Avoiding Disorientation with Ferret

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- 15 years ago, I was looking for a topic for my PhD. I decided to investigate a problem I encountered: becoming lost while developing software
- In this talk we’ll cover
  - What is disorientation?
  - How do IDEs contribute to disorientation?
  - How do we contribute to disorientation?
  - What can we do to prevent disorientation?
Even experts get lost too

- E1: Sometimes you go into method into another method, and I have no idea where you were coming from any more, you forgot, you lost track.

- P3: When I’m […] in browsing mode, I’ll totally forget how I got to certain places.

- P8: But when I’m lost, what I tend to do is go Alt-Back, back a row. “I’m lost, give me my context back! Where [am I]?” And after three or four things, if I’m not coming back on what I was expecting, I close everything.

- These are some quotes from the Eclipse committers I interviewed about getting lost
- It’s not a frequent occurrence, but when it happens it’s frustrating
- Affects novices and experts
- It turns out that how we set up our work environments and structure our work practices affects the onset of disorientation
What is disorientation?

• “When a developer loses the context or relevancy of their recent actions to their overall goal.”

• Aka “Loss of Context” or “Getting Lost”

• Reported in WWW, control systems, real-world navigation

• BUT: software is always changing, sometimes in radical ways

- Don’t know how they got somewhere, nor why they were there
- Other domains promote information architectures, consistent signage to support way-planning. But we routinely perform method and class refactorings that result in massive changes — more akin to renaming and moving streets, like pre- and post-Haussmann's re-organization of Paris.
The earliest traces I can find of examining disorientation was from David Woods and his group, where they tested a proposal to computerize nuclear plant operation manuals.
But they found operators were getting lost in a maze of pages. (Based on simulations: results were so poor systems were never introduced.)
- Moved to a set of serial displays. From what I gather from their papers, it was very much like Gopher.
- Complaints were that it was like looking through a keyhole
- By moving from paper manuals, the operators lost richness of physical medium: scrawled notes, highlighting, placing bookmarks.
Why was this happening? They undertook a widespread evaluation, and noted a number of issues. Came up with concept of Visual Momentum, motivated by cinematography, to discriminate between supportive systems.
Visual Momentum

- A qualitative measure of a user’s ability to extract relevant information across multiple displays

- Low VM: series of perceptually independent displays

- High VM: aids in coordinating information displayed

- Techniques include: landmarks, longshots (overviews), spatial organization — goal to maintain context from what has been seen before

- Low VM: User carries mental burden of transitioning and reorienting between displays
- High VM: continuity of structure and content
- Key point: when something is hard, we naturally choose to avoid and choose simpler solutions — tunnel vision, or miss key information
- Place information in greater context:
  - perceptual landmarks: common points between displays
  - longshots / overviews / overlays (overlaps)
- Spatial organization is hard in software, since no inherent spatial mapping
EGit Bug 441198:
Add support for credential.helper config

A simple demonstration of how even superficial exploration of the elements involved in a PR can lead to deep path traversals and digressions.
Visual Momentum issues in Eclipse

- lack of visible connecting context when switching between files
- thrashing to view necessary context
- pursuing digressions / mixing contexts

- Eclipse provides amazing program navigation traversals, tied to hotkeys. Enables rapid descents, such as through a call chain. But as the views decontextualize themselves around the current editor, there is rarely any visible connecting context to where you came from.
  - some developers would manage their editors and close unimportant ones to maintain a hot-set
- hard to see everything: frequently switch or between or scroll within files
  - exacerbated by developers using a single giant window
Why do developers become disoriented?

- Difficulties in answering the questions they want to ask
- Difficulties in making sense of what they see
  - Especially when much is new or unfamiliar
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overview</th>
<th>Dependencies</th>
<th>Runtime</th>
<th>Extensions</th>
<th>Extension Points</th>
<th>Build</th>
<th>MANIFEST.MF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

What bundle provides this package?  
Why is this package required?

How would you determine which bundle provides a package?
Which features include this bundle?

How would you determine which feature includes this bundle (consider if the features are from a target platform, so that they are not searchable using File Search)
Walk through of Ferret
Why do software developers become disoriented?

- Herbert Simon: “Information is not a scarce resource. Attention is.”

- *Information Presentation*: Developers must spend mental effort to manage the UI and coordinate what is shown.

- *Information Acquisition*: Mismatch between the questions being asked and those questions that can be answered.

There is plenty of information — the difficulty is understanding how what we see relates to the big picture.

The key to solving data overload issues to is improve the organization of information:
- improve presentation, to leverage perceptual systems and reduce/eliminate cognition required
- make acquiring information we think is necessary able to be done in a tractable manner
Humans can only keep in mind 5 – 9 unrelated “chunks”, where a chunk is some kind of codified knowledge. We can of course remember more things providing that there’s some kind of relation or pattern relating them together.

- This is one of the reasons developers frequently get lost when exploring new code: they haven’t built up how the elements relate to each other.
- This theory plays nicely with Visual Momentum: we want to explicitly externalize information into the UI so that the user doesn’t have to consciously remember it. There is a limit to what they can remember if there’s no clear and deeply encoded relation between the relevant elements.
Problems with information acquisition

- Mismatch between
  - the questions that can be answered with tools (concrete queries)
  - the questions posed by a developer (conceptual queries)

- Burden of managing mechanics falls to the developers rather than the tool

- Developers use tools to help them explore software systems, usually in the form of answering questions
  - Why was this change made?
  - Who uses this value?
  - When does this value change? Why?

- Use many different tools to answer these questions because there are many different sources of information about a program
- Mismatch requires the developer to spend time and effort to express their questions in a form that can be answered by their software tools.
  - decompose the conceptual query into a form that can be answered with available concrete queries
  - and synthesize the results to answer the conceptual query

- These difficulties are further exacerbated by the fact that developers may have to use multiple tools, but these tools have limited abilities to work together
Alternatives

• Faced with these burdens, a developer may choose to:
  • Reformulate his query
  • Choose an entirely different line of inquiry
  • Persevere and accept the extra work needed

• The effort required takes the developer away from their core goal of answering their conceptual query

• Reformulate: but they may miss information that is relevant to their task
• Change: but this wastes whatever time they spent to this point
• Persevere: and this may account for reports of developers spending significant amounts of time simply navigating through the code, or examining irrelevant code, and even becoming disoriented

• We argue that performing this mapping, although an automatic behaviour, is actually a bit more involved, and the mapping isn’t always straightforward
  • Takes time, ties up mental resources
(1) Mapping and Scoping

Where is this exception thrown?

Searching for the program locations throwing an particular exception
Where is this exception thrown?
(2) Composing results of queries

What instantiates this interface?

Requires first finding the implementors of the interface, and then the methods instantiating those classes.
(3) Integrating and reasoning across tools

What actually calls this interface method?
Ferret federates information from multiple sources

- Relation implementations have an implicit type; inputs are converted, if possible

Arrows represent possible correspondences.
The correspondence network allows unanticipated integration. For example, java.reflect, JDT/Debug, Resources. These are all elements that are available as selections in the UI; Ferret uses these correspondences to allow clicking on values and have them trigger the same questions.
Tips for remaining oriented

• Avoid F3
  • Ctrl-O and Ctrl-F3 (Ctrl-O for what’s underneath)
  • Shift + hover: show source
  • Call hierarchy view

• Manage your editors: close editors automatically
Manage digressions

• Use windows to maintain context

• Bind Window > New Window to shortcut

• Prefs > Java > Open Type Hierarchy in New Perspective

Example is a screenshot of a set of windows opened while exploring possible uses of ITextHover
Surprising that many developers use a single window
Take notes

• Externalise your thought products

• Also helps build relationships between what you see
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Eclipse Marketplace
github.com/briandealwis/ferret
Evaluate the Sessions
Sign in and vote at eclipsecon.org

-1  0  +1