

# gWidgetsWWW

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## Abstract:

The **gWidgets** package provides an API to abstract the interface for a few of the available GUI toolkits available through R. The **gWidgetsWWW** package provides an implementation of the **gWidgets** API for use with through the web. Using just R commands, interactive GUIs can be produced.

The current status of the project is still experimental. It should work with most modern browsers, although some widgets (gcanvas, gsvg) are not working equally for all browsers. (Some of these require the **canvas** tag to be implemented.)

## 1 Overview

To create a web GUI a means first that a web page with controls, etc. must be created to layout the GUI. More importantly though, to be interactive a means must be provided to callback in to the web server when the user initiates an action so that the web server can responds with commands to manipulate the user's page.

There are two choices for the webserver:

- For local use (no outside internet access) the dyanmic help web server of R is leveraged. To use this, the function `localServerStart` is called to start the server, or `localServerOpen` is used to load a file. The command

```
localServerOpen("/Examples/ex-simple-gui.R", package="gWidgetsWWW")
```

will open an example page.

- To allow other computers to run a **gWidgetsWWW** script the RApache package <http://biostat.mc.vanderbilt.edu/rapache/>, which embeds an R process within the Apache web server, is used. Both process callbacks from the browser to the web server that can be processed through R.

To return instructions to the page, javascript is used so that the entire page need not be reloaded, as javascript can manipulate elements on the page. The javascript code is simplified by using the extjs javascript libraries, available from [www.extjs.com](http://www.extjs.com).

To make a GUI in **gWidgets** can be as easy as loading the **gWidgets** package then calling

```
w <- gwindow("simple GUI with one button", visible=FALSE)
g <- ggroup(cont = w)
b <- gbutton("click me", cont = g, handler = function(h,...) {
  gmessage("hello world", parent = b)
})
visible(w) <- TRUE
```

To run the GUI, two ways are possible. This code can be embedded in (or sourced from) a **brew** template and run through the combination of **brew** and **RApache**. Alternatively, one can configure **gWidgetsWWW** to process specific URLs through this template and encode the file name in the URL. With this approach, adding a web page is as easy as adding a file to a directory and pointing a browser at it. The main webpage for **gWidgetsWWW** <http://www.math.csi.cuny.edu/gWidgetsWWW> contains examples of some basic GUIs. These are included in the Examples subdirectory of the package once installed.

GUIs made with **gWidgetsWWW** are not as snappy as other web GUIs. The main reason for this is the fact that callbacks to manipulate the page are sent back into R (the server) and then returned. In many GUIs, this is avoided by using javascript directly on the web page. The clear tradeoff is ease of programming for the R user (R not javascript) versus speed for the user.

## 2 Top level windows

Web GUIs are different than desktop GUIs. Not only are they slower, as they have lag time between the GUI and the server, there can only be one top-level windows. The **gwindow** call above makes such a top-level window (a web page). Subwindows are possible, but all other **gwindow** instances should use the **parent** argument to

specify an object that acts as the parent of a subwindow. (an animation will appear from there, say.)

### 3 The containers

The **gWidgetsWWW** package has all the following containers: the top-level container **gwindow**, subwindows also constructed through **gwindow** (use a parent object); the box containers **ggroup**, **gframe** and **gexpandgroup**; the tabular layout container **glayout**; the notebook container **gnotebook**, but no **gpanedgroup**.

To make a component appear in response to some action – such as happens with **gexpandgroup**, one can add it to a box container dynamically. Or one can put it in a **ggroup** instance and toggle that containers visibility with the **visible** method, in a manner identical to how **gexpandgroup** is used.

### 4 The widgets

Most – but not all – of the standard widgets work as expected. This includes labels (**glabel**), buttons (**gbutton**), radio buttons (**gradio**), checkboxes (**gcheckbox**, **gcheckboxgroup**), comboboxes (**gcombobox**), sliders (**gslider**), spinboxes (well kind of) (**gspinbutton**), single-line edit boxes (**gedit**), multi-line text areas (**gtext**), dataframe viewers (**gtable**) and editors (**gdf**), images (**gimage** – the image is a url), menu bars (**gmenu** – but not toolbars), statusbars (**gstatusbar**).

Some of the dialogs work including **gcalendar**, **galert**, **gmessage**.

The widgets **galert**, **ghtml** and **gaction** are all implemented.

The widget **gcommandline** is implemented for local versions only – running arbitrary commands is a *huge* security risk.

No attempt has been made to include the compound widgets **gvarbrowser**, **ggenericwidget**, **gdfnotebook**, **ggraphicsnotebook**.

#### 4.1 graphics

There is no plot device available. Rather, one uses the **png** device driver, say, to create graphic files which are then shown using **gimage**. The function **getStaticTempfile** should be used to produce a file, as this file will sit in a directory that can be accessed through a URL. This URL is returned by **convertStaticFileToUrl**. Other drivers may be used, but for server use they should not depend on X11.

Two package-specific widgets, **gcanvas** and **gsvg**, can be used for displaying non-interactive graphics files through the **canvas** device or the **RSVGTipsDevice** (the **SVGAnnotation** device should work as well). They are used similarly: You create the widget, you create a file. The graphics device writes to the file (similar to the **png** device driver, say). This file can be assigned to the widget at construction time, or later through the **svalue** method. For **gsvg** the file must be accessible as a URL, so the **getStaticTempfile** function should be used. The **canvas** device uses a newer HTML entity, **canvas**, which is not supported on all browsers. The **gsvg** package uses a SVG (scalable vector graphics) format. This format again has some issues with browsers, but seemingly fewer. The **RSVTTipsDevice** device has simple features for adding tooltips and URLs to mouse events. The **SVGAnnotation** package allows this and much more.

## 4.2 Quirks

A number of little quirks are present, that are not present with other **gWidgets** implementations:

1. The top level window is not made visible at first. (A good idea in any case, but not the default for **gwindow**. To create a window the **visible** method, as in **visible(w) = TRUE**, is used. (When this is issued the javascript to make the page is generated.)
2. The handlers are run in an environment that does not remember the loading of any packages beyond the base packages and **gWidgetsWWW**. So in each handler, any external packages must be loaded.
3. The use of the options **quietly=TRUE** and **warn=FALSE** should be used with **require** when loading in external packages. Otherwise, these messages will be interpreted by the web server and an error will usually occur.
4. Debugging can be tough as the R session is not readily available. The error messages in the browser are useful. For development of the package the firebug ([getfirebug.com](http://getfirebug.com)) add on to FireFox has proven very useful.

## 4.3 Data persistence

AJAX technologies are used to prevent a page load every time a request is made of the server, but each time a page is loaded a new R session is loaded. Any variables

stored in a previous are forgotten. To keep data persistent across pages, one can load and write data to a file or a data base.

## 4.4 Comboboxes

The `gcombobox` example shows how comboboxes can show a vector of items, or a data frame with a column indicating an icon, or even a third icon with a tooltip. As well, the `gedit` widget does not have a type-ahead feature, but the combobox can be used for this purpose.

The following will set this up.

```
> cb <- gcombobox(state.name, editable=TRUE, cont = w)
> cb$..hideTrigger <- TRUE ## set property before being rendered
```

This package is implemented independently of the **gWidgetsWWW** package, and so there may be some unintended inconsistencies in the arguments. The package uses the **proto** package for object-oriented support, not S3 or S4 classes. There are some advantages to this, and some drawbacks. One advantage is the user can modify objects or call their internal methods.

## 4.5 ggooglemaps

[Currently not quite working] The `ggooglemaps` widget provides access to a sliver of the google maps API. This sliver could be enlarged quite easily if desired. Using this requires the web server to be registered with google.

## 5 Installation

The local server is installed with the package. Just type `localServerStart` to begin, although this won't load a file. For that try `localServerStart("Examples/ex-index.R", package='gWidgetsWWW')`.

Installation of the RApache server requires several steps:

1. Install the RApache module. For Ubuntu or Debian machines there is a copy and paste script on the RApache.net website
2. Install the **gWidgetsWWW** package from CRAN. This must be installed so that the webserver can run it.

3. The **gWidgetsWWW** has a `RApache.conf` file that must be installed and configured. To install it with UBUNTU something like this will work (provided you have permission)

```
> system(sprintf("cp %s /etc/apache2",  
                system.file("templates/RApache.conf", package="gWidgetsWWW")))  
> system("cat 'Include /etc/apache2 RApache.conf' >> /etc/apache2/apache2.conf")
```

To configure the `RApache.conf` file requires a few things:

- Specifying where the `mod_R` apache module is. The default is for an Ubuntu installation
- Specifying where to find scripts to run through `gWidgetsWWWrun`. The default is the set of examples, but this should be changed to the directory (or directories) where you wish to put the `gWidgetsWWW` scripts. The directory need not part of the `htdocs` directory.
- Or specifying where to find brew scripts **gWidgetsWWW**. (This is needed for creating graphics files.)
- Some other options have reasonable defaults, although many have a hard coded path to the `gWidgetsWWW` package in them. If this is not a standard place for an Ubuntu install these will need to be changed to that given by:

```
> system.file("", package="gWidgetsWWW")
```

## 6 Security

Security – is a big deal. Web servers can be hacked, and if hacked the hacker has full access to the server. This can be scary. The local server blocks all requests that are not to the local IP 127.0.0.1, preventing outside access. As for outside access, although it is not believed that `RApache` is any less secure than other Apache modules, you can protect yourself by running the entire setup within a virtual machine. There is easy to install, reasonably priced (or free) commercial software from VMWare ([www.vmware.com](http://www.vmware.com)). For open-source fans, the VirtualBox project ([www.virtualbox.org](http://www.virtualbox.org)) also has software. One can install this, then run the author provided appliance. Or one can install the virtual software, install a host OS (ubuntu linux say), then install Apache and R then `RApache` etc. It actually isn't so hard to do.

The call from the web server back into RApache can also be source of insecurity. The **gWidgetsWWW** package allows only a limited number of calls back from a web page, which should in theory be secure. But if the script is not secure, there is nothing the package can do. Scripts must *never* trust that data sent from the web page to the server is safe. It should be coerced into any desired format, and never evaluated. Using `eval` say allows any one to run R commands on the server which given the power of R means they have full control of the server.

The web server communicates back to the web browser through an AJAX call. This is supposed to be secure, as only javascript code that originates from the same server as the initial page is executed.