The Psychology of Navigation
by *Jesse James Garrett*

So, what do you do?

When people ask me what I do for a living, I usually tell them I design Web sites. Let's face it, most people who ask that question want an answer they can understand, not an indoctrination. That's why I don't often use the phrase "information architect" among the uninitiated. It causes too much trouble.

It causes trouble because it's not always easy to explain the complexities of the work information architects do. They often have to fall back on vaguely defined metaphors such as "information spaces" to describe their area of specialization. These terms, naturally, make no sense to most people. Information spaces bear only the roughest resemblance to the physical spaces people encounter in the work of those "real world" architects.

At the very least, information spaces are different from physical spaces in one crucial regard. In the real world, everything you put into space is going to be visible to visitors by default. The designer of the space has to choose to hide something. With an information space, everything is hidden by default. The only parts of the space visitors can see are those the designer has chosen to reveal.

Information architects are only able to give users a limited amount of information about the options available to them. Sure, a paragraph could be written about each navigation choice available, but stubborn users won't read it. This puts the information architect between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Users don't want to have to guess what's around every corner, but they won't sit still long enough for someone to tell them either.

Paper or plastic?

Information architects can better understand how to communicate navigational choices by examining how users make choices. A typical user, faced with a typical, freshly loaded Web page—her eyes bouncing around the page—takes in all the options available. Maybe she scrubs the pointer over a few navigation elements. Then, finally, she's poised to click. In that moment, as her pointer hovers over the link and finger hovers over the mouse button, she has a picture in her mind of what is on the other end of that link. Where does that picture come from? What informs the details of the user's imaginary result?

Every link makes a promise, but the creators of the link have little control over what that is. The promise exists entirely in the mind of the user. Information architects can hope to influence that image in users' minds in a way that makes it more likely that what they actually see as a result of clicking the link will make them feel the promise has been fulfilled.

The navigation decision—whether or not to click—hinges on the mental image users create of the page they expect to see. Fortunately, a few tools are available to help influence the images in users' minds: language, design, and the understanding of the expectations users bring to sites. In order to deploy these tools effectively, the

information architect needs to understand the process of extrapolation going on in the user's head in that moment before the mouse is clicked.

The most important factor in evaluating the link is its language. First and foremost, users will look for specific words that they would use to describe what they're looking for. They aren't mulling over interpretation and connotation. They're looking for particular words, and finding those particular words will overwhelmingly cause them to click links. If they don't see their own words, they'll keep an eye out for words they would expect other people to use. A synonym will do just fine, but it won't generate the level of interest that an exact match will.

Even if the link text is not an exact match or a synonym, users will still take note if it is in the same conceptual neighborhood as their target. Mentally flagging links that might be related to what they are seeking can help them in two ways. In some contexts, it can reassure them that they're on the right track, keeping them looking for a closer match. In other cases, if the closer match doesn't turn up, that close-but-not-quite link may turn out to be their best bet, bringing them back to click.

When presentation speaks

A couple of other factors in the presentation of the link will cause users to extrapolate meaning. The visual treatment of the link can communicate quite a bit about its content. Bold and red shout, "Look at me! I'm important!" while small and gray says, "I'm here if you come looking for me." Conversely, using similar visual treatment for different links communicates conceptual similarity. Maybe the visual treatment is intended to communicate something to the user; maybe it's just a stylistic choice. Whatever the case, users are going to try to get all the information out of the visual treatment that they can.

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The link's placement on the page can help inform users' navigational decisions. Important or overarching concepts find placement near the top. Closer to the center, users expect to find options specific to the context of the page they're currently viewing. Perhaps more important than absolute placement is the placement of the link relative to other navigational items. It's not uncommon to see a navigation bar display a continuum of ideas, moving from general to specific or from common to obscure. Links that are visually clustered together are considered to be conceptually related. This clustering provides context for interpreting the link that the link lacks considered in isolation.

All the information users have to go on are the language of the link, its visual treatment, and its placement on the page. Yet, despite this extreme shortage of information, they somehow develop mental images of the result they'll get when clicking a link. The mental image might not literally be a picture of the page in their minds—although if they're visual thinkers, it may take exactly that form. They may have formed a mental impression of the content and the manner of its presentation. This impression isn't derived solely from the information they have gleaned from the navigation design, though. They also take their own experience into account.

First, users have their experience with the rest of the Web to consider. They have grown accustomed to seeing certain terms used in consistent ways across Web sites—"search," "about," "privacy," "site map"—and have picked up on some of the conventional ways

navigation items are treated visually. This experience informs their interpretation of the navigation.

In addition, users may have some experience with a particular site as well. Maybe they have seen the site dozens of times, or maybe they are just a few pages into their first visit, but, in either case, they have a set of expectations about how this specific site works. Those expectations extend from the vocabulary the site uses to the style of presentation of its content and the design elements used throughout.

All of that experience, both general and specific, serves as a filter through which they process the information the page provides about the content behind each link. Out of that process, they'll form a mental image, an expectation about the corresponding page. That mental image will be evaluated for the probability that the page will meet the criteria that make the page worth visiting.

What's the goal?

It doesn't matter if they have a specific informational goal in mind or if they are "just browsing"—they will have some criteria against which they'll be evaluating that mental image. If they have a specific goal, the mental image may not be required to meet the goal completely. Simply feeling that clicking the link will get them closer to their goal may well be enough. If they don't have a specific goal, their criteria may be only vaguely defined, or difficult to articulate, but this process of navigation by extrapolation will still apply.

It's important to note that users won't bother to extrapolate images for every link on the page before making decisions to click. On the contrary, the very first link to catch their attention, tipping the scales of their evaluation criteria, will earn the click. If what they see falls short of their expectations, they'll probably go back to where they started—perhaps a bit more discouraged. If they keep finding themselves disappointed, they'll just leave.

Of course, that very disappointment is what information architects are in the business of preventing. It's not just about categorization schemes and organizing principles. A rich understanding of the process of mental extrapolation users go through every time they decide to click a link is critical. In a very real sense, information architects have to try to get inside users' heads to predict what they'll be thinking.

Maybe I'll adopt that as my new job description: mind reader.

Jesse James Garrett is one of the founders of Adaptive Path, author of The Elements of User Experience, and a recognized figure in the information architecture community. He created the Visual Vocabulary, an open notation system for IA development, and his personal site at jjg.net is one of the Web's most popular destinations for information architecture resources.

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