What is Information Design? Is it ‘the art and the science of presenting information so that it is understandable and easy to use’, as we once stated at our start with IDJ? Or is it ‘the defining, planning and shaping of the contents of a message and the environments it is presented in’, as IDJ partner IIID defines it? To be honest: none of these two definitions satisfies us. Neither indicates what we have in mind when we think of the subjects that are and should be discussed in the Information Design Journal and InfoDesign-Café, or mentioned at www.informationdesign.org.

Maybe the differences between Information Design and adjourning specialisms can better express what we think our field of study covers and what it does not. The April 2001 issue of Design Matters discussed differences between Information Design and Information Architecture. Jesse James Garrett came up with some distinctions which also give a good impression of what we feel information Design is:

1. Information Architecture is primarily about cognition; Information Design is primarily about perception.
2. Information Architects seem more related to language; Information Designers have a background in the visual arts.
3. Information Architecture ‘belongs to the realm of the abstract, concerning itself with the structures in the mind’. Information Design ‘couldn’t be more concrete with considerations such as color and shape’. It is concerned with structures on a page or screen.

So here is the problem for Information Design Researchers: we are of course interested in the abstract, the generalities on which Information Designers base their decisions. We do not focus on perception in the way psychologists, biologists or physicists do. We are not so much interested in how the brain processes perceived shapes and colors, but rather in why people understand and like certain shapes and colors better than others, why designers prefer some shapes and colors to others. We are interested in design aesthetics, in creative solutions – which are seldom produced by following ergonomic guidelines, psychological laws or analyzing the biology of perception. We are looking for practical abstractions – a paradox basic to Information Design Research.

However, over the years, Information Design Researchers have published studies in the IDJ that do focus on these ‘practical abstractions’. Examples are the article in which Bertin illuminated his theory of visual variables (Figure 1), Drucker’s article about pictographic rhetoric (Figure 2), and Kahn, Lenk & Kacmarec with their isometric projections for visualizing websites (Figure 3). Of course, we had contributions of more direct practical relevance for Information Designers: from Carpendale’s contribution about ‘elastic presentation spaces’ (Figure 4)
to Holmes’ fine article about the influence of Neurath and Arntz (Figure 5); from ‘a grammar for zooming interfaces’ (Rogers) (Figure 6) to ‘designing with 2 1/2-D attitude (Ware) (Figure 7). Maybe this overview better than any definition represents what we have in mind when we think of Information Design.

But there is more. Information Design is in transition. The rapid developments in micro-electronics have a major influence on our field of interest. The increasing influence of technology on society and on our lives has vastly widened the focus of Information Designers. Information Design is a major issue in website design, user interface design, product graphics, and many other visual aspects of products with displays. Information Designers did not contribute very much to old telephones, record players or typewriters; now they have an important role in the designs of the virtual follow-ups of these products and many more products that do not really have ancestors in the pre-computer age, such as route navigation systems, personal digital assistants and spreadsheets.

There is another reason why information design has rapidly become more than typography, page lay-out, pictograms, background colors, and other traditional subjects of the field. We feel that Information Designers should be involved more in fields in which their role seems too limited now: specialisms in which the presentation of information is playing an increasingly important role. Examples are aviation, medicine, statistics, geography, chemistry, biology and military technology. The visual presentation of information has always played a role in these specialisms, but the introduction of micro-electronics and increase in communication (including teaching) has made an effective and attractive presentation of the information of utmost importance. To operate in areas of interest, Information Designers may have to study them to a certain degree – and the effort may well be worth the try. Moreover, Information Designers working in those fields will have to cooperate with the technical specialists.

These transitions – towards electronic presentation of information and other fields – is what we had in mind when we started our work as general editors of the Information Design Journal. Therefore we decided to have a theme in each issue with at least four articles from specialists in selected technical fields, such as on geography, pictographics (Figure 8) and aviation (Figure 9).

We feel that we were on the right track with a combination of articles from traditional Information Design, new Information Design and Information Design in rapidly developing technical areas. But we did not get enough submissions to fill three issues per year and regular appearance of the journal is also an important consideration. Regular appearance will from now on be guaranteed by combining the Information Design Journal with Document Design, also published by John Benjamins Publishing Company. The publisher decided that Tilburg University, the home base of Document Design, would be the home base of the combined journal. This means that Delft University of Technology, where we work, will no longer allow us the time and money needed to edit Information Design Journal. So this issue is the end of our experiment. We are in transition.