Comparing Portals and Web Pages

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INTRODUCTION

Just how do Web pages and portals differ? A fair question, since both have common characteristics. However, important differences can be drawn. The purposes of this chapter are to (a) provide a basic background of both Web pages and portals, (b) compare the structure of Web pages with the infrastructure of portals, and (c) point out future trends for each.

BACKGROUND

A Web page (WP) is a document written in HTML or XHTML language and placed on the World Wide Web through a unique and rather permanent address called the uniform resource locator or URL. A Web page can be either a single page, or be combined with other Web pages, nested one inside the other. These multiple Web pages, once created by using frames (F), are increasingly being created through the use of cascading style sheets (CSS). These enhancements allow users to navigate content on other Web pages while remaining on the initial page. Web pages contain navigation links (NL) to other Web sites and are viewed through Web browsers. Web pages can also contain elements that can be seen (graphics and images) and cannot be seen (scripts, meta tags). A Web site (WS) is physically located on a Web server as a collection of Web pages stored in hierarchical folders. Users move from page to page through use of these navigation links, navigation bars, or hyper links (HL) to view additional pages. Even so, Web pages are relatively flat or static when compared to the more functional and complex portal.

A portal (P), is a Web site that serves as a gateway to other resources (Internet or intranet). These resources provide the user with enhanced capabilities through the use of distributed means—computers, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and cell phones. Therefore, some would argue that the portal is nothing new, but yet another type of Web page. Others (Tatnall, 2005) argue that portals are more than Web pages. At the very least, portals are enhanced versions—powerful improvements—along the evolutionary development of the simple Web page.

Portals have proliferated. Tatnall (2005) describes attempts to categorize them and provides a list of major types: (a) general portals, (b) vertical industry portals, (c) horizontal industry portals, (d) community portals, (e) enterprise information portals, (f) e-market place portals, (g) personal/mobile portals, (h) informational portals, and (i) specialized or niche portals. While some have proclaimed the death of the portal (Online Publishing News, 1999), others (White, 2003) write about portal metamorphosis, an evolving transformation of the simple Web page in response to user needs.

STRUCTURE OF THE WEB PAGE

Web pages of all kinds are created by using an HTML suffix and HTML commands inside a text file. Each of the tags are located inside right and left angle brackets (< >). Most HTML tags are used in pairs with the end tag leading with a forward slash (<HTML/></HTML>) signaling the end of the specific formatting style.

The basic parts of a Web page are created by using HTML tags include the head (<head></head>), title (<title></title>), and body (<body></body>). Additional tags provide for extra spaces (&nbsp;) or page breaks (<br>), extra spaces between paragraphs (<P>), or font that is bolded (<b></b>). Some require ending tags other do not.

Additional tags can be used to add background color (<bgcolor = #XXXXXX>), or a texture file background (<body background = "filename.gif">). HTML coding is used to create additional functionality on Web pages. There are special email HTML tags that help users send email messages from a Web page. Other tags provide Web page designers with the use of FRAMES—a design structure that lets users stay on the main page and navigate to other pages within that home page.

HTML language provides the tools that designers use to create the basic structure of a Web page—a home page and all attached pages. These pages provide (a) sequences, (b) hierarchies, or (c) webs of related pages. The user navigates through the Web Site to find and review information put there by Web designers.

Typically, Web pages contain the following sections: (a) menus and sub-sites, (b) resource lists or other related sites, (c) site maps or guides, (d) search features, and contact information for page designers or owners. Well designed Web pages are constructed with the user in mind. This concern for the user led to the development of more and more complicated Web sites, and eventually to the development of Web portals—the natural evolution of the simple Web page.