

Constructing a Groupware Pattern Language

Positionpaper for EuroPLoP 2002 Focus Group: What makes Pattern Languages work well?

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ABSTRACT

This position paper provides an overview on our approach for creating a groupware pattern language. We show, how interested authors can provide patterns and present an authoring environment, which guides the authors through the process of writing a pattern. Finally, we outline, how the use of discussion groups may contribute to the groupware pattern language.

MOTIVATION

Having worked in an interdisciplinary team that develops and evaluates groupware, we encountered problems when a new member joined the division or a guest researcher participated: the language that is used by the CSCW community seems to contain contradictions or differing definitions of the same terms. We see the need for a common language between all participating parties: Groupware developers, who construct new software systems, groupware tailors, a special kind of end users, who adapt the system during its use, and groupware end-users, who need to express their demands for the construction or creation of a new groupware system.

CREATING A GROUPWARE PATTERN LANGUAGE

In the Patterns-4-Groupware project, we aim to collect a comprehensive catalog of groupware patterns. The catalog thereby should not be static: as in the Oregon Design Process, we are heading for a dynamic pattern catalog, which improves during its use.

It is important that many experts from the field provide submissions to this catalog. Therefore, we set up a pattern submission infrastructure. It is a web-based catalog of patterns, where everyone can modify the pages (until they are frozen).

The groupware patterns Swiki

We used a Squeak Wiki (Swiki) for storing patterns, which was extended with a set of templates to ensure the integrity of the catalog. To enter a new pattern, the author navigates to the Intent Catalog.

The intent catalogue provides names and intents for all existing patterns in the groupware-patterns catalogue.

When adding the name and intent of the new pattern, an empty template for the pattern is automatically generated.

Each of the fields is related to the explanation of the specific section in the pattern template. Thus, even novice pattern authors will be guided through the writing process.

When the author submits the pattern the Swiki renders a document in the pattern catalog. In the catalog, each pattern is represented in a uniform way. The formatting is done automatically and the author can concentrate on the content.

For each new pattern contribution, the system informs prospective shepherds about the existence of the pattern. The shepherds can then decide whether or not they want to begin a shepherding phase with the author.

Getting the Community involved

Providing an infrastructure for placing patterns is one issue in the creation of a pattern catalogue, another important question is, how the community can be involved in the process of creating a shared pattern language. We see two additional means that can help here:

Writers' workshops for groupware pattern authors. Each group that is participating in the groupware patterns project should try to host a groupware-patterns writers' workshop (at least 4 times a year) in their groupware environment. Since pattern writing is an additional activity for the groupware experts, the workshops will serve as important milestones and thus encourage the creation of patterns.

Computer-mediated Discussion Groups. Co-located writer's workshops require that the participants find at least half a day, where they can come together for the discussion. This is often not possible because pattern writers are experts in their domain and will therefore have a very tight schedule. Thus, we set up a discussion group to provide a platform for discussing the patterns. Interested authors can subscribe to this group by sending a message to gw-patterns-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

We are currently seeking for groupware experts, who agree to contribute patterns to the catalogue.