

Professional Bio – Thomas Erickson

Thomas Erickson is a social scientist and designer. He studies how people interact with technology, and uses what he learns to design new technologies and systems. Over the course of his career, Erickson has authored fifty-four patents, published over a hundred articles, edited two books, and participated in the design of systems ranging from research prototypes to commercial products. He was named a Fellow of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) in 2009 for his contributions to interaction design and social computing, and for outstanding service to ACM.

Erickson's career has its roots in his graduate training in cognitive psychology at UC San Diego, where his research focused on how people understood metaphors, and why smart people made seemingly dumb errors when using technical systems. As his graduate work was nearing its end in the early 1980's, Apple released the Lisa, a predecessor to the Macintosh that aptly illustrated the connection between metaphors and ease of use. This recognition of the practical applications of his academic work led to him joining Software Products International, a small start-up in which he worked as the "user interface czar" to design some of the first integrated software for the then-new IBM PC.

In 1988 Erickson moved to Apple, where he contributed to the Macintosh user interface, and then moved into Apple's Advanced Technology Group to develop prototypes of future systems. During his nine years at Apple, his projects ranged from AppleSearch and WAIS (the first working attempt at something like the web), to Scribe (a prototype tablet that anticipated features of the iPad, but was five-times heavier, and ugly).

In 1997 Erickson left Apple for IBM, where his focus shifted from the design of personal technology for individuals to the design of complex technical systems for groups, communities and organizations. His early work focused on technologies for supporting communication and collaboration, ranging from a chat system called Babble (similar to Slack) to the development of a class of visualizations known as "social proxies." Around 2010, Erickson's research expanded into the area of cognitive systems, including work on "smarter cities," the development of tools for those 'programming' the Watson artificial intelligence system, applications of drone swarms, and, most recently, work aimed at smoothing the interactions between people and intelligent agents. The intersection of Erickson's work with artificial intelligence is a bit ironic, as he has been (and remains) a long-time sceptic, believing that artificial intelligence is limited and brittle, and that the most significant advances in our ability to think and act intelligently will come from using technology to tap the knowledge and intelligence distributed among humans embedded in communities and organizations.

Erickson retired from IBM in the spring of 2018. He does not consult, but he is interested in conversation and collaboration. His permanent email address is snowfall@acm.org.