects require a Big Information Architect. Others require a little information architect. The best work comes out of collaboration between

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[6] Morville, P. (2000) Little Blue Folders. Strange Connections. Argus Center for Information Architecture. https://argus-acia.com/strange_connections/strange003.html.

information architects and interaction designers and other professionals of all shapes and sizes. By working together to design useful and usable web sites, we can ensure that our food supply continues to grow. Evolution is not a zero-sum game.