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Interface-parasite Gateways

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Abstract

Apart from challenging new possibilities in resource discovery and retrieval, WWW gives the opportunity to provide legacy applications with a new look and feel and to add functionality without having to change the software itself. We describe problems and possible solutions in the area of connecting legacy software based on terminal sessions to WWW, especially focusing on the problems that arise from adapting stateful interactive services to the stateless HTTP. As a case study we present a WWW gateway¹ to a stateful legacy application (Austrian national academic OPAC) by encapsulating it within a CGI conformant gateway.

Keywords: World-Wide Web; Gateways; Legacy software; Stateless and stateful; Interactive sessions; Online public access catalogs (OPAC)

1 Introduction

Providing access to non HTTP based information systems through the World-Wide Web [6] implies that two technical problems have to be tackled. First, WWW requests have to be transformed into queries for the information system—say a database—and, second, query results have to be converted into HTML [5]. There are numerous generic gateways (e.g. [15]) and programming language extensions

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¹<http://bibgate.univie.ac.at/>

(e.g. [20]) available for the skilled engineer, with which prototypes or even complete applications can be built.

The trouble starts if no application programming interface (API) for the information or database system in question is available, or—similarly serious—no reliable documentation for the system exists. Applications of this kind are often euphemistically referred to as *legacy applications*. Most of them originated many years ago, providing access for querying and maintenance only through interactive, character based terminal sessions (telnet, 3270) or dedicated user interfaces.

The standard way to “integrate” session-oriented resources into WWW is by providing a telnet URL [4]. A rich list of telnet-accessible resources can be found in [19]. Clicking onto such a link will start up a terminal emulation program at the client site. The user then has to navigate according to the application’s interface philosophy which usually does not follow WWW’s user interface paradigm. Even worse, most applications expect the terminal emulation to be perfectly configured, forcing the user to use special function keys or escape sequences.

A more seamless integration can be done by writing CGI [14] gateways which encapsulate these applications. Thus users just have to deal with the usual WWW point and click GUI paradigm. Carefully designed gateways will also result in a much simpler user interface compared to the original (e.g. [9]).

In the following sections we first describe interface-parasite gateways, an approach we successfully used for the integration of BIBOS, Austria’s national academic OPAC. We then argue for a complete integration of gateways into existing information infrastructures. Next, we address the issue of statefulness, which is crucial in the design of WWW gateways, and present our WWW–BIBOS gateway as a case study. Finally, we describe how implementation of interface-parasite gateways can be supported by tools.

2 Interface Parasites

In the absence of an API interface to an existing system, the only reference is the user interface itself. Our approach is based on attaching to textual, character-stream-oriented user interfaces with (command) line or page logic.

Providing a seamless service integration into WWW means hiding the *terminal emulation feeling* from the user. This implies that a gateway has to run the terminal emulation on behalf of the client (Fig. 1).

The gateway’s task is to behave as a *virtual user*. It has to translate HTTP requests into (sequences of) keystrokes, that are sent to the terminal emulation. When the application has reacted by showing a new *virtual screen*, the gateway has to analyze it and extract any relevant information. It does so by locally interpreting the data



Figure 1: Gateway as Interface Parasite

and control stream coming from the application. In the usual case of character-based terminal emulations this necessitates running a telnet or 3270 protocol automaton and interpreting terminal control sequences (e.g. that of VT100). Depending on the type of gateway (see section 4), relevant information is hypertexted and forwarded to the client.

Detection of information is the key problem here. Any information on a user interface is first converted into an external representation (strings for textual interfaces). Usually semantical information is lost during this process. It is not possible to reverse this process in general. Often information is packed into a few lines because of space limitations on the display. This makes automated detection of information complicated or even impossible. One has to exploit position information which may give a clue to the meaning of a string or rely on heuristics.

Another problem concerns page oriented interfaces. The end of a page has to be detected before the analysis process can start. In telnet based services transmission of characters usually just stops at the end of page. While this is obvious to the human client, it is not for an automated one. In order to avoid painful time-outs the character stream must be analyzed to identify discriminating character sequences which give a clue to an end-of-page. Sometimes heuristics have to be applied here too.

From the above it is evident that interface-parasite gateways are vulnerable to any kind of layout modifications of the user interface. These, however, are by definition not likely for legacy applications.

3 Forward and Backward Integration

Providing gateways between WWW and other resources not only allows people to use this service without being bothered by its specialities. It also allows integration with other information systems (Fig. 2).

Given a particular URL, the gateway will produce a document on-the-fly. *Backward integration* means that these virtual documents must have a systematically reproducible URL. Only then another web service can make more use of the gateway than merely pointing to the gateway's start page. Examples of such gateways are those into X.500 or whois.

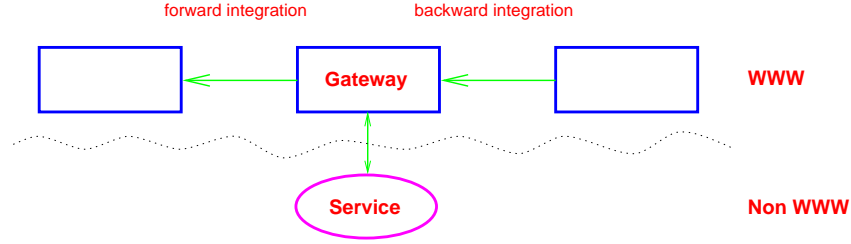


Figure 2: Forward and Backward Integration

Forward integration conveys the approach where the gateway itself enriches its output by providing links to other relevant web resources. A gateway to a staff database, for instance, could not only return the department and the telephone number of the sought-after staff member but could also generate a `mailto` link, say `commonName.surName@organization.country` supposed such an email address is valid.

The effort to maintain a small database of links to be included is often neglectable in comparison to the gain of integration.

4 Stateful vs. Stateless Gateways

WWW is based on the stateless HTTP protocol [23]. Using it as GUI for stateless (request-reply) applications, like many C/S applications, works perfectly well. For stateful (interactive) services state information has to be kept and maintained for a certain period of time. The decision what and where state information is stored is crucial for the design [16].

4.1 Stateful Gateways

Efficiency and security considerations may prevent the use of a simple stateless gateway approach as described below. In the OMNIS/Myriad retrieval engine [8], for example, login/logout is very resource consuming, making it necessary to use a stateful WWW gateway with dedicated, permanently connected server processes.

Stateful gateways overcome such problems at the expense of having to maintain state information within the gateway. Followup HTTP requests are related by gateway-maintained state information [16].

Usually a permanently running gateway process keeps up a connection to the server on one side (stateful) and serves successive requests on the HTTP client side. Every request is translated relatively to the gateway's state (Fig. 3).

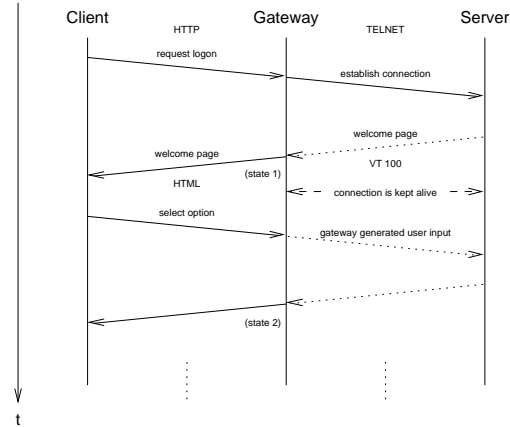


Figure 3: Stateful Gateways

Translation servers [17] work according to this interaction pattern. Though flexible and fast, this approach suffers from a state bookkeeping problem. During a session the history of all requests has to be memorized to provide a stateful connection to the server. In the presence of client caches, which all state-of-the-art browsers use, this management of context information can be quite complicated: whenever the user decides to go back to a previous page, the client will not contact the gateway, but use the cached information instead. New requests issued from previous pages (i.e. previous client states) may confuse the gateway. It may even be forbidden in certain application states, even if no cache is used. Recovery procedures for the gateway will be complex, as some kind of request unification may have to be applied or even complete playback of the whole session may be necessary.

A similar problem arises when the client interrupts an HTTP request. State may become inconsistent depending on the time the interrupt occurs and the gateway and service semantics. Recovery is hard or impossible in this case.

The gateway has to take into account existing time-outs of the session-oriented service and coordinate these with its own (e.g. [17], [8]). This problem is further complicated by instable client software (lost connections).

Many stateful services have restrictions for concurrent access, be it licence agreements or performance problems to necessitate a user limit. Stateful gateways may deny access when the user limit is reached. This may lead to request starvation. In order to cope with this problem, services will try to prevent long inactive sessions. When a user waits too long for a followup HTTP request, the connection between gateway and server will time out. On issuing the next request the gateway either reacts with an error message or has to replay the whole session up to the last state, which might be rather time and resource consuming.

4.2 Stateless Gateways

Stateless gateways are the simpler type of gateways for stateful services. State information, that is necessary to relate HTTP requests and replies, is generated by the gateway and stored at the client either within URLs (see [18] for an example) or inside HTML code as hidden fields in forms. Thus stateless gateways allow to overcome the possible inconsistency problem of stateful gateways.

There are two extreme approaches:

The bridge mirrors the logical user interface structure on the server (e.g. the sequence of terminal pages a user has to navigate through) into WWW pages. User interaction is translated one-by-one into HTTP requests.

Since the communication pattern itself is stateless, a followup request causes the whole interaction to be replayed upto that context, which has already been built up between the client and the service. This implies running through all previous states to build up this context before issuing the new request (Fig. 4).

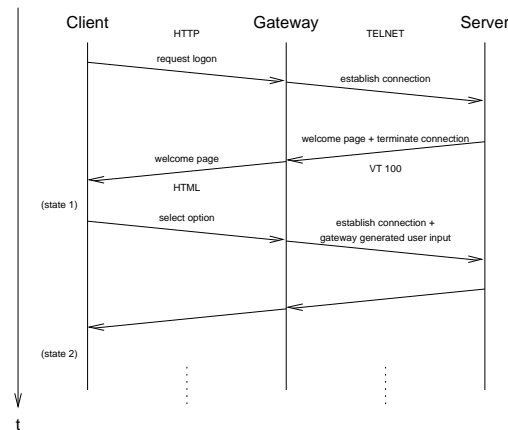


Figure 4: The Bridge

With a similar technique clients themselves work on FTP links. Here the client itself uses the link information to start an FTP session and navigate to the requested directory or file. Afterwards the FTP connection is closed and has to be reopened for followup FTP requests.

This type of gateways is mainly feasible for inherently stateful services, like [18] or services that have some kind of “collect and submit” semantics: e.g. consider a shopping service, where the user “collects” items and when finished submits a “buy” request. While collecting the user can easily go back to any previous state (in case of mistakes), pause as long as wanted and carry on later.

However, this solution also has some significant drawbacks: state information can quickly become rather large and due to replaying of sessions computing resources are wasted. Additionally, since state information is visible to the user, there is no protection against modification of this information by the user.

One-shot gateways transform the application semantics itself and not only the syntactic server information. This is accomplished by a request/reply interaction hiding intermediary states (pages) from the user.

This means that the user specifies the complete input information with a single HTML form [7]. After submitting it, the gateway runs a complete session on behalf of the user and returns the relevant information in hypertext representation (Fig. 5). This frees the gateway from keeping connections open and provides a higher degree of scheduling freedom. As a by-product this method offers inconsistency transparency [3], since no state information has to be kept between successive requests.

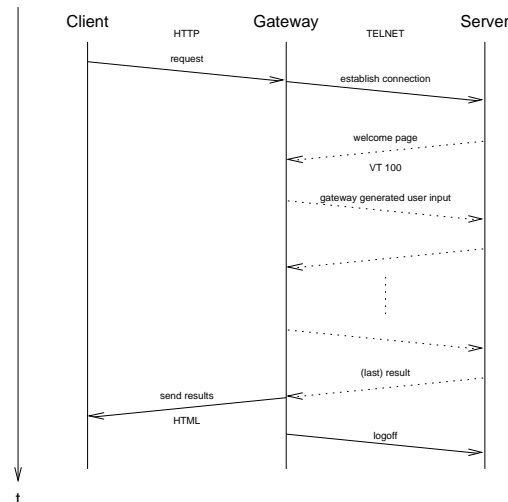


Figure 5: One-shot Gateways

This approach also facilitates a meaningful, seamless integration into WWW. Result information can be collected throughout the session and can be combined, converted, corrected and enhanced at will and presented in a WWW conformant, hypertexted way, not merely mirroring the legacy original.

This implies that the prevailing application has to be analyzed thoroughly. This approach also assumes that all necessary input is provided by the user with a form, redefining the service into a request/reply application. If this is not possible, more sophisticated gateways have to be used. Nevertheless, it seems that a considerably high percentage of applications can be transformed into one-shot applications.

5 Case Study: WWW-BIBOS Gateway

BIBOS is the Austrian national academic online public access catalog (OPAC) and encompasses almost all of Austria's academic libraries. It is a huge database running on a mainframe for several years now. Before the existence of the gateway, BIBOS only offered terminal emulation access². Some major drawbacks of this access method are:

- Users (especially students) are reluctant to learn how to search and navigate through BIBOS.
- Terminal emulations have to be configured well because the use of special function keys is mandatory.
- Several pages have to be passed and filled out before the actual search form is reached. The same applies to logging out.
- Important functionalities are unnecessarily complicated to use. E.g., to get detailed informations on books, users have to perform a query to get a list of matches first. Only then one can step through the search result and request detailed book information.
- BIBOS is full of acronyms and codes, only understandable to the professional librarian.

The database itself, however, offers exhaustive access to scientific publications. Since there was no BIBOS documentation available to us, we decided to prototype an interface-parasite gateway using the one-shot approach described earlier.

Initially the user is confronted with one out of three possible query forms: a form with all available input fields³, the same form with descriptions for the fields⁴, or a concise one⁵ (Fig. 6), only containing the most important fields. All types of forms are linked to each other. Additional information (help, feedback, usage, deficiencies) is available via buttons at the bottom of each query page.

Having filled out the query specification, the user has to submit the form. On return, he/she will receive a list of matches. Every match is displayed in a compact or detailed way, depending on the user's selection in the query form. Fig. 7 shows a compact query result.

Clicking on a specific match will repeat the query and will return a more detailed description. If the user wants detailed descriptions for all books there is a *gory details* link at the top of the result page.

²telnet://opac.univie.ac.at

³http://bibgate.univie.ac.at/

⁴http://bibgate.univie.ac.at/BIBOS-2/Search-verbose.html

⁵http://bibgate.univie.ac.at/BIBOS-2e/Form.pl

more verbose form and a [more powerful one](#) is available. We have also a [newsletter](#) in which you find current information about this gateway.' There are two red input fields for 'Author' and 'Title'. Below them is a 'Pressing' button, a 'Search' button, and a text field 'shall return at most' with '20' entered. To the right is a 'compact' button and a 'matches' link. Below this is a 'Library' dropdown menu showing 'Technische Universitaet Wien'. At the bottom are six icons: a house, a globe, a document, a bar chart, a book, and a laptop. Below the icons is the text 'Manfred Hauswirth, Robert Barta'."/>

Figure 6: Gateway Query Form

To get in contact with our customers we offer a feedback form to them. Initially this was only a simple form where users could enter their freely formulated opinions. As we received only few, mostly imprecise statements, we decided to offer an exhaustive questionnaire. We now receive lots of feedback with more meaningful bug descriptions and suggestions for improvements.

5.1 Extending the Functionality

The gateway offers a wealth of additional functionality to the user which was not present before.

- Detailed search results can now be requested directly⁶. Also, the user may now restrict the maximum number of matches returned, to have better response times.
- In order to support sporadic users we supply a simple context sensitive help facility. By clicking on the label of a query field a verbose query form is displayed at corresponding page position (Fig. 8). The user then can go back to the initial form (where parts of a query might already have been specified) or use the verbose form.

⁶Future gateway versions will also provide a taggable list of compact results, where the user can select matches, that shall be displayed in detail.

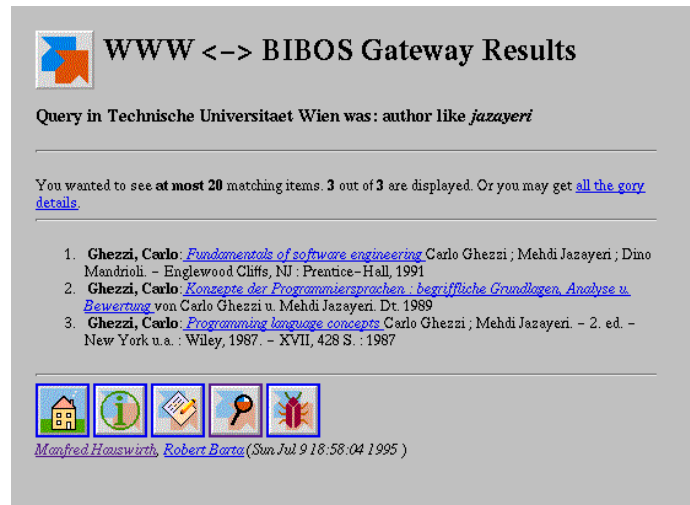


Figure 7: Query Results

- Some entry fields in the original BIBOS interface require the user to enter special names and codes, e.g. library selection or the type of medium to look for. In the gateway these fields are offered through selection lists.
- We tried to integrate the existing information infrastructure into the gateway (forward integration). If, for instance, a particular book is located in a department and not in a library, we refer into an information system about departments and their staff⁷. Otherwise we link to the library information service.
- While BIBOS allows a keyword search the list of valid keywords is stored separately. The gateway provides access to that list via a link.
- Additionally, we analyze shelf codes and enhance these alpha-numerical codes with a more meaningful, user-friendly text and hyperlinks, if an appropriate information system exists⁷.
- For backward integration the gateway now allows URLs to point to BIBOS references. These BIBOS links can easily be embedded into other HTML documents. Some Austrian universities have already included publication lists of their staff⁸ into their information systems by adding hyperlinks into the WWW-BIBOS gateway. Instead of having to fill out forms and submitting them, corresponding hyperlinks are generated automatically with appropriate parameters and link activations result in a query to BIBOS.

⁷Currently works only for our university.

⁸<http://www.wu-wien.ac.at/cgi-bin/psphone1.pl?TYP=EE592&such=>

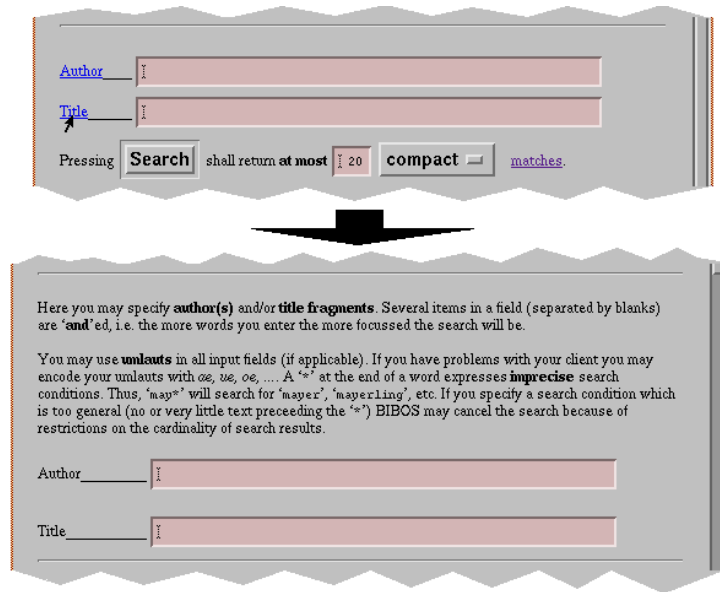


Figure 8: Context Sensitive Help

Other improvements simply result from using state-of-the-art WWW browser. Users now can go back to any previous page at any time using client caches. This is not possible in the page logic of BIBOS itself.

Due to BIBOS' terminal interface only a limited number of items can be displayed per output page. The user has to jump back and forth. Query results cannot be printed from inside BIBOS. The gateway, however, delivers all matches in a single HTML page which can also be printed readily.

5.2 Implementation Problems

In addition to the general issues of stateless interface-parasite gateways we had to cope with other problems when implementing the gateway.

The most serious and basic problems we encountered were the lack of an API and any documentation of the interface. We initially had to analyze BIBOS' output behavior which we did in a long and painfull trial-and-error process.

Since we did not want to implement a full 3270 protocol automaton, we decided to use tn3270, which offers a telnet based 3270 emulation. Our gateway then analyzes VT100 control sequences to keep a local virtual screen.

The virtual screen is necessary because the BIBOS interface returns data whose semantics derive from its position on the screen. Additionally, there exists no standard

format for the reference information returned by BIBOS. The gateway has to guess which parts of a reference denote author, title, bibliographic and administrative information.

There are several situations when the gateway cannot precisely detect whether a page has been transferred completely or not. This end-of-page detection problem could only be solved by using appropriate heuristics.

Finally we had to cope with a couple of special cases the existing BIBOS interface exhibits. So, for instance, a query process works slightly different when searching in all libraries at once rather than in a single one. Also BIBOS returns detailed information instead of compact references when only one match is found for a query. These non-orthogonalities do not make sense in a WWW context, so the gateway hides them from the user.

5.3 Performance Considerations

Introducing such a gateway clearly simplifies the handling for the end user. Still, one should also consider the effects on the involved hosts and the traffic produced by such a service, especially when it gains wide-spread popularity. Fig. 9 depicts access statistics of our gateway. The smaller bars represent the number of query form fetches, the taller ones are actual search requests.

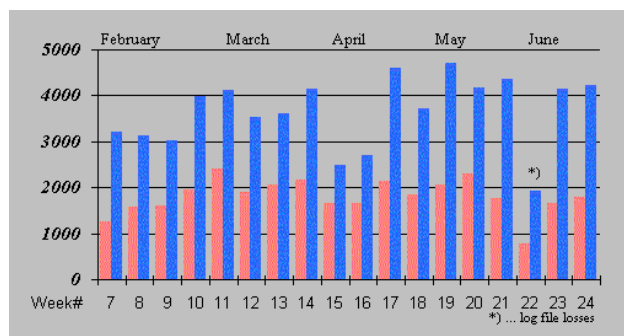


Figure 9: BIBOS Gateway Usage

In pre-gateway times people were using telnet and, less often, 3270 emulations. The former is quite costly in bandwidth terms, since every typed character results in two packets on the network. Result pages may be fragmented, adding to the network cost. This problem is less serious with 3270 since it transmits on a page by page basis.

Our gateway, in turn, receives HTTP requests, uses 3270 as terminal emulation protocol and ships back HTTP packets. This—especially over long distances—is cheaper than having a VT100 based telnet session.

This traffic reduction is attained at the cost of additional processing load on the gateway and on the database host. Currently, for every request a new 3270 connection has to be established. Since the gateway is stateless, the database host may be forced to repeat queries already performed. Nevertheless, it does not have to keep open long-lived sessions, thus giving it more scheduling freedom.

5.4 Planned Improvements

The gateway has left its prototype phase and is about to be institutionalized. This necessitates several procurements, such as providing a better online documentation and adding search demos. Also, more sophisticated management tools have to be considered.

The most important goal, however, is an increase of performance. As already mentioned, the connection establishment is responsible for a good deal of the delay. To overcome this, we will run permanent terminal emulation sessions. Particular search requests will be assigned by a global scheduler to one of these sessions. This will also lead to a more modular gateway architecture.

Concerning the functionality, we have to set up a more manageable, i.e. scalable scheme to integrate existing information systems. The idea is to include pointers to information systems that belong to the organization which hosts a book, or, if available, to link to an electronic version of the document. Furthermore comprehensive analysis of classification and shelf codes shall be performed⁹. Their syntax and meaning depends on the sublibrary, making necessary an incremental process depending on the support we receive from the librarians.

6 Spin-off Projects

Our experiences with the gateway have encouraged us to benchmark the approach with other services. This resulted in prototypes for the Austrian electronic telephone book (not publicly available) and for the Austrian stock exchange (service is cancelled due to licencing problems).

In general, during a session with an interactive service a user is confronted with a couple of pages. Each single page requires the user to input some commands or fill out a form. All possible pages build a network with the pages as nodes and commands as edges. Currently we are working on a tool which shall support the designer when analyzing such a network.

Interface Logic. With the help of the tool the designer navigates through the pages. The tool memorizes pages already encountered and unifies those pages—with the help of the designer—which have to be regarded to be the same.

⁹Currently this analysis only is done for our local university library.

During this process the tool learns about the significant and non-significant parts of a page.

In the same way the commands (edges) that link the individual pages are learned. In particular, the tool gains knowledge which parts of a command are constant and which are variable (Fig. 10).

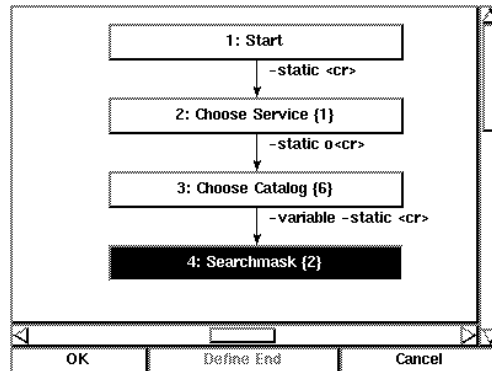


Figure 10: Interface Logic

Page Information. For every page the designer has to mark the positions on the screen where relevant information is expected. In this phase the tool learns about the semantics of a particular piece of information.

Query Session. Now the designer has to define a path through the network of pages. Along with that he has to specify how input parameters have to be mapped to the variable parts of commands (Fig. 11).

Backend Generation. In this phase a code skeleton (we plan to use perl [22]) for running a query session is generated. Afterwards the designer has to supply code that defines how the collected information is presented to the client.

The tool shall free the designer from digging into character codes and shall help to adapt to small modifications in the interface logic.

7 Related Work

Considerable effort has been spent in many recent projects to integrate existing databases and legacy systems into WWW. Different application domains and requirements led to a high variety of solutions.

| | | | |
|---|--|---|------|
| EDV-Zentrum der Universitaet Wien | | Schirm=00000000 | |
| Oesterreichischer Bibliothekenverbund | | | |
| Auswahlmoeglichkeiten: | | | |
| LIBRARY | (0) | Online-Publikumskatalog (OPAC) | |
| UBI / UBS | (C) | OPAC/Entlehnung fuer die UB Innsbruck / UB Salzburg | |
| Befehle in Klammern koennen anstelle der Langformen verwendet werden. | | | |
| Nur mehr ueber Internet-Adresse VM.UniVie.AC.AT erreichbar: | | | |
| VM | am Rechner COMPAREX CPX 99/711 | | |
| RIS | Rechtsinformationssystem und RDB am BKA (Command: DIAL VTAM) | | |
| ACHTUNG: Timeout aus dieser Sitzung nach 15 Minuten Inaktivitaet. | | | |
| End Control Sequence: {^[K] {^[m] {^[20;68H] {^[J] {^[m] {^[23;1H] | | | |
| Timeout (ms): 0 | | | |
| Mark as unimportant | Undo | Apply Changes | Data |

Figure 11: Query Session

After a proof-of-concept gateway succeeded the MORE [9] project team decided to completely redesign the underlying database. Switching from a stateful database environment to a stateless WWW interface environment transformed the original complex multi-function windows interface into a rather simplistic single function/single action interface.

Special attention to the user interface design area of gateways is paid to in the OMNIWeb system [13]. Typical user sessions are analyzed to meet user requirements and a context sensitive help facility is added.

Instead of using specialized gateways to access legacy data, the CUBAI project [2] promotes (bijective) conversion of such data into a common format, facilitating integration and interchange of heterogenous data. The benefit of needing only one WWW-gateway to access the common data, however, is achieved at the expense of high conversion costs.

The OmniPort system [10] tries to integrate legacy data by bidirectionally translating the native search capabilities into a standard language. Thus consistent access to multiple information sources is offered regardless of particular access methods. It supplies new uniform search capabilities using WWW as frontend for easy and everywhere availability. A similar approach is used in Willow [21], which uses the architectural paradigm of database-drivers to communicate to various databases in a uniform way. A driver for Z39.50 [1], a standard that defines a uniform procedure to query information resources, is supplied.

Other approaches try to cope with the problem of generating gateways by describing the original user interface and thus deriving an executable gateway. Expect [12]

allows to define dialogues with interactive programs by programmatically characterizing interactions.

IDLE [17] is a description language for interactions with telnet-based, character-stream-oriented interfaces. IDLE programs are interpreted on-the-fly by a so-called translation server [16], thus providing the intended WWW-gateway functionality. Problems of gatewaying between stateless and stateful protocols are addressed in [16].

8 Conclusion

A considerable number of useful services is provided by so-called legacy systems. This does not necessarily mean bad software, but it indicates that its production standards make it difficult to modify it in respect to user interface techniques and/or functionality [11]. Especially code for the user interface is tightly embedded into the application's code and cannot be upgraded easily to modern user expectations.

Interface-parasite gateways are a cheap and—when carefully designed—an effective way to integrate an existing service into a global information infrastructure like the World-Wide Web. Their employment provides a new look and feel to an application and prolongs the application's lifetime.

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