6. BUILDING NOTECARDS STRUCTURES

NoteCards has been around for some time and people have developed different ways of using it. In this chapter we have recorded some of the different approaches people have taken towards using NoteCards in the hopes that these notes will help you discover the best way of using NoteCards for you.

If you have ideas about ways of using NoteCards which you would like to share with others, please send them to us.

Introduction

By its very design, NoteCards encourages you to use it in specific ways. However, some users have found that they make the best use of NoteCards by not following the intended path but by branching off and forcing NoteCards to conform to their own idea of what a hypertext system should look like.

A Standard View of Building NoteCards Structures

NoteCards was intented to support two parallel modes of organization, a hierarchial one, implemented with FileBoxes, and a relational one, implemented with links.

Here is one possible scenario:

1. Collect a body of material, and break it up into logical bits.
2. Enter the logical bits into Text, Sketch, Graph, and other card types, using a scanner or other electronic sources.
3. Build a hierarchical structure with FileBoxes, inserting the data cards in their appropriate places in the FileBox hierarchy.
4. Read through the document, building links between related ideas and constructing other non–hierarchical structures. Use different link types to keep these lines of thought apart.
5. Collect the different lines of thought in the material by using document cards to follow the different link types.

This is a stereotypical view of how you might generate a structure in NoteCards; however, it is not the only view.

A Non-Standard View of Building NoteCards Structures

FileBoxes and Hierarchies

One frequent comment from longtime users is that people have a tendency to use FileBoxes too soon. They try to organize their data into a structure before the best structure is apparent and wind up reorganizing their ideas, wasting much time and energy. These users suggest that you build your structures only after you have worked with your data for awhile.

Other users simply do not use FileBoxes at all or use them to build only very shallow structures. Note that you could use links directly to build the equivalent hierarchial structure as with FileBoxes.

Flat System

In the flat system, all cards are filed in the "Table of Contents", the "To Be Filed" or some user-specified FileBox card. These users may specify one or several start points for the reader, but aside from that the system is flat.

Almost Flat System

In this organization the cards are grouped into large bunches which can be based on source, topic or some other broad category. One FileBox is used for each source, topic, or whatever the divisions are. One user likens his use of FileBoxes to library shelves where each FileBox is a different shelf. He then uses Sketch cards as an organization and integration tool, to help him navigate through his system.

Link Type

The system is built with the idea that you will classify each link type so that later you can build documents or browsers based on link types. However, some users make all their link types "Unspecified."

One of the dangers with links is that new users tend to link everything to everything else and end up with spaghetti.

Multiple Users

NoteCards was not designed with collaboration in mind. One way users have gotten around the problem of tracking what each user has done is to assign each collaborator a different font. Each contributor's work can then be recognized by font face.

Cards and Information Chunk Size

Because cards come up on the screen a particular size, able to display a small amount of information, the perception grows among new users that the information chunks have to be small. It is important to recognize that cards can hold any amount of information, and that they can be scrolled or resized to display all the information they hold.

There are trade offs, however. If you work with large cards, the size of your notefile grows much more rapidly. This is not serious. It only means that you need to compact your notefile more frequently than people who work with smaller information chunks do.

A second trade off is that links always point to the beginning of a card never into the body of a card. If your cards are very large, it may not be immediately clear what the relationship is between the source card and the destination card.

Types of Structures Built with NoteCards

One user working on a design project used a notefile structured with design goals as roots moving down to the component level at leaf nodes. This structure allowed him to see the design history, subgoals, and goals which were retracted.

Other users use NoteCards to maintain indices of where to find sources of information. This is fairly common. Users frequently implement on-line rolodexes, customer-support or customer-tracking notefiles, and other types of text databases, such as project tracking.

The most common use is in writing large reports. NoteCards is used to collect, organize, and cross-reference information until the writer has a firm grasp of the material and how various pieces of it interact.

Specializing NoteCards

It is possible to specialize NoteCards to specific tasks.

One user has created an interface to the Lexis legal database. To do this he created a new text-card type which receives retrieved data from Lexis. He is also working on an interface to videodisk and other sources.

At Xerox PARC there is a group working on an Instructional Design Environment for designing, developing, and presenting instruction. These people are extensively modifying the NoteCards environment

If you have a need for a particular extension to NoteCards there is a programmers interface which you or your company's developers can use to extend the NoteCards environment, or Venue can provide you with specalized extensions to NoteCards.

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