The Hypertext 2004 Conference Comment Board Experiment

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Introduction

We were given the charge of designing and implementing a comment board for the Hypertext 2004 Conference website. The comment board was intended to allow conference attendees to communicate in an open forum about such issues as conference programs, papers, and travel. Additionally, the comment board provided an opportunity to research how people respond to the capability of commenting on all aspects of a website, from a paragraph to an entire page.

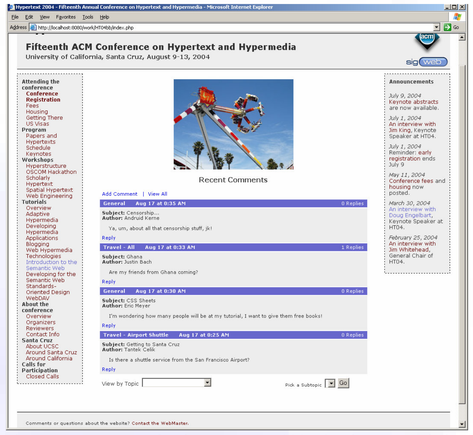

Figure 1: Homepage for the Hypertext 2004 Conference website

Implementation

Our task required integrating a comment board into the existing Hypertext 2004 Conference website. This involved both setting up an appropriate database using MySQL to store the comments and using PHP to generate the board on each page. Since the existing website was developed using PHP and HTML, the comment board was also implemented using these languages.

The pages used to add a comment or add a reply both utilized simple MySQL queries to insert the comments into the database. Retaining user specific information as the user navigated through the site such as the current topic and subtopic was resolved by using PHP session variables. PHP was limiting in that dynamically generating pull-down menus when searching through comments by topic and subtopic could not be implemented, so JavaScript was used to resolve this issue. JavaScript was also utilized to both close the window and refresh the parent page after the user had submitted a comment to the database.

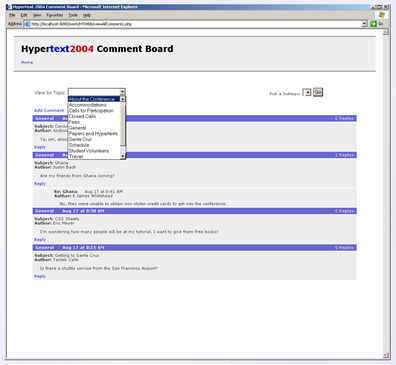

Figure 2: Main comment board page

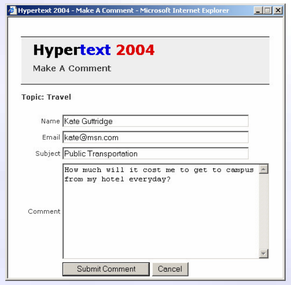

Figure 3: Window for adding a comment

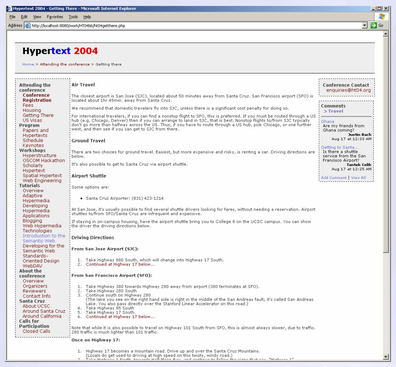

Figure 4: Example of sidebar comment board

Results

The comment board went live on the Hypertext 2004 website (www.ht04.org) on July 27, 2004. We were expecting the majority of comments on the website to be general questions or concerns. There were some comments of this nature, but overall the board received little use. A few individuals did use the board to bring up issues specific to themselves, which might have hindered others from asking general questions. The board was taken down upon the conclusion of the conference due to concerns about monitoring future posts.

Conclusions

This experiment generated many issues that were not heavily considered during the development of the comment board. One such issue was the lack of an editorial policy for the comment board. By failing to have a published editorial policy, the website was open to posts of any nature, and the site administrators had no stated right to remove any posts deemed inappropriate. A second issue that surfaced during this experiment was the lack of any security or validation features. Essentially, any user was able to type in any name into the author field, and there was no check for authenticity of the author's identity.

Acknowledgements

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