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# What on earth is what3words?

It sounds odd but it is changing how people find their way

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Chris Sheldrick, the co-founder of what3words, found this to his cost in 2013. At the time, he was running a business providing the music for events such as weddings in venues such as pretty, rural villas. But the problem with pretty, rural villas is that they tend to be quite hard to find. Street numbers work only if there are streets. Postcodes cover vast areas of the countryside. And in much of the world there is no formal address system at all.

Mr Sheldrick took to giving directions in latitude and longitude. Then at an event in Italy, a lorry drove to N 42.804509, E 12.683829 rather than N 41.804509, E 12.683829. The difference in numbers was tiny: a single digit. The difference to Mr Sheldrick was vast: his sound system was two hours north, rather than somewhere east of Rome. He realised that any good location system must be “really simple”.

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If the idea is simple, choosing the 40,000 words needed is not. What3words employs linguists who manually go through each country's dictionary, removing rude words lest they offend ("bottom" appears in the English version but not "bum") and homophones lest they confuse (English loses "sun" and "son"). Complicated words are not removed entirely but do tend to be exiled to less populous places ("dodecahedron", says Mr Sheldrick, often ends up in the ocean).