

Menu Design for Complex Applications

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Many complex applications that we create involve a large number of business objects on which the user needs to operate. Creating a unified menu to accomplish this can be quite challenging. Fortunately, as we begin to place the user's focus more on the objects and tasks and less on the application itself, there are new window and menu constructs to support this design technique. As the user activates different objects, different commands need to be accessed in the user interface. Menus in the traditional application window are now being divided into three types: primary window menus, workspace menus, and active object menus. Each one of these types enhances usability by defining the appropriate user interface as the user activates or deactivates an object.

Primary Window Menu

This menu is the topmost container menu and controls the work area of the window. It also identifies the 'main' or high-level object and the commands normally associated with that object. This menu is displayed in the menu bar at all times, regardless of which object is active. If you have several main objects in the application, you should include a 16x16 pixel icon for each active object as part of the primary container window.



Primary window menu

Workspace Menu

As we move away from MDI (Multiple Document Interface) applications, the workspace becomes the new window construct to support the organization of child windows. The workspace menu (typically labeled "window" on the menu bar) provides commands for managing the child windows displayed within it. Like the primary window menu, the workspace menu should always be displayed, regardless of which object is active.



Workspace menu

Active Object Menu

An active object can define the menus that appear on the primary container's menu bar. Actions that apply only to the active object should go on the active object menus. If no child objects are active, the object defined by the primary window container becomes the active object. Most of the menus on the menu bar are this type of menu. You should follow the normal menu naming conventions and use separator bars to create clear and intuitive menus. In addition to having a place on the application menu bar, an active object menu is often associated with the object itself via a right-click pop-up menu.



About the author:

James Hobart is an internationally recognized user interface design consultant based in California, USA. He specializes in the design and development of large-scale, high-volume client/server and web applications. He is an expert in GUI design for transaction processing systems and strategies for migration to thin-client graphical user interfaces. He can be reached at jimh@classicsys.com

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