WAP

Designing for Small User Interfaces

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INTRODUCTION

Current and upcoming WAP-capable mobile phones introduce new user interfaces where standard methods for application design often fail. Automated translation of HTML to WML produces screen layouts and input mechanisms that are often not useable on a mobile phone.

WAP-DEVICES

An increasing number of WAP devices become available today. In contrast to desktop machines these devices do not form a homogeneous platform in terms of UI and usage.

User Interfaces

WAP devices have a variety of interfaces; output can be displayed as text, formatted text, or graphics. Input is provided by touch screens and/or buttons.

Displays are in general much smaller than that on PCs, however the size varies very much.

This large differences in screen space makes it almost impossible to design an application so that it fits all WAP-devices.

The input mechanisms provided by WAP-devices are not coherent either. PDA like devices offer point and click on a touch screen whereas most phones rely on a set of buttons. Link navigation with a button interface however is more difficult than point and click. Scrolling up and down is supported very well on most devices whereas often the display width is fixed and no left right scrolling is provided. Text input is difficult and time consuming on most phone-sized devices, whereas inputting numbers is supported very well and users are accustomed to that.

Applications

PDA like devices as well as phones offer a number of applications beyond phoning, such as messaging, calculator, address book, and games. For these applications, and to some extent even for phoning, the usage of devices from different manufactures (or even for different models of one manufacturer) does not follow the same rules.

DESIGNING

From our experience in developing WAP-applications we derived a set of guidelines for the development of WAP-applications.

General Issues

The first and most important matter is to *identify the benefits for bringing an application to the WAP platform*. Supporting these benefits must be the prime goal of the application development.

The navigation space and implied interaction with the application should be reflected in the structure of decks and cards in the implementation. Wherever possible provide a maximal navigation space within one deck to avoid reloading during navigation.

Input Design

Most current phones are optimized inputting numbers rather than text. Also direct point and click, as known from PDAs and PCs, is typically not given. Based on this the following recommendations for input design should be considered:

- use *numbers for input* when ever possible
- use *common abbreviations* like country codes
- if letters are used keep the input mechanisms in mind, e.g. *prefer first letter on key*
- *offer choices* or *default values* when applicable; even longer link list prove useable because of scrolling
- *provide labels to hardware* buttons were possible
- *use standard conventions* on buttons (e.g. back)

One basic issue is to reduce the need for user input as much as possible. Here customization of applications for the user provides one way. Also the cooperation between desktop interfaces and WAP-devices can be beneficial.

Output Design

Displays on mobile phones are in general rather small and provide only a low resolution and color depth. Thus, reading of larger texts is rather difficult whereas the display of small information chunks is much better.

- assess the screen size and quality of the target devices with text and graphics
- reduce the output by customizing to the users need
- design information chunks that are seen at once on the screen, larger text blocks (more than 20 words!) within on card should be structured
- horizontal scrolling is easy on most devices, vertical is not! use multiple cards in one deck instead of very large cards or multiple decks

Figure 2

PERSONAL WAP - A CASE STUDY

Within the project *Personal WAP* we investigate the reduction of user interaction in WAP applications by providing users with a personalized WAP portal.

During our WAP usability studies we found inputting text, e.g. setting bookmarks on a phone, very inconvenient – but nevertheless we found it important to have a hotlist of links easy accessible and maintainable. In addition, we wanted to have mechanism to filter information both, personal and situation specific. Finally, we wanted to have access to short personal notes (e.g. an address, a shopping list, etc.) when leaving the office or home (a ”WAP PostIt”).

The solution consists of two interfaces - one for a standard Web browser and one for a WAP phone.

The Web Interface

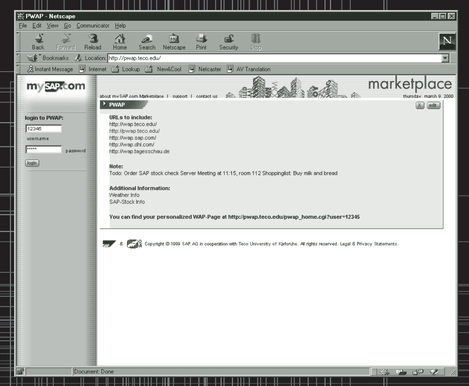
A Web service where the user is identified by his phone number, access is granted by using a password. On this page the user can input links, news items, and notes that should be available on his personal WAP portal (Figure 1).

The WAP Interface

The WML deck which represents the personal WAP portal is generated from the information edited on the Web interface. The WAP URL to the personal WAP portal is fixed, whereas the content of the WML deck is dynamically generated. As the management of the WAP portal takes place on the Web interface, no tedious bookmark management on the phone is needed (Figure 1).

CONCLUSION

WAP applications require a new technique for user interface design. Prime design guideline is minimal user interaction during input and output. Suggested techniques for output reduction are WAP specific presentation as well as user driven Web based customization.



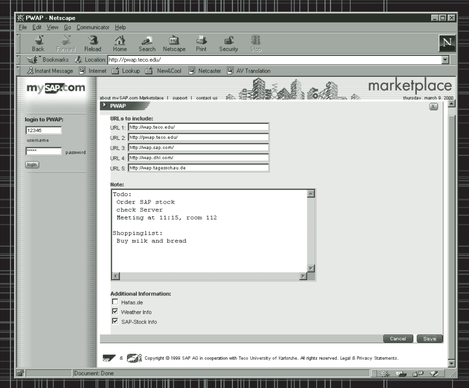


Figure 1