



Usability Testing Virtual Margins: Supporting People's Remembering

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There Is Something Missing

Web based interfaces are lacking something that paper based interfaces have had for centuries. What is amazing is that the first web browsers had it. But it has been lost. You have probably printed out web pages in order to compensate for this missing feature.

Problem: We Need Space In Which To Think

How do I know what I think until I see what I say?
-- Edward Morgan Forster

Web documents have no provision for annotations. Specifically there is no margin in which a reader can put comments. A margin allows recording transient thoughts, reminders, and supports the development of nascent ideas.

What Do We Gain? What Do We Lose?

By adding a writeable margin to web pages we gain the ability to record thoughts and ideas in the context which inspired them. We gain the ability to talk to ourselves about what we read without the implications of sharing the thoughts with others.

We lose some screen real estate and make the browser interface more complex.

What Might It Look Like?

The virtual margin is envisioned as a simple and convenient way for people to record their thoughts and impressions in a private context relevant location with a very low threshold of use. The goal is for the virtual margin to require no conscious effort. The person's focus remains on the page content and their own thoughts.



Interaction

The virtual margin is implemented as a writeable area on the right side of the page content. The margin extends the full height of the browser window. At the bottom are some buttons to provide simple formatting controls. The reader can make notes in the margin simply by clicking once in the margin area and typing. The margin notes are automatically saved before transitioning to the next page. The contents are automatically restored when the page is redisplayed.

Summary of Previous Study

Four education graduate students used an earlier version of the virtual margin in a study which compared two different presentations. The choice of presentation turned out to be unimportant. The participants wanted more functionality.

Proposed New Study

Education graduate students from two cohorts (2004 and 2005) review postings from one of their Knowledge Forum discussions and compose their best contribution to the discussion.

The study is to take place during June in the Centre for Education Technologies at Simon Fraser University.

The virtual margin re-enables a document feature that has been lost in the transition from paper to web based documents. This study will investigate whether the virtual margin is something that would be useful to add to the Knowledge Forum interface and assesses the usability of one means for doing that. The study has been designed to minimize the differences between the pre- and post-virtual margin environments. So the results should be indicative of how useful the virtual margin would be in a real knowledge building environment.

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