Traditional vs. Pull-Down Menus

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INTRODUCTION

Human interactions with computers are often via menus, and “in order to make information retrieval more efficient, it is necessary that indexes, menus and links be carefully designed” (Zaphris, Shneiderman, & Norman, 2002, p. 201). There are a number of alternatives to menus, such as icons, question-and-answer formats, and dynamic lists, but most graphical user interfaces are almost entirely menu-driven (Hall & Bescos, 1995). Menu systems have many advantages. For example, Norman (1991) identified low memory load, ease of learning and use, and reduced error rates as advantages of menu-driven interfaces. They frequently form the main part of a WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) interface, providing most of the functionality in the more common operating systems such as Microsoft Windows. Consequently, familiarity also can be added to the list of advantages of menu-driven interfaces. These aspects are particularly important when considering public-access technologies, where individuals from across the population exhibiting a range of ages, skills, and experience levels will attempt to use the systems. Further, training or the opportunities for training will be minimal and, most likely, non-existent.

BACKGROUND

Two main types of menu designs are commonly found: traditional and pull-down. Traditional menus occupy the whole screen. Secondary and further menu levels also appear and, again, take up the whole screen. Once the final option choice has been taken, the screen is cleared for work. This type of menu is common in public access technologies such as cash points and multimedia information kiosks. Traditional menus are thought to be easier for first-time/novice users, because they are explicit in terms of operation. This is in contrast to pull-down menus, where operation is usually via a mouse or the enter and cursor keys. Pull-down menus have an initial main menu in the form of a bar at the top of the screen from which further lists of options may be seen and selected, thus leaving the majority of the remaining screen area for other purposes. This comprises their primary advantage: the user is able to stay in the same workspace/screen. However, this form of cascading menu hides information until the user activates the menu item, which can be viewed as a disadvantage (Walker, 2000). Pull-down menus form the main method for option selection in the most commonly available packages from Microsoft and Macintosh. There are a number of variations of pull-down menus. For example, horizontal and vertical menus (Dong & Salvendy, 1999) and split and folded menus (Straub, 2004). Split menus present frequently accessed items at the top of the menu, while folded menus give the high frequency items first and on their own. After a short delay, the complete menu appears.

The comparison of traditional and pull-down menu types has been a somewhat neglected area, with much work focusing on the comparison of menus with other styles of interface, such as command languages (Mahach, Boehm-Davis & Holt, 1995). As a further example, Benbasat and Todd (1993) compared icons with text and direct manipulation with menus. Direct manipulation was defined in this context as the “physical manipulation of a system of interrelated objects which are analogous to objects found in the real world” (Benbasat & Todd, 1993, p. 375). These objects are usually represented as icons. Benbasat and Todd (1993) found no differ-

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