Usability News

January 1999, *Vol. 1 Issue 1*

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Usability News is a free web newsletter that is produced by the Software Usability Research Laboratory (SURL) at Wichita State University. The SURL team specializes in software/website user interface design, usability testing, and research in human-computer interaction.
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Mouse-Over vs. Point-and-Click: Which is Better?

By Greg Bender, Michael Bohan, & Alex Chaparro

Target selection is an integral part of computer software use. Users communicate their intentions to the computer, usually with a mouse using the point-and-click selection technique. An alternative to point-and-click is the mouse-over technique. The mouse-over technique differs from the standard point-and-click technique, in that rather than having to select the target with a mouse button-up or button-down action, the cursor must simply be superimposed on the target for a specified period of time. This technique is becoming very popular in web page design especially with menu structures (i.e., www.msnbc.com).

We are conducting a series of studies investigating the viability of the mouse-over technique. Thus far, results indicate that the mouse-over technique significantly reduces target acquisition time compared to the standard button select technique. However, under certain conditions, the mouse-over technique is associated with significantly more errors. Our studies suggest that mouse-over error rates are significantly reduced by increasing the length of time that the cursor must be superimposed on the target, increasing the target size, and decreasing the density of targets on the display. With these error-reduction manipulations, preliminary results suggest that target acquisition time is less with the mouse-over technique than the point-and-click technique.

Future studies will delineate the specific conditions in which mouse-over is superior to the point-and-click technique and determine whether these results generalize to web-based environments. These findings will eventually be used to generate concrete interface design guidelines that will help guide designers when to use the mouse-over and point-and-click techniques.
