MAPS Recap – April 2002

This month Andy gave me a book to read on website usability. The book was a study done on several websites such as Disney and Edmunds that rated the accessibility of information on the sites, as well as their ability to help the user perform other tasks such as comparing things found on the site (i.e. car prices on Edmunds). Users also rated how much they liked using the site and how easy it was to navigate. I found this book very useful and plan to use the information I got from it to improve the MAPS website.

Since the MAPS website is meant to display our research and its progression, I think it would be useful to organize it in a way that differentiates between who the user is and what information they would like to access. For example, if someone in the cognitively disabled community were to look at our website, they may be more interested in the product side of our project such as the cost of the handheld device, the usability of the software, what it looks like, etc. Whereas someone who was conducting similar research may be more interested in what research we have done and what new insights we have gained that relate to their work. And even another user of our site may only be interested in programming of the device, etc.

This book also gave me insight as to how to design websites for the best navigation. For example, the MAPS website right now has navigation buttons along the top and the sides of every page. Perhaps I need to change them somewhat so that it is clear that the ones on the side change whereas the ones along the top do not. Another point about the navigation buttons that I picked up was that having buttons that are .gifs could cause problems for people with slow download speeds. So I may consider replacing them with text links. At the very least I will add alt tags to them and all the other pictures on the site so users do not have to wait for them to download.

When I was originally designing the site, I wanted the site map to be associated with the Maps Man gif. If I were to implement this, I would have to make it very clear and easy to understand. I almost think that I should not pursue that, just because having a simple structure is probably easier to use than a fancy one.

Overall I think the structure of the site is well set up. I have a little concern for the PDFs that are linked on our site. Since some users may not know to use their back button after they've clicked on a PDF link, they may not know how to get back to our site. I think that two possible solutions would be to indicate on the site that a particular link leads to a PDF, and that they have to hit the back button to return, or to just have the PDFs open up in a different window. At this point I'm not sure which the best solution is.

In a different context, I plan to apply what I read about website usability to the eventual design of our online user-interface for downloading scripts. Since we have a pretty good idea of who our main users will be -- mostly caretakers – we can design the site with then in mind.

Since the site will have a lot of information (scripts), I think we will definitely need a search engine for the site. I also think that the user will want to be capable of comparing multiple scripts, so that they can get the one that is the best for them. Navigation will also be an important issue when designing this site, because as it accumulates more and more scripts, there is a higher chance that the user could get lost.

In conclusion, I found the website design book to be very useful and I plan to incorporate what I learned to revise my current sites and to make very user-friendly sites in the future. I think that it is a great book for anyone designing websites and I would highly recommend it.

In other MAPS progress, we successfully loaded Pebbles onto the PDA and using wireless capability we 'remotely controlled' the desktop using the PDA by doing a 'hello world' type thing with a scribbler program. We intend to use this wireless capability not only with the Pita board, but also with the cognitive bus stops for Mobility for All by having the PDA and the bus stop communicate 'cognitive surroundings'. We also discussed these wireless beacons that transmit infrared messages such as urls that can be received by PDAs. This could be very useful for the bus stop scenario. For example, the beacon could transmit the current location, time, and bus information to the PDA which could then interpret that information and display it to the user. I think this is very exciting technology and I think it allows us the capability we need to make this a very useful tool.