

Foreword

Long before the invention of the compass, sextant, and clock, Polynesians navigated open ocean voyages without instruments. In tiny canoes, they explored the vastness of the world's oceans, discovering such uninhabited and disparate islands as Samoa, Tonga, Tahiti, Hawaii, and New Zealand.

Employing an ancient art of navigation known as “wayfinding,” these seafaring explorers relied solely on careful observation of natural signs to reckon direction and location. The sun, moon, stars, and planets served as a broad navigational framework. Ocean swells, winds, landmarks, and seamarks¹ provided more localized clues.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century, and we find ourselves lost in the seas of cyberspace. Navigation is the number one usability problem of our web sites and intranets. In this brave new world, in which direction and location are transmogrified and distance abolished, people are having a horrible time finding their way.

We have a choice. We can wait for the emergence of a new generation of expert navigators to develop wayfinding techniques for traversing the unnatural realm of the web, or we can actively work to shape our virtual environments in ways that help people find what they need.

1. In Micronesia, living seamarks known as aimers are associated with particular locales near or between certain islands. Seamarks include schools of fish, flocks of birds, clusters of driftwood, and conditions of waves. To learn more, visit the Polynesian Voyaging Society at <http://pvs.hawaii.org/>.

As a leader in the emerging field of Information Architecture, Christina Wodtke clearly chooses to act. Whether she's spearheading a new venture, organizing a conference, or provoking an online discussion, Christina is never afraid to take risks and stir things up in the pursuit of understanding. She asks simple questions that defy simple answers. She crosses disciplinary boundaries and ruffles feathers. She sails off the map and takes us along for the ride.

But perhaps most important is the unique blend of passion and empathy Christina brings to the practice of Information Architecture. By invoking the suffering of the user, she inspires us to innovate, to find better ways to design complex systems. And she reminds us to talk plainly so that more people can understand and make use of the lessons we've learned.

In this book, Christina leads by example. She rips Information Architecture out of its ivory tower and brings it down to earth. With humor, plain talk, and tons of great visuals, she brings abstract concepts to life and makes Information Architecture more accessible. But unlike a number of dangerously influential gurus, she doesn't go overboard in her quest for simplicity. In the spirit of Albert Einstein, Christina makes things "as simple as possible—but no simpler."

This is a small book packed with big ambition. Only Christina would promise to teach you "rocket science in a day." It is such fearlessness combined with deep knowledge of craft that enabled the Polynesians to navigate the open ocean. As you explore the uncharted waters of Information Architecture, you can take comfort knowing you're in the hands of a master navigator.

Peter Morville
Ann Arbor, Michigan
August 2002