

Introduction

This is not a how-to book. There are many, many books out there that explain how Web sites get made. This is not one of them.

This is not a book about technology. There is not a single line of code to be found between these covers.

This is not a book of answers. Instead, this book is about asking the right questions.

This book will tell you what you need to know before you go read those other books. If you need the big picture, if you need to understand the context for the decisions that user experience practitioners make, this book is for you.

This book is designed to be read easily in just a few hours. If you're a newcomer to the world of user experience—maybe you're an executive responsible for hiring a user experience team, or maybe you're a writer or designer just finding your way into this field—this book will give you the foundation you need. If you're already familiar with the methods and concerns of the field of user experience, this book will help you communicate them more effectively to the people you work with.

The Story Behind the Book

Because I get asked about it a lot, here is the story of how *The Elements of User Experience* came to be.

In late 1999, I became the first information architect hired into a long-established Web design consultancy. In many ways, I was responsible for defining my position and educating people both about what I did, and how it fit in with what they did. Initially, they were perhaps cautious and a bit wary, but soon they came to recognize that I was there to make their jobs easier, not harder, and that my presence did not mean their authority was diminished.

Simultaneously, I was compiling a personal collection of online material related to my work. (This would eventually find its way onto the Web as my information architecture resources page at www.jjg.net/ia/.) While I was doing this research, I was continually frustrated by the seemingly arbitrary and random use of different terms for the basic concepts in the field. What one source called “information design” appeared to be the same as what another called “information architecture.” A third rolled everything together under “interface design.”

Over the course of late 1999 and January 2000, I struggled to arrive at a self-consistent set of definitions for these concerns and to find a way to express the relationships between them. But I was busy with actual paying work as well, and the model I was trying to formulate wasn't really working out anyway; so by the end of January I had given up on the whole idea.

That March I traveled to Austin, Texas, for the annual South by Southwest Interactive Festival. It was an engaging and thought-provoking week during which I didn't get much sleep—the conference's schedule of day and night activities begins to resemble a marathon after a couple of days.

At the end of that week, as I walked through the terminal of the airport in Austin preparing to board the plane back to San Francisco, it abruptly popped into my head: a three-dimensional matrix that captured all of my ideas. I waited patiently until we boarded the plane. As soon as I reached my seat, I pulled out a notebook and sketched it all out.

Upon my return to San Francisco, I was almost immediately laid up with an enervating head cold. I spent about a week sliding in and out of a fevered delirium. When I felt particularly lucid, I worked on turning my notebook sketch into a finished diagram that would fit neatly onto a letter-size piece of paper. I called it "The Elements of User Experience." Later I would hear about how, for many people, that title evoked memories of periodic tables and Strunk and White. Unfortunately, none of these associations was in my mind when I chose that title—I chose "elements" out of a thesaurus to replace the more awkward and technical-sounding "components."

On March 30, I posted the final product on the Web. (It's still there; you can find the original diagram at www.jjg.net/elements.pdf.) The diagram started getting some attention, first from Peter Merholz and Jeffrey Veen, who would later become my partners in Adaptive Path. Soon after, I spoke with more people about it at the first Information Architecture Summit. Eventually I started hearing from people all over the world about how they had used the diagram to educate their co-workers and to give their organizations a common vocabulary for discussing these issues.

In the year after it was first released, “The Elements of User Experience” was downloaded from my site more than 20,000 times. I began to hear about how it was being used in large organizations and tiny Web development groups to help them work and communicate more effectively. By this time, I was beginning to formulate the idea for a book that would address this need better than a single sheet of paper could.

Another March rolled around, and again I found myself in Austin for South by Southwest. There I met Michael Nolan of New Riders Publishing and told him my idea. He was enthusiastic about it, and fortunately, his bosses turned out to be as well.

Thus, as much by luck as by intent, this book found its way into your hands. I hope that what you do with the ideas presented here is as enlightening and rewarding for you as putting them together in this book has been for me.

Jesse James Garrett

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www.jjg.net/elements/