Chapter I

Portals, Portals Everywhere

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Abstract

In general terms a portal is just a gateway, and a Web portal can be seen as a gateway to the information and services on the Web. This chapter explores the definition of the word “portal” and attempts a categorisation of the various types of Web portals. It outlines some of the many uses for portals and shows that the portal concept is equally useful for accessing corporate intranets as for the public Internet. In conclusion the chapter looks at the proposition that the portal is dead and finds that any announcement to this effect is very much premature. Portals are everywhere and are likely to grow to even greater importance in the future.

Introduction

Kate and Leopold (in the film of the same name) travelled through a time portal from the 1800s, and the exploration team in the television series
Stargate SG-1 travels to the other side of the universe using a portal. The word “portal” has been around for many years and was even referred to in 1595 by Shakespeare in Richard II (Act 3, Scene 3): “See, see, King Richard doth himself appear, as doth the blushing discontented sun from out the fiery portal of the east.” In its simplest form the word “portal” just means a gateway, but often a gateway to somewhere quite different than just the next room or street. The Oxford Reference Dictionary (Pearsall & Trumble, 1996) defines a portal as: “a doorway or gate, etc., especially a large and elaborate one.” In this sense we could, perhaps, refer to the Great Portal of Kiev (Mussorgsky) or to the Pearly Portal. In this chapter, however, we are referring much more specifically to Web portals.

The term “Web portal” is overused and difficult to define precisely. In the 15 other chapters of this book each of the authors has provided their own definition of this term, from their own perspective. Many of the definitions are similar, but some definitions are able to provide a little more insight into the use of Web portals.

A colleague from my academic department at Victoria University says that there is nothing new about portals, and in this he is both partially right and completely wrong. A simple definition sees a Web portal as a special Web site designed to act as a gateway to give convenient access to other sites. In a sense there is nothing new about this as Web sites have contained hyperlinks to other sites since the Web’s inception. What is new is the way that these special Web sites are now being used to facilitate access to other sites that may be closely related, in the case of special purpose portals, or quite diverse, in the case of general portals. What is also new is that the marketers have discovered the portal concept and its advertising potential.

Portals, Portals Everywhere

A Google search of the Web in December 2003 revealed 35.6 million entries for the word “portal”. Even allowing for a considerable degree of overuse and overlap, portals are seen everywhere, and it would be difficult to make any use of the Web without encountering one. Portals also span a bewildering range of topics and interest areas, a small sample of which is provided below.

There are government portals such as: www.gouv.qc.ca (Québec), www.ukonline.gov.uk (UK), www.vic.gov.au (Victoria), www.firstgov.gov
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