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Raghav Madhavan
New York University

Balaji Padmanabhan
New York University

Jon Turner
New York University

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Raghav Madhavan
Balaji Padmanabhan
Jon Turner
New York University

1. INTRODUCTION

In business schools, cases are assigned often to groups of students for preparation, reflecting the observation that problems in organizations are frequently resolved by teams. In preparing business cases, students may work together to discuss various aspects of a case before arriving at a coherent analysis. The traditional paper-based case delivery method provides little explicit support for group interaction. In addition, group discussions are limited to those times that members can be physically together.

This paper describes the Web Living Case (WLC), a Web based business case delivery system that incorporates support for collaborative work. WLC provides a more interesting environment for case presentation than do traditional written cases. To facilitate effective collaboration, WLC provides shared workspaces for students working on common tasks, bulletin boards, and real-time conversation support, and a consistent and friendly user-interface.

2. THE WEB LIVING CASE

Four characteristics of the WLC that contribute to its usability are (i) the maintenance of a temporal order in the presentation of material, (ii) the ability to explore easily information related to a common theme, (iii) the use of a standard and familiar interface for presentation of material, and (iv) support for collaborative work. In business domains, all relevant information pertaining to an issue is not immediately available. Rather, information expands as the problem unfolds. In WLC, each case is divided into a sequence of "frames." The author of a case assigns "chunks" of information to different frames which establishes a temporal order in which chunks can be viewed. By using hyper-media links, users can explore easily a theme in the current or previous frames. Adopting a Web browser as the interface eliminates the need for special equipment or training, and it permits the integration of multimedia into case material. To enhance collaborative problem solving, intra-group support is provided through shared documents and workspaces and inter-group communication through bulletin boards for the various cases in the system.

3. THE ARCHITECTURE OF WLC

WLC is implemented as a Common Gateway Interface (CGI) script, in Perl using Netscape™'s "frames" feature. The choice of WWW as a delivery platform is motivated by its (i) support for multimedia, (ii) platform independent access, (iii) mobility (anyone-anywhere-anytime access), (iv) potential for sharing of casebases across academia, (v) ability to use information sources across Internet, and (vi) open standards of the Internet.

WLC uses and maintains two categories of knowledge — static and dynamic. Knowledge about various entities in the system and their relationships is static, and is constructed as part of the casebase. Navigation histories of individuals, shared documents and workspace are dynamic, and evolve through user interactions with the system. The shared information space available to users is partitioned into different channels based on the nature of information that the user accesses or creates. A channel provides a specific, predetermined kind of information which can either be static or dynamic. In addition, the evolution of information in programmed channels can be dependent on user interactions. Examples of channels that WLC supports are (i) Case Segment Channel that provides the next (or previous) segment of the active case, (ii) Comments Creation Channel that contains comments about a specific frame of a case for personal, group or class use, and (iii) Real-time Conversation Channel, for the real-time exchange of information about a frame.

4. FUTURE PLANS

Our plans over the next period will be devoted to evaluation of the WLC compared to traditional case presentation.