Critical Review of *Ambient Findability*

Jenny Olivera

Ambient Findability by Peter Morville

This book discusses wayfinding techniques as they relate to the emerging 21st century environment of ubiquitous digital connectivity, specifically with regards to finding and classifying information. Morville points out that along with a wealth of information, there is an "ensuing poverty of attention" (p. 45). While technology and available information have increased dramatically, our brains and behavior patterns are still essentially the same as they were 50,000 years ago; we're facing the information age with stone-age brains.

Morville begins by discussing media and information literacy, as well as establishing the importance of factoring in findability—the quality of being locatable or navigable, as well as the degree to which a system or environment supports navigation and retrieval— when designing a system or web site. Many companies don't look beyond web design to the core of what they're trying to do, which is distribute information. The second chapter is a brief history of wayfinding. The term wayfinding "originated in the context of . . . the built environment . . . to describe the role of maps, street numbers, directional signs, and other 'wayfinding' devices in cities" and has since been adopted to describe the behavior of both animals and humans in natural environments, and most recently has been "applied to the study of user behavior within digital information environments" (p. 17). The majority of the chapter is on wayfinding in non-digital environments, to establish the different types of wayfinding behaviors and their most likely origins.

Toward the end of the chapter Morville relates these behaviors to digital and virtual environments, citing examples of digital environments such as both text- and graphic-

based computer games, web sites, and the internet in general. He discusses briefly what sorts of environments work and what has failed, and why.

The next three chapters contain a significant amount of history and context, and spend time discussing the broader issue of the evolving technology for finding and keeping track of people and objects, the potential benefits and drawbacks of the technologies, as well as the ethical issues about usage. There is a lot in these chapters that does not directly relate to the structure or use of digital information. But while it might not seem relevant, its purpose is to establish a deeper understanding of the place virtual environments and information play in society, as well as how people react to certain designs and why.

Partway into chapter five, Morville starts focusing more directly on web interface design. Drawing on the context and background established in the previous chapters, he talks about the emotional responses users have to web sites, and why people respond better to well-designed sites regardless of the true quality of the content; credibility is linked with desirability (p. 110). He proposes the "user experience honeycomb," which lists seven key qualities that shape the user experience: useful, usable, desirable, findable, accessible, credible, and valuable (p. 108-109). These qualities can be looked at separately, but should also be considered as a whole, to understand the ways they interact both with each other and with the user.

The last two chapters discuss structures and networks, and systems for storing, tagging, and finding information, including taxonomies, hierarchies, metadata, and "folksonomies," which is a categorical structure development with an emergent thesaurus that is user-created from the bottom-up (p. 136). Morville points out that the lack of a

consistent structure and the imprecise nature of natural-language tagging makes

information on the web hard to find, which increases the importance of incorporating

findability in site design.

    Ambient Findability is not a clear, concise manual or reference guide on how to

design web site interfaces. Rather, it is discussion on why findability is important, and

why it is lacking in many sites. As stated in the prefix, it is designed to be "read in linear

style from start to end" (p. xii). It is well written in a casual, humorous style that is easy

to follow and understand.

Reference

Morville, P. (2005). *Ambient findability*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, Inc.