Using Word 2000 for HTML and paper documentation

(tools, support)

Jean-Paul Bardez
Telephone: +33 (0)4 42 36 65 11
Fax: +33 (0)4 42 36 56 53
Email: jean-paul.bardez@gemplus.com

Technical communication manager

Gemplus Software Mobile Division
111, route de la Valentine
13011 Marseilles
France

Home:
654, chemin des Manaux
13160 Roquevaire
France
Email: bardez@club-internet.fr

1991: University diploma in translation, ESIT.

1991-1998: Freelance translator and technical writer.

1992: Founding chairman of the Conseil des Rédacteurs Techniques (CRT).

1994-1999: Teacher of technical writing at Paris 8 University, occasional teaching at Rennes 2 University, at CPSS Trudaine and correction of French students' homework at the American University in Paris.

1998: Public Relations Secretary for INTECOM (international federation of technical communicators).

1999: In charge of technical documentation for the mobile telephone software division of Gemplus, the world leader in smartcard solutions.

When the company I work for re-structured and set up a new department, I was given responsibility for technical documentation, and had to give a great deal of thought to the tools and methods to be employed. My new job involved defining a documentation policy in an evolving technical field I was relatively unfamiliar with. What was required was a flexible solution, enabling the production of electronic documentation that could be quickly and easily transferred to a traditional printed medium. To provide integrators with an open, customisable solution, we chose the latest version of Word rather than a desktop publishing programme or web publishing tool. I'd like to talk about some of the problems we encountered and how we solved them for version 1.0 of the software.

Word 2000, like Word '97, can generate HTML documents, but it can also generate Word documents from HTML files. It also includes editing functions adapted to the web, such as frames. We chose this tool rather than specific web-publishing tools in order to be able to convert documents for printing as transparently as possible, by applying a specific style sheet, and to allow our customers (integrators) to transfer the text to other tools of their choice. Word 2000 does not yet offer all the tools required for HTML publishing, and we had problems of compatibility with Netscape.

Structure and dynamic links

Our product is a platform providing value added services for mobile telephones. It is also a development platform and is used to integrate existing applications. We therefore needed 4 manuals (installation, administration, reference and development guides). These were initially organised around a home page which provided access to the index, the glossary and the copyright, and contained an email address for enquiries.

We soon realised that the reference guide and the development guide would contain a large number of cross references. With HTML documentation, it is not a case of establishing links between .doc files but between the HTML files generated from the .doc source files. First, we experimented with placing markers in the files manually, which runs the risk of accidentally deleting the markers. We then decided to merge the reference and programming guides. The resulting document was very large, slow to work with in Word, especially due to the large number of graphics that had to be incorporated. The target HTML file was also a respectable size, despite the fact that Word allows you to export graphics to separate locations. Response times depend on the processor in the computer used for browsing the electronic document and on the network configuration, if the document is deported to a server.

Browsers

We were unable to find a single browser on the web to suit our purposes, i.e. with the capacity to handle .doc and HTML files. We therefore decided to fall back on a solution based on an exhaustive index. Here again, Word did not provide the support we hoped for, since the programme does not provide a standard solution for generating an index from more than one file. We wrote a macrocommand to create tags at the level of the index entry markers and compile them in an index file. The macro creates an occurrence number for each occurrence of identical index entries.

The frame tool allowed us to display 3 levels of titles in the left margin of the document, although the restricted width of the margin meant that the title was often spread over two lines. With hypertext links, parts of the graphics can be linked to their technical explanation, and technical terms can be linked to their entry in the glossary or to their technical implementation in the reference guide. The overall result is that the finished document is full of links that were not too difficult to generate.

Compatibility between web browsers

The HTML version of the documents produced is compatible with Internet Explorer 4.0, which is also produced by Microsoft. However, we tested the documents with Netscape 4.0, and unfortunately we found that some of the document properties are not supported by this browser. For example, the partial frames of titles used in our style sheet were not properly converted and the titles on the right-hand part of the screen were displayed with underlining, like hypertext links, due to the markers used for compiling the table of contents on the left-hand side of the screen. We took the smallest common denominator and solved the problem of the rogue hypertext links by running a macro after the HTML files were generated.

Conclusion

The solution we have adopted is operational, requiring only slight adjustments, but we would be interested in input from anyone working in the same direction. For instance, we would be more than willing to exchange our macros and style sheets for a suitable search engine.