Where Am I Going?

Wayfinding best practices and guidelines

OVERVIEW

You can't find your linear algebra class on your first day of freshman year. You're 15 minutes late to little Sally's birth because you couldn't find your way out of the ER and into the maternity ward. You miss your connecting flight to Grandma's for Thanksgiving because you never quite knew which terminal was yours. You end up hiking eight miles, instead of the 2.5 you had planned, because the trail sign had no arrows. Wayfinding is an element of our everyday world. You might not even notice it—that is, until you get lost, miss an important event, and wonder what went wrong.

One underlying issue around wayfinding is a lack of general conventions and widely accepted rules. Even when there are guidelines for large centralized wayfinding systems—think government-issued road and parking signs—they can be extremely confusing and unhelpful. While guidelines around accessibility do exist, they aren't always clear.

> ## Wayfinding is an element of our everyday world. You might not even notice it—that is, until you get lost.

The challenges of wayfinding are best exemplified when traveling through multiple airports in a day. There are no unifying elements that standardize wayfinding from airport to airport. When you leave Logan International Airport in Boston, the gate number indicators, flight status boards, and rideshare pickup points appear a certain way. They might look completely different once you arrive at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. In unfamiliar, fast-paced, high-stakes environments such as airports, you do not want to be confused about the location of your connecting flight. Good wayfinding can help lower the stress of being in an unfamiliar environment.

Historically, the word "wayfinding" referred to the physical act of travelers finding routes, often hidden and unmarked, as they crossed land and sea. As time went on, the "natural" environment slowly became a highly complex "built" environment. A crafted set of navigational skills was slowly replaced by well-traveled paths and local knowhow; then came roads, street signs, and urban landmarks. Today, the ubiquitous smartphone has placed a map in each and every one of our pockets, ready to guide us wherever our

fingers swipe and click. What does this evolution mean for wayfinding today? Well, a lot.

But there does exist a concern in the realm of digital wayfinding. The fear: an overly digital, device-reliant, a-contextual wayfinding and navigation system will lead users to an absent-minded, passive interaction with the environment around them. This form of "wayfinding" is antithetical to the sort of enriching, human-centered wayfinding we should promote.

> ## Wayfinding is fundamentally about the human experience.

Instead of understanding wayfinding as a series of signs, an app, or simply a map, we should instead understand it as an entire cognitive and social experience. Wayfinding almost always occurs in a public, social environment, involving passive and active interaction with passersby, as well as a passive interaction with the stakeholder(s) controlling or having an interest in the path of travel. Wayfinding is fundamentally about the human experience.

It is important to keep accessibility in mind when designing a wayfinding system. Because of the typically wide user base, wayfinding systems run a high risk of being exclusionary. It can involve not only a differene in age and height, but eyesight, language spoken, technological literacy, but a litany of other factors. And these factors only speak to the user's ability to interact with a system. We also have to consider what a user might want and/or need here.

With this in mind, we have outlined three pillars for an effective wayfinding system. First, it is important to provide consistent information by maintaining a consistent visual language (use of color, text, etc.). Offering multiple communications reassures the guest that the information is accurate. Second, it is essential to provide timely and contextual information by keeping signage and information simple, telling guests only what they need to know, when they need to know it, and avoiding information overload. Third, a proper wayfinding system will employ both digital and physical elements to accentuate their positive qualities and mask their downsides.
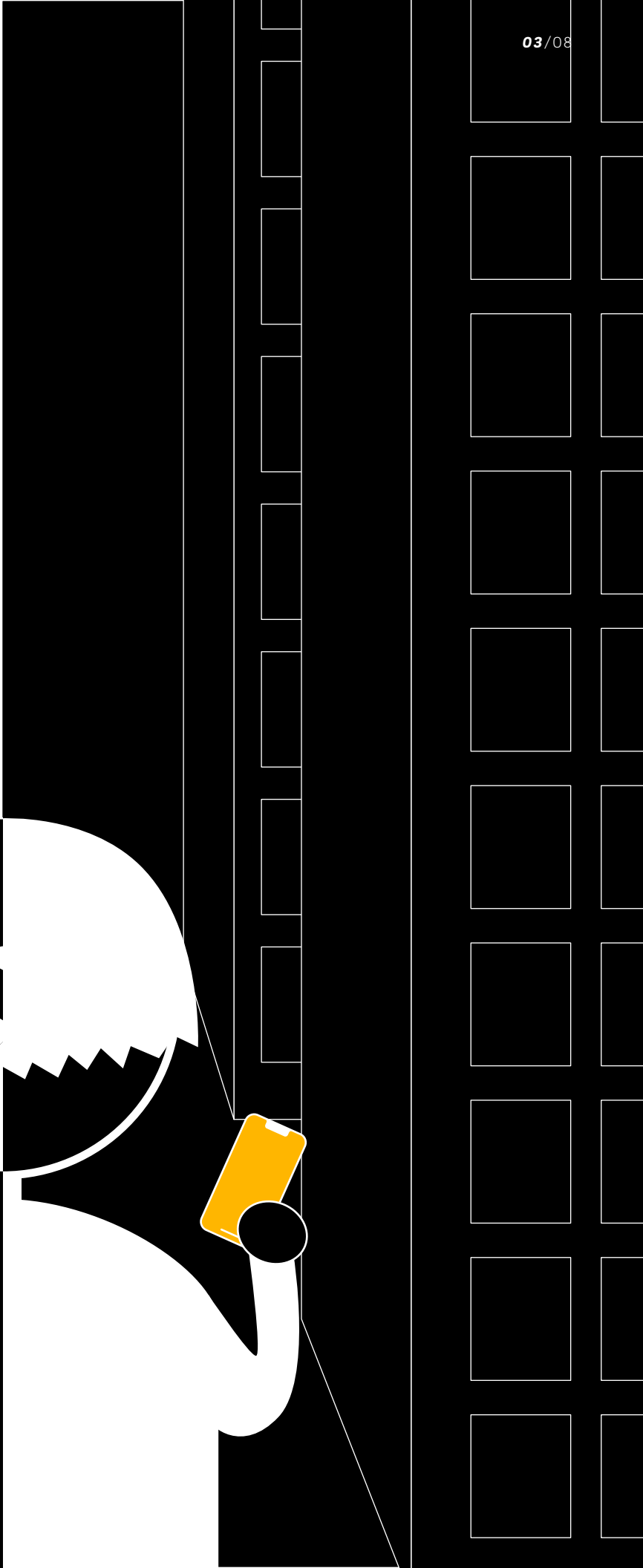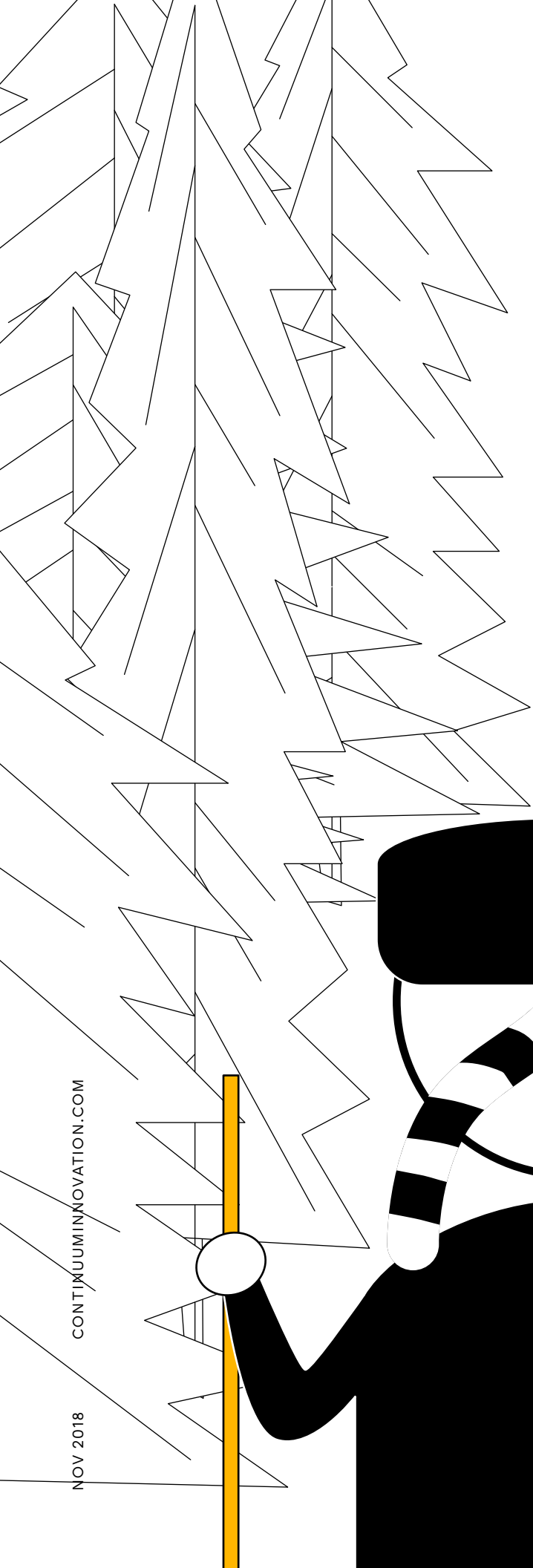
01. CONSISTENT INFORMATION

Maintaining a consistent visual language (use of color, text, etc.) and providing multiple communications reassures the user that the information is accurate.

VISUAL LANGUAGE

Any wayfinding information, whether digital or physical, should employ a consistent vocabulary and tone in order to unify the entire system as a whole. The language guidelines should include both the necessary terms and the way they should be used (for example, color should be used to mean the same thing at each instance).

Some areas to focus on:
- Consistent naming of rooms and events
- Consistent use of color
- Consistent font use and sizing
- Consistent design hierarchy and layout of similar information types

INFORMATION ASSURANCE

Keeping information consistent across all signage and platforms, as well as repeating information in multiple locations, helps to reassure the guest that they are recieving accurate and up-to-date information.
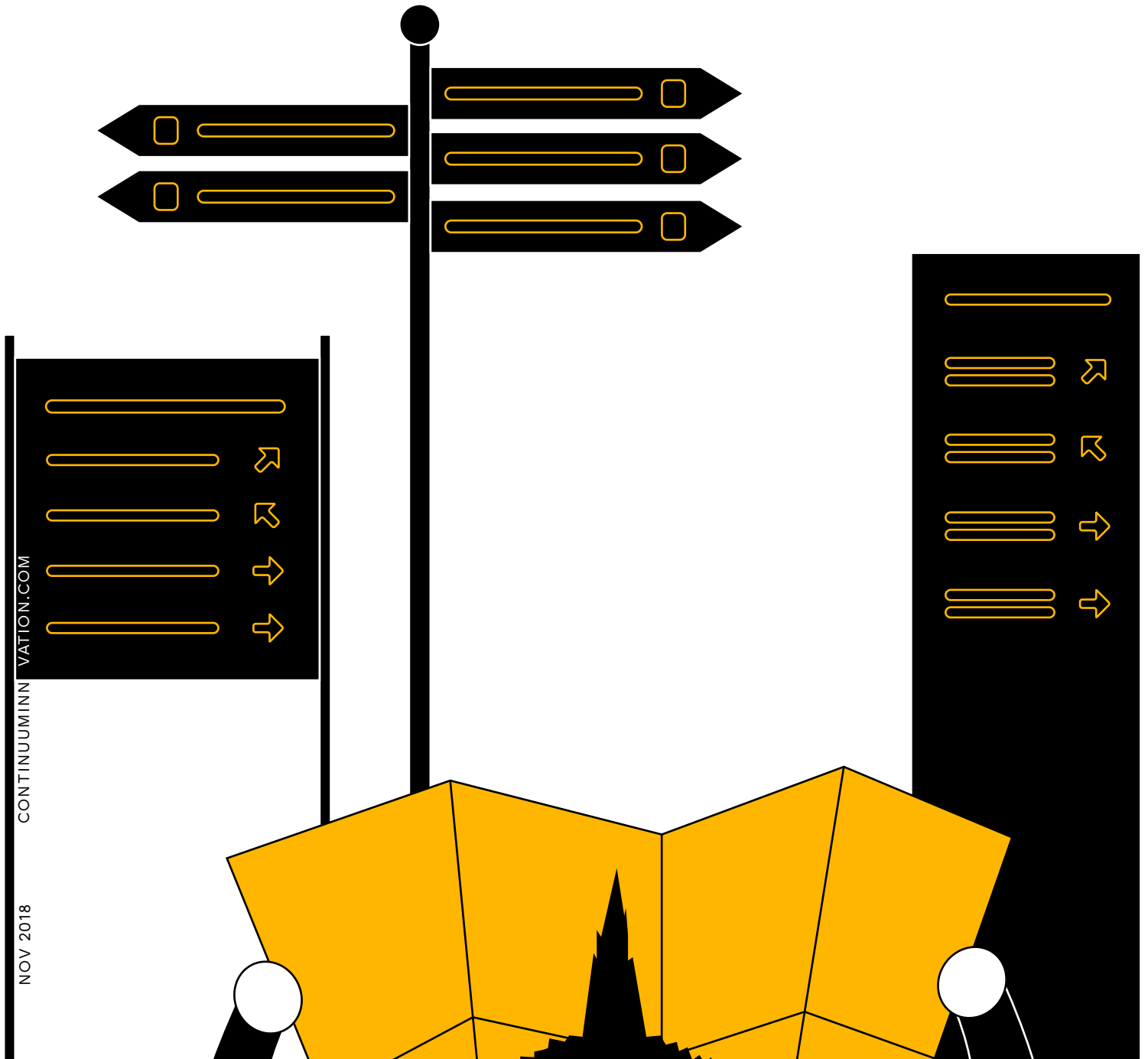
02. TIMELY, CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

Keep signage and information simple, telling users only what they need to know, when they need to know it, avoiding information overload.

THREE KEYS

Effective wayfinding should: [1] inform the users where they are; [2] educate them on where they can go; [3] and effectively direct them to a specific location.

PATHS, MARKERS, NODES

Information should be clustered around central nodes that multiple pathways lead to and from. Markers are clearly identifiable locations that help orient guests to where they are. They should always be consistently labled.

RHYTHM

Creating a repetition or rhythm to the wayfinding should allow more intuitive interaction with the system, providing the user with an opportunity to create a mental map of the built environment and move with confidence.
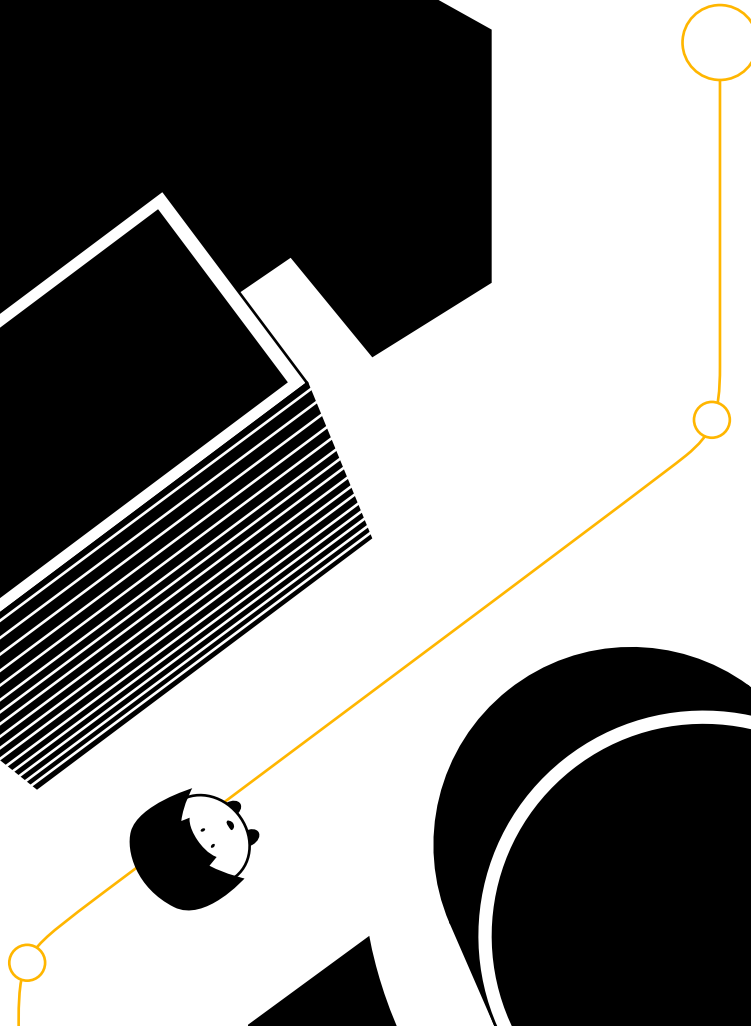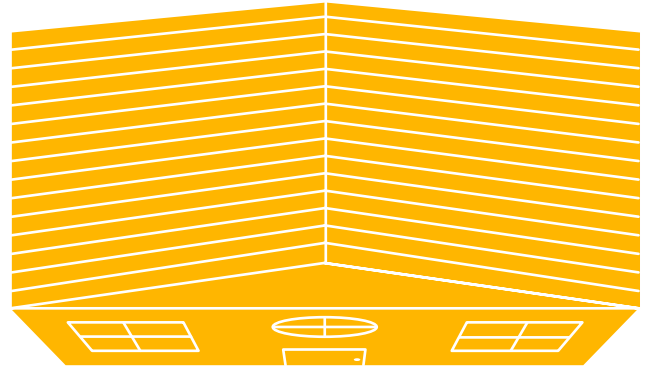
03. THE DIGITAL PHYSICAL MIX

Both digital and physical methods of communication have great benefits; however, they also have downsides. Using them together creates an optimal guest experience.

FAIL SAFE

Utilizing both digital and physical wayfinding elements within the same system provides proper redundancy, to reassure users and to protect them from failure, in the event of technical problem with either piece of the system. This also helps maintain a level of accessibility for a diverse group of users across the system.

DIGITAL

Digital systems are great for timely, personalized information, while physical signs are always static. Digital screens and mobile apps can be location aware and updated constantly while users are moving about a large space. Digital wayfinding can be packed with much more secondary information for users to go through at their leisure, reducing in-the-moment stress and panic.

PHYSICAL

Physical signage is more universal and approachable than digital. Glancing up at a sign can be much less cumbersome than constantly looking down at your phone, when your hands are full with three kids and twice as many bags in an airport. It is also typically more fail proof than digital signage in the event of an emergency.

THE MIX

Employing digital and physical systems allows for a better hierarchical differentiation between the different types of information. We suggest using physical signage for high-level navigation and digital for more detailed, personalized event information.
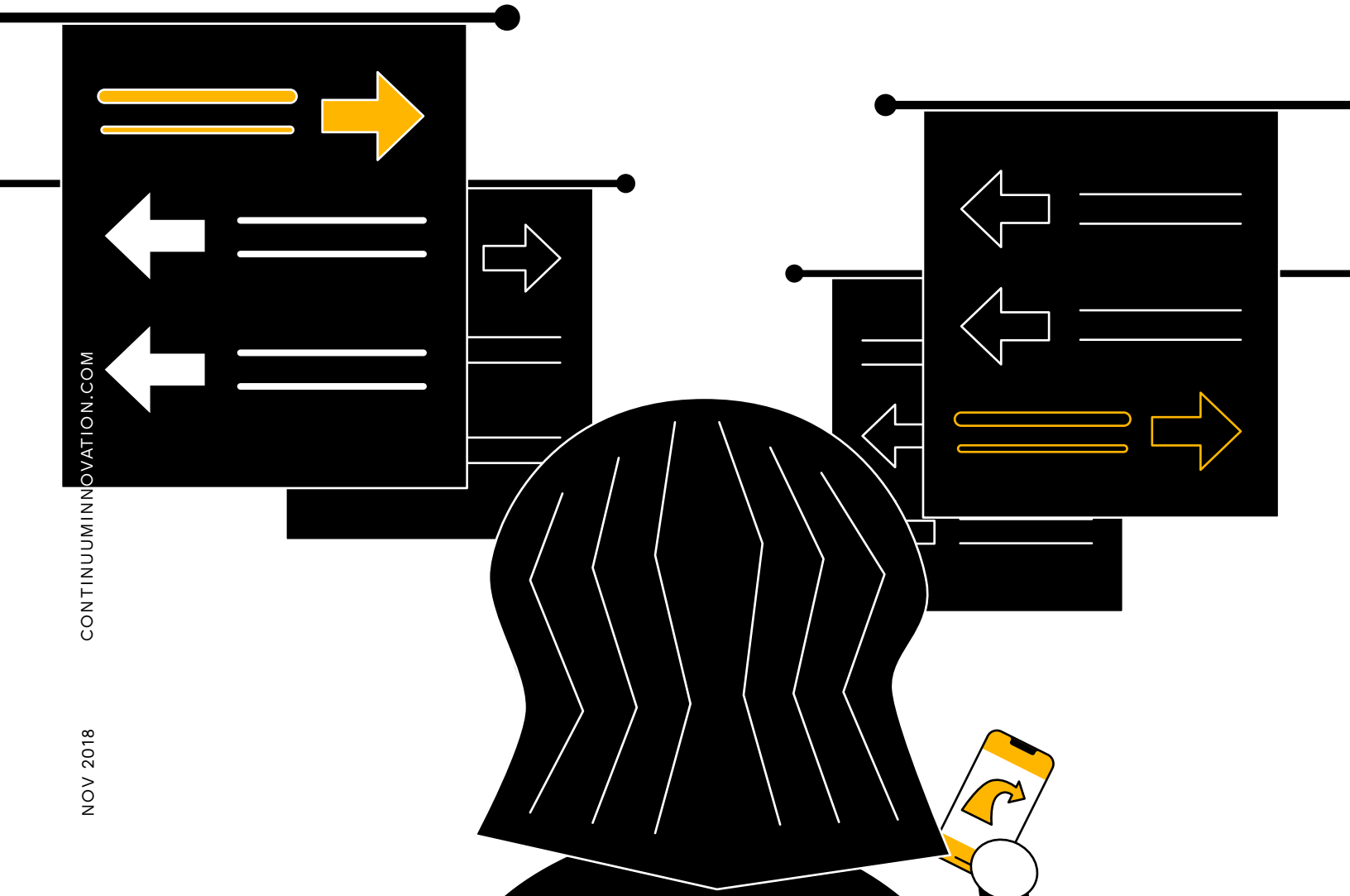
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