Appendix 8: Standard Design Pattern for Designer Study

Title
Forum

Picture

Figure A08-1 The Roman forum

Background
fo-rum (fôr’ m), NOUN: a. The public square of marketplace of an ancient Roman city that was the assembly place for judicial activity and public business. b. A public meeting place for open discussion. c. A medium of open discussion or voicing of ideas, such as a newspaper or a radio or television program. 2. A public meeting or presentation involving a discussion usually among experts and often including audience participation. 3. A court of law; a tribunal.

This pattern is intended to provide the means for asynchronous group communication. It allows users to communicate in the context of a community.

Problem
Users want to communicate about a specific topic. Without knowing people interested in the same topic, this is difficult.

You should consider using this pattern when:

- Users received messages from many communities via the same e-mail address.
- Users can forget to include some group member in the list of recipients.
- Users often have problems relating messages to the group context.
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- Users have problems referring to messages in the group interaction.
- You want to allow latecomers to catch up with communication.
- You want to support group building according to themes instead of people.

Solution

Therefore: Create a forum as a central place for communication in which all group members can discuss asynchronously by reading and writing messages. Keep forum messages persistent.

To create a FORUM a central server has to be set up that can easily be accessed by all users. Users must be able to create their own FORUMS on the server. The server has to keep a directory of all available FORUMS and users must be able to browse this list. To enable discussion, users must be able to access the FORUMS via the central server and post messages to their selected FORUM. All messages that are posted to a FORUM are kept persistent. When a user accesses a FORUM, the messages that were posted to it are displayed. Users must be able to view single messages and reply to selected messages, to enable interaction.

The rationale for this forum is that all users can browse the list of available FORUMS or create a new FORUM, they are able to find interesting discussion partners. Users can read the messages that belong to a discussion, as the central server keeps all messages persistent. New members can understand a discussion that started before they became a member of the FORUM. Finally, as users can post their own messages to a FORUM and reply to messages, users can join or start a discussion.

Check that when applying this pattern you should answer the questions:

- How are you going to let users access the FORUM?
- How are you going to categorize the available FORUMS?
- How are going to handle communication between the users and the central server that hosts the FORUMS?
- Will you allow strangers to read FORUMS messages?

Danger spots in using this forum may be that users might not check the FORUM frequently using their community system. If possible, also allow users to access the FORUM with their preferred tool for asynchronous communication, such as their e-mail client, which automatically receives the newest messages.

Users might not want to use additional software to access a FORUM. Instead they want to use their preferred e-mail client. If you cannot support access to the FORUM for e-mail clients, establish a mailing list for the group. For that purpose, collect the e-mail addresses of all group members and create a new e-mail address, the mailing list address. Whenever a user sends a discussion contribution to the mailing list address, distribute this contribution to the collected e-mail addresses of the group members.

When displaying the messages posted to a FORUM using the order in which the messages were received, it might be difficult to find related messages and to follow a specific discussion. This problem might be solved using THREADED DISCUSSIONS. Some users might post contributions that do not fit into the topic of the FORUM. To control the content of a FORUM use a QUALITY INSPECTION.
Teaching strategies
Try to encourage participation.

Related patterns
FEEDBACK LOOP – describes how users can connect other users if they did not completely understand another user’s message.

INTERACTION DIRECTORY – allows users to look up FORUMS in which they might be interested.

FAQ – can be used to gather the knowledge of a FORUM community and collect answers to the most frequent questions in the FORUM.

QUALITY INSPECTION – describes how to ensure the quality of the content in a FORUM.

References
Case Study

Martin, an expert in computer-supported collaborative learning, entered the project with the goal of discussing new application areas for the game engine. He is convinced that it can be used to create various games for public education. He also knows that there are other community members like Weigang and Molo who might be interested in such a discussion. Getting in contact with them by email, however, or using a room to establish a task force for the issue, would limit participants to the people who Martin already knew.