

Hasta Luego

by Stacy Surla, outgoing associate editor for information architecture

When I took over the job of editing this IA column four years ago, my selfish goal was to learn more about what interests me most, directly from the people whose work I most admire. I'm an inquisitive dilettante (as Heinrich Zimmer defines that notion) and proud of it. As one who takes delight in information architecture's obscure and thrilling connectivities, the column gave me a wonderful opportunity to commission a diverse collection of articles from authors and practitioners who are exploring the most thought-provoking domains in user experience.

I will no longer be the one petitioning these explorers for their articles, their trip reports from a still largely undiscovered country. Instead, to my deep pleasure, writer, teacher and speaker Thom Haller will carry on this work. Thom is himself a noted explorer, one who also takes delight in the field of IA, and a deeply gifted, Virgil-like guide who excels in introducing others to the venerable, yet future-facing, practice of making the complex clear.

Good night, then, and a thank you to everyone who enabled me to make this adventure – including Andrew Dillon who passed the scroll to me; Irene Travis who was a warm and ever-tolerant editor-in-chief; Dick Hill who is unfailingly supportive of all my ambitions; and the authors who gave so generously. See you later.

Stacy

Stacy Surla served as the *Bulletin's* associate editor for IA. She serves on the IA Institute Board of Directors and is a past chair of the IA Summit. She can be reached at stacy@greenfx.net.

Introduction from Thom

by Thom Haller, incoming associate editor for information architecture

I often think of myself as the man who is most likely to get lost in information. I have trouble finding my way across sentences, I expect my paragraphs to be well structured, I want document clarity and visible structure, I expect systems to be consistent and I anticipate good user experience.

Sometimes I'm disappointed. OK, often I'm disappointed. I become frustrated and grumpy. And I sometimes envy those of us who move through turgid prose and improbable structure without batting an eye. I am not among them. I stand with the humans who cannot understand the kiosk interface and cry out for plain language in government documents. Lots of challenges, but with them, great possibility. Obviously, we have a job to do.

How I Landed Here

I stepped into the job of making the complex clear 15 years ago. I recall standing at the top of an escalator at a communications conference in 1995. "I'm interested in information structure and visuals," I told my colleague. "But I'm also interested in how people process information and what they do with information. I think I'm a data stylist."

"No," he responded. "You're an information architect."

"Sounds cool," I thought.

My colleague directed me to books by Richard Saul Wurman who coined the term. "These are ideas I can use for improving my PRINT documents," I squealed (oblivious to the web world forming at the same time). But by 1999 business had embraced the web, Rosenfeld and Morville had released the Polar Bear Book and I was teaching an information architecture course – one more theoretical than its current day descendent.

It's as a teacher that I step into this column. As with my classes, I anticipate I will find I'm more frequently a learner than a pontificator. I hope I've learned from Andrew and Stacy before me and

Thom Haller, teacher, speaker, writer and user advocate, teaches principles of performance-based information architecture and usability. Since 1998, Thom has taught classes on architecting usable web/Intranet sites. As a teacher, Thom enables students to structure information so people can find it, use it and appreciate the experience. He can be reached at thom@thomhaller.com

that I can use this space to bring you current conversations in the IA and UX communities.

Passion for Foundation

Once, when chatting with Peter Meholtz, president/founding partner at Adaptive Path, Peter related how he liked that the field provided him with different speaking topics. “Really?” I replied. “I like how the field provides me with the same topics – it’s only the details that keep changing.” I long ago condensed the field into what I call eight Ps of information architecture:

1. *Performance* – What do users need or want to do in this information space? How do we measure successful performance?
2. *Perspective* – What is our focus? Are we focusing on who’s using the communication product, what they want from the product and their context?
3. *Product* – What technological choices best suit the needs of the users of this information?
4. *Presentation* – How can we visually structure information so people can accomplish what they want to accomplish (without becoming thwarted)?
5. *People* – Who is involved in this endeavor? Who will provide content and expertise? How do we build beneficial relationships?
6. *Politics* – How do conceptual barriers and organizational context keep us from meeting the needs of the site’s users?
7. *Process* – What is the framework we follow to develop this communication product?

8. *Possibility* – What are the ways we can respect and help users, while maintaining our focus on a site/product’s mission?

These questions have guided me for 11 years. They welcome differing opinions, and my job is to bring opinions, stories and synthesized research to you.

I Need Your Help for the Next Issue

Throughout my career, I have been fascinated by the idea of improving human (and organizational) performance – following the idea, “How can information structure help people do their jobs better?” Years ago, engineer Thomas Gilbert laid out the foundation for human performance thinking in his book *Human Competence*. He proposed “[i]mproving the information used by workers raises their measured performance substantially – never less than a 20% improvement, and sometimes as high as 600%.”

I have yet to see the studies that show me 600% improvement. But I believe the work we do is directed at this size organizational gains. I’d like to know what you think. What studies, summaries, stories and findings show the relationship between good architecture and accomplishment? I need your help for the next issue. Feel free to comment on any of my foundational questions – or let me know which ones I’ve missed.

Write me at [thom<at>thomhaller.com](mailto:thom@thomhaller.com).

P.S. As I step into this column I want to thank Stacy Surla for all her support and thank my frequent colleague Deborah Aker for supporting me with editorial counsel. ■