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Back to the Future, Back to Home, Back to Mom: Use and Abuse of the Back Button on English and Non English Web Sites

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Abstract

This paper presents the first results of an investigation aimed at verifying how the so-called back button is used on web sites.

The research is carried out on sites written in English, both by native speakers and foreign people, and in several other languages: Italian, French, German, Spanish, Hungarian, and Russian.

Preliminary results of the survey, based on several hundreds of sites, show two main phenomena: the back button is less common than in the past and is far from being properly managed by web programmers.

1 Rationale

This paper presents the first results of an investigation going on at the University of Bergamo, which is aimed at verifying how the so-called back button is used on web sites.

The research is carried out on sites written in English, both by native speakers and foreign people, and in several other languages: Italian, French, German, Spanish, Hungarian, and Russian.

The main concern driving the survey is related to web usability: the idea is that back buttons are often built by web designers so that they do not help visitors preserving the history stack for an efficient use, and therefore they do not have the maximum cognitive effect.

As a starting viewpoint, we take for granted that a *correct semantics* of the back button does exist (the chronological one), and that any other different interpretation is supposed to be misleading for web surfers, unless the context in which the link starts can clearly suggest its ending point; that is, going beyond syntax and semantics, for taking into account pragmatics.

2 Aims

The research has several focuses and tasks. First of all, we are trying to set up a sort of catalogue of the different "signs" - alphabetical, graphical and iconic - which host the back button.
[...]

3 Methodology

The survey is performed on a set of sites grouped in four categories: commercial sites, academic, governmental, personal.
Commercial sites have been selected randomly from the Fortune 500 list and from similar national catalogues. Academic and governmental sites have been selected randomly from official lists, and personal sites from lists created by filtering messages from Usenet newsgroups.
[...]

4 Results

Preliminary results of the survey, based on several hundreds of sites, show two main phenomena: the back button is less common than in the past and is far from being properly managed by web programmers.
With reference to the first issue, the back button seems to be on the road to extinction, at least in large professional sites, driven out by rigid hierarchical structures, menus and breadcrumbs, whilst its use survives in small sites.
On the other hand, it is very often used as a pointer to the ancestor page, where an explicit textual link, or a more specific procedural one, such as *up*, would be more appropriate.
Comparisons of pages written in English within and outside the Anglophone areas show that abuses are more frequent among non-native speakers.
[...]
In the first phase of our research we did take into account about 400 sites belonging to the national domains .it, .fr, .de, .ru, that is Italian, French, German and Russian sites, about 100 from any domain.
[...]

4.1 Italian sites

[...]

4.2 French sites

[...]

4.3 Russian sites

[...]

5 Conclusions

This first results of an investigation aimed at verifying how the so-called back button is used on web sites show two main phenomena: the back button is less common than in the past and is far from being properly managed by web programmers.

Whilst back links rarely implement the chronological back (using the browser's history stack), they often point to the "previous" page, as defined by web designers, or to the ancestor page, or to the home page.

6 References

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