DESIGN ISSUES FOR ONLINE MESSAGES

(Abstract)

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User assistance is a diverse and growing area of investigation. Designing of on-line help messages is of the topics which have been discussed most in the literature. Over the years quite a few approaches have been tried to define and analyze on-line help systems. As yet, there is no common agreement between system designers about what help is and what it should consist of. The variations reflected in existing definitions indicate the various experience and understanding people have had with many interactive computer systems. They also suggest that information actually provided in response to the user's request for help varies greatly from system to system.

The error message generation system and the on-line help message system are closely allied. Quite often the need for help information arises when the user is presented with an error message which he or she does not understand and the user turns to the help for further assistance. It is possible to design help features into the error handling component of a system or even to integrate these two functions into one single system. Both types of messages provide guidance to users and the content of information is critical to their success.

Designing an effective assistance program to provide appropriate messages to users is a complex process. There are many alternatives to consider and many trade-off decisions to be made. Major design issues include: what kind of assistance messages to provide (static versus dynamic); how much information to provide (levels of assistance); how to provide the messages (approaches of presenting information); how messages are accessed (access initiative, access mechanisms, access complexity); how messages should be presented physically (such as presentation methods, text quality). There are also many implementation alternatives such as what is the information source (pre-designed versus generated-on-the-fly), data structure (integrated versus non-integrated), etc. There can be many combinations of these alternatives and significant differences in the kind of assistance information each type can provide. As a consequence, there might be a big difference in the design time and efforts required for each.

Being aware of these design issues does not imply that we understand them well.

Systematic investigation is needed to find out which factors affect the usefulness of the assistance program.

On the one hand, we need to further our research in exploring and applying artificial intelligence techniques; on the other hand, and more practically, we need to really understand these design issues and apply them into future design so that messages provided will be more usable.