User Experience Panel
OpenOffice.org Conference 2003
Friday, March 21, 2003

Notes and Abridged Transcript

Panel: Lutz Höger, Christian Jansen, Matthias Müller-Prove, Nick Richards

Notes

by Elizabeth Matthis (Liz) <elizabeth.matthis@sun.com>

Participants: 42 total; of which 12 were developers and 9 were user interface designers (including panel)

The panel asked for input from the OO.o Community on usability of the OpenOffice.org/StarOffice office productivity suite. This is a collection of the suggestions made by the participants in the order they were made.

– Make it clear what the differences are between MS Office and OO.o/StarOffice (i.e. the new concepts of functionality); "educate the user".

– Make the Style concept easier to use.

– Provide a list of MS terms in the Help to show the user where to find the same tool/function in OO.o/SO (that has a different name than in MS Office).

– Provide the option to "run like MS Office".

– Allow key shortcuts to be set up like MS Office or Word Perfect, e.g. "profiles".

– Maintain a distinct identity and don't give users something similar to MS Office: it's easier for users to come to terms with a definitely different product than to be teased into thinking the product is a clone and then discouraged when it isn't.

– Provide tutorials for switching from other products.

– Make the product sooooo easy to use (intuitive) that the users don't need re-training or to read the Help---i.e. make it less complex.

  – Idea: The OO.o community could come up with user profiles to use in creation of slimmed-down special modes/versions of OO.o/SO. For example, create a mode for publishers in which hard-formatting in hidden so the writers are forced to use Styles, which publishers require.

– Matthias Mueller-Prove suggested that there be a 'usability forum' on OO.o

– Allow users to get used to the new-to-them product in a "2-step phase" where for the first 2 1/2 weeks they have to struggle a bit but get help every now and then; after that...? [sorry couldn't follow this to write it down, Liz]

– Utilize Gareth Jones' suggestions for changing the menu structure. (http://modena.intergate.ca/personal/gslj/OOoMenus.html)

– Do something like the File-Open dialog from KDE. (They did their own usability research before creating it.)

– Make the functionality the same throughout the product, i.e. across all applications within the office suite. For example, make the header functionality the same in Calc and Writer.

– Post the internal ToDo-list for usability on the OO.o website so that college students looking for topics for their theses can take on projects and help----this would benefit everyone.

Transcript

by Matthias Müller-Prove <mprove@sun.com>

This abridged transcript follows the recorded audio files. They are available at http://marketing.openoffice.org/conference/friday.html

Matthias: intro

Lutz: provoking thesis: open source software is not usable.

Matthias: MS Office is just a step. We have to face the competition, sure, but have to build on top of that

Audience: different concepts in MS and OOo are a problem for new users. e.g. how do these damn styles work? You have to make clear that some things work differently.

Matthias: in user interface design it is very dangerous to have something which looks similar but which under the hood is not.

Audience: Figaro Project, users don't like to work as strong as needed for publishing process. They mess with styles and therefore the tags are not set properly. How cab we

enforce the user to use the correct styles?

Audience: When the time has come the user is ready to learn new things. Negative pressure is the only way to make the users comply to the rules.

Audience: functionality is similar between MS and OOo, but the menu structure is very different. Another example, there is no hint that the DataPilot in OOo is the same as MS's PivotTable. Give MS users a good first impression!

Audience: the best thing to do for OOo: maintain an individual distinct identity. Rely on the soft pressure of working with a better attitude. They should make the move to OOo consciously. I see two groups making the switch. People who do not what to spent the money anymore. And second, people, who are sick of using MS, they want their job done and don't care for similarities with MS Office.

Lutz: Let me put on my Sun hat for a moment. I met with customers and asked, why do you take a look at OOo/StarOffice? Answer is cost. But what does cost consist of? 10%-20% is licensing cost, 40% is migration cost, 40% retraining users. Usability is in this case leveraging the existing knowledge of people. 95% of the existing user knowledge in the market is the MS Office experience. Question is, how do we improve the usability, how do we lower the retraining costs of StarOffice by not making it a clone? By accepting their needs to be similar to MS. How do we leverage the existing knowledge? And how do we do this as a community?

Audience: making OOo less complex will improve usability

Nick: if you want a simple office suite use >AbiWord.

Matthias: let's focus the OpenOffice community on usability issues

Audience: let me propose a 2-phase model. First is the expectation phase. The MS Office user comes to OOo and tries to operate OOo. When he encounters problems the second phase kicks in -- after about 2 weeks of use. Then a few tips help them to go ahead. People will make the transition if you give them a little time.

Audience: >Gareth Jones proposed a new menu structure. I am wondering how much of this goes back into the usabiltiy team?

Matthias: Yes, this is a perfect example how cooperation between the community and the User Experience team can work. We all know Gareth' paper and like to start the dicussion.

Lutz: I am scared by open source projects that everyone thinks that usability is what he likes best. It is not. Another point, on Gnome mailing lists they discuss the nth incarnation of the File Open dialog. They never come to an end.

Audience: users have different cultural background, different state of knowledge. That makes it so difficult to give the ultimate answer to the best File Open dialog.

Lutz: Why is it so hard that proposals concerning the user go into the product? Because there is no forum so far.

Nick: It also takes a long time to get things into the product.

Lutz: e.g. accessibility took 2 years. Many interdependencies between the OOo modules

make things complicated too.

Audience: What are your plans to improve the visual qualities of the product?

Christian: We plan a new toolkit to use native controls in the future.

Nick: Usability is not just the graphical user interface. It is about the entire experience.

Audience: ...

Lutz: Users don't care about the number of executables. They care about startup performance and memory footprint.

Audience: There seems to be a lot on your internal lists. Why not put more details behind and publish it on the web. There are a lot of smart guys in colleges that can help the community effort.

Christian: We will communicate specifications to the public and start an OpenOffice forum on usability soon.

Nick: The web site >marketing.openoffice.org may serve as an initial point of information.

Matthias: Thank you very much for attending this session.

Short Biographies

Lutz Höger n/a

Christian Jansen has held a position on the StarOffice User Experience team for over 4 years. As a member of this user experience team at Sun Microsystems, he plays a major role in the product design of StarOffice. His responsibilities include designing and specifying the graphical user interface and the functionality behind it and in so doing, addressing easy-to-use-interface needs. Specific areas include color schemes and accessibility considerations. He holds a degree in Communication Design from the 'Hamburger Akademie für Kommunikationsdesign und Art Direction' (Hamburg Academy for Communication Design and Art Direction).

Matthias Müller-Prove is a creative computer scientist. His reputation as a first-class human-computer interaction expert is based on nine years of direct experience designing professional software interfaces for international operating companies. Before joining the StarOffice User Experience team at Sun Microsystems, he played a significant role in designing the user interface of Adobe GoLive. He holds a degree from University of Hamburg (Dipl.-Inform.) and is member of the usability professionals' association upa and ACM/SIGCHI.

Nick Richards is the Marketing Project Lead at OpenOffice.org. This means he gets in the way of programmers, asks lots of questions and talks too much. He is in the final year of a History degree at King's College London.