

Git GUI Software Usability Survey

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ABSTRACT

UPDATED—October 19, 2016. This sample paper describes the formatting requirements for SIGCHI conference proceedings, and offers recommendations on writing for the worldwide SIGCHI readership. Please review this document even if you have submitted to SIGCHI conferences before, as some format details have changed relative to previous years. Abstracts should be about 150 words and are required.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information Interfaces and Presentation (e.g. HCI): Miscellaneous; See <http://acm.org/about/class/1998/> for the full list of ACM classifiers. This section is required.

Author Keywords

Authors' choice; of terms; separated; by semicolons; include commas, within terms only; required.

Git; gui.

INTRODUCTION

Git is a powerful version control system that is used by users of various skill levels. This survey will evaluate 4 different Graphical User Interfaces (GUIs) that help users manage their Git repositories.

Each piece of software will be examined and reviewed based on a few different metrics including: what features it affords the user (what functions it provides) [1], how it signifies different affordances (how it shows the user what they are able to do), the constraints present in the application (things that the GUI prevents the user from doing), the feedback shown to the user when actions are performed and the overall discoverability of the GUI. The conceptual model is also something that will be discussed for each GUI; how it shows the underlying conceptual model defined by Git will be evaluated.

The four Git GUIs that will be reviewed in this survey are by different companies and have free versions available for public use.

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CHI'16, May 07–12, 2016, San Jose, CA, USA

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.475/123_4

One client is GitHub, it is provided by Git Hub - a site that hosts git projects. It is a simplified GUI aimed at making git accessible to everyone with a reduced learning curve.

GitKraken a client made by Axosoft, allows users to link to multiple remote repositories hosted on many types of servers (GitHub, BitBucket, etc...). It provides access to many of Git's functions, making it useful for advanced users.

The third piece of software to be reviewed is SmartGit. SmartGit allows for almost ALL of git's features to be used, making it useful in almost any git scenario.

Source tree is the last piece of software that will be examined in this survey. SourceTree was developed by Atlassian and prides itself on it's ability to communicate information about the state of a repository to the user.

GIT USER GOALS AND GIT TERMS EXPLAINED

Each of the reviews in this document will contain a brief introduction to the software and some notable features, before applying the terms previously introduced to two main high-level tasks. Those tasks will be clearly identified after stating why someone might want to use Git and providing an idea of the benefits that Git gives to the user.

Users of Git in general want to be able to make changes to their code and have a centralized version of the code reflect those changes. The ability to view when a change (in the form of what's called a 'commit') to the code, when that commit happened, and who made those changes can prove to be an invaluable debugging tool should the software malfunction after a commit is made. When work needs to be done on a separate feature of an application, branching (the process of copying the code to be modified independently of other branches) is critical for testing and developing features alongside an application.

There are two core tasks that almost all Git users will perform. The first task is making changes to a local copy of the code, committing those changes, and finally pushing those changes to the master branch. This task should provide appropriate feedback to the user in the case that they are unable to push for whatever reason. The second task is a common and can be a more involved task, merging a branch into the master branch. When the user creates a branch from the master to add a feature, or fix a bug (programming error), they will eventually need to merge that branch back into the master for it to be integrated into the main application. This process can involve many merge conflicts (when the differences in source

code between two revisions of a file cannot be automatically resolved) that can make this challenging.

These high level goals can be broken down into Git commands, the GUIs use Git commands to achieve the user's goals. Depending on the GUI, it is explicit about the git commands that will be used and will allow the user to customize them.

GITHUB DESKTOP REVIEW

This section reviews GitHub desktop, the default GUI for managing git repositories. This application is produced by GitHub and can be downloaded and opened directly from their website. The affordance that most git users appreciate about GitHub desktop over other applications is the easy cloning ability. This interface does not allow for users to edit their code directly within the app, nor can you view the most recent version of the files. Instead you can see the initial files, and you can see the specific changes that you made to the files. In order to see the current file with all changes applied and to make changes to the file you must open those files in another program on your machine. This application does allow the user to see all changes that were made to a file, as well as who made those changes.

Stage, Commit and Push Changes to Remote

Being able to take changes made on the users machine and apply them to the remote repository is an essential element to managing a git repository. This is described for GitHub desktop in the HTA *****called this*****. After a user has made a change to a file on their machine and has opened the GitHub desktop application, they must choose what repository they have made changes to. The repositories are found on the left hand side of the page and although there is no title signifying that these are the repositories, the filter repositories field is used as a signifier. The feedback the user receives after pressing the repository name is not immediate and could be frustrating depending on how long the repository takes to load.

The user must then enter the changes view, signified by the dot appearing on the changes button. In this view all changes on the local machine are automatically selected, but none of the changes are automatically visible. This can lead to a misconception when users enter their summary of the change, believing they are writing the description for one change but actually committing all changes with that summary. This is a problem with discoverability in the system, a user might make this mistake many times before realizing their actions consequences. After a user commits their changes, they receive a small piece of feedback at the bottom. Unfortunately this is the same colour as the rest of the GUI and is not very noticeable.

There is another problem in discoverability for this process. This comes from the actual push action and closes off the action described in the HTA. Namely, GitHub users the word push to describe pushing a change from your local repository onto the remote repository. However, in GitHub desktop, this action is instigated by pressing the sync button in the right hand corner. A long term git user could have trouble relearning the new terminology or locating the button in the first place.

Merge a Branch into Master

Another important function to enable a user to manage their repository is being able to merge two branches, specifically merging a branch into the master branch. This is described in the HTA *****name of HTA*****. The whole process in GitHub Desktop has problems with discoverability. In order to merge a branch into master you must have selected the master branch, and then select the branch you wish to merge into master. This is counter intuitive as the user is most likely in their branch already and would have to switch to master in order to achieve this goal. The last action that the user must take is to press the update button. This lessens the discoverability of the GUI because once again this is not the terminology that GitHub traditionally uses.

GIT KRAKEN REVIEW

GitKraken is a powerful Git GUI that was meant aimed at making basic Git tasks easier for developers. One of the first things to note about GitKraken is the walk through it gives you upon the first startup of the application. It highlights some of the basic ways that GitKraken integrates with Git by using signifiers (text boxes) to point to different buttons and explain what each button affords the user. It also outlines some basic startup tasks including: how to link to your existing GitHub profile, how to change account preferences, and how to add an existing repository.

GitKraken affords adding additional remote repositories for a local repository. The newly added remote repository can be hosted on GitHub, BitBucket, or just linked to using an URL.

Upon opening a repository to explore, you are shown a commit history graph. The graph affords the viewing of the impact of each commit on the central code base. It shows when it was committed, who pushed it and the modifications made in that commit.

Stage, Commit and Push Changes to Remote

This subsection will go over the task outlined in the GitKraken-HTA1 - the task of staging committing and pushing changes to a remote. Images will be provided to supplement the critique.

The first item, 1.1., is very simple in GitKraken, as it affords the switching of local repositories by clicking the folder in the top left corner. It signifies that you can click the folder by changing the cursor, which is not a very clear signifier as you need to hover your mouse over it to see that you can click it. Without the tutorial, this would have been difficult to discover.

1.2 is also quite simple, selecting the desired branch within a repository can be done by hovering over it under the 'local' heading with your mouse, clicking the three vertical dots that appear (or by more intuitively, right clicking anywhere over the branch name) and selecting checkout from the drop down.

1.3 in the HTA is somewhat intuitive. To view the changes you have made locally, you can select the top item in the branch which is highlighted. GitKraken indicates that there are un-staged changes by having a dashed circle as apposed to a solid circle. After you have done that, you can see all the files with changes made on the right side of the screen. GitKraken affords the viewing of changes by clicking on the

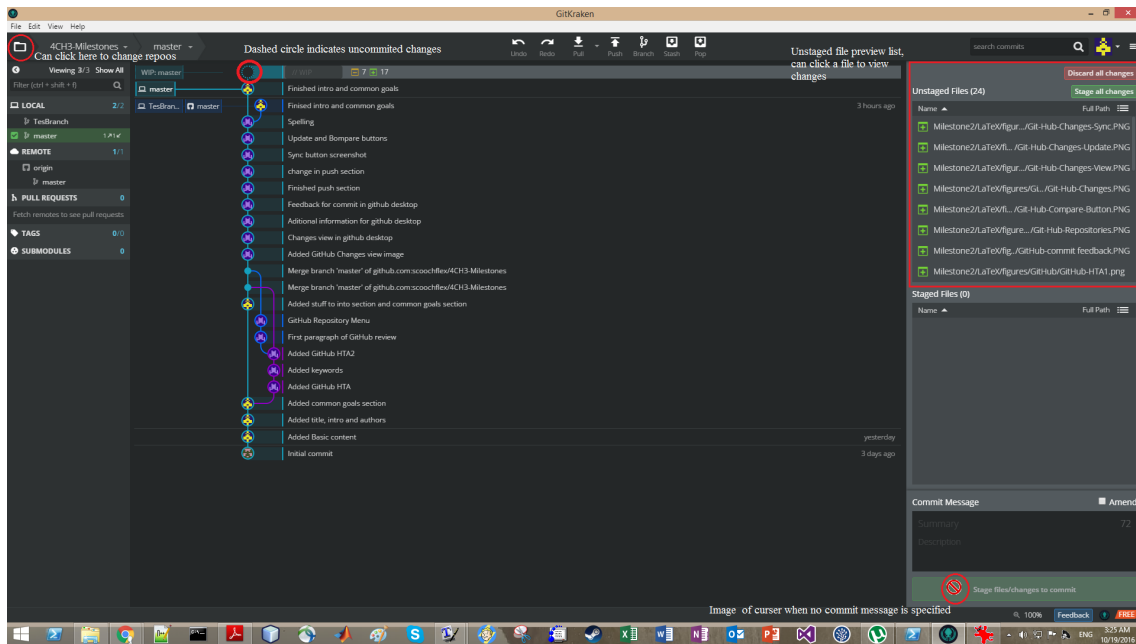


Figure 1. This image is a screen shot of the GitKraken tutorial that happens on the first startup

files, the changes are shown in the middle of the screen and the additions and subtractions are signified by being highlighted green or red (this uses a cultural convention relating to traffic lights [1]).

CONCLUSION

It is important that you write for the SIGCHI audience. Please read previous years' proceedings to understand the writing style and conventions that successful authors have used. It is particularly important that you state clearly what you have done, not merely what you plan to do, and explain how your work is different from previously published work, i.e., the

unique contribution that your work makes to the field. Please consider what the reader will learn from your submission, and how they will find your work useful. If you write with these questions in mind, your work is more likely to be successful, both in being accepted into the conference, and in influencing the work of our field.

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