LogiLogi: The Quest for Critical Mass

Wiersma, Wybo
mail@wybowiersma.net
King's College London

In this abstract, and more so in the poster-presentation, we will report on the process of, and the problems involved in, gaining a critical mass of users for an interactive hypertext application for the Digital Humanities. The aim of any DH application ultimately is to be used, but for collaborative ones, the contributions and interactions of existing users are often what make it worthwhile for new visitors. Gaining an initial critical mass of users for such applications is notoriously hard, but especially important if they are ever to be used at all.

First we briefly introduce LogiLogi, the system on which we are going to try to get a community started. Next our strategy for gaining users, some possible improvements, and attempts so far, are explained. Here we will also discuss the kinds of users we target, and the possible size of the application's critical mass. We finish with an overview of the usage-data that our poster will report on.

1. System

LogiLogi is a Web 2.0 application that tries to find an informal middle-road between good conversations and journal-papers by providing a form of quick, informal publication, peer-review, and annotation of short philosophical texts. It is intended for all those ideas that one cannot turn into a full-sized paper, but that one deems too interesting to leave to the winds.

It does not make use of forum-threads (avoiding their many problems), but of tags and links that can also be attached to phrases by people other than the text's original author. It also features a rating-system modelled after journal-based review. Well-rated texts earn authors more voting-power, and thus a measure of standing, within their peer group (of which there are multiple).

LogiLogi is Free Software, and has been under development for 3 years, during which about 30 volunteers have done 8 man-years of work (worth $500.000). A public beta is already online and fully functional at `www.LogiLogi.org`.

2. Strategy

Things that have been done so far to gain users are, first of all, making sure that LogiLogi works properly. LogiLogi has been extensively tested and improved at the LIRMM lab of the University of Montpellier this September. And it was used there by about 30 active users for internal discussions until the end of October. Secondly, some seed-content has been added (about 100 philosophical texts, some of which are part of larger essays). And finally, since October, it has been made easy for users to track new replies, annotations, and votes for their documents, both through a personalized RSS feed, and e-mail alerts. These things have made LogiLogi practically usable for the first time.

2.1. Target Audience

LogiLogi has not yet been advertised widely, and changing this is one of the first things we will do next. LogiLogi aims for a wide audience of scholars, students, and people interested in philosophy, but to set the right tone, we first aim for people with academic credentials (students and scholars). Among them, most success is expected with students, both because of their limited access to other publishing channels, and their greater average computer-literacy. Possible places to reach them are forums, newsgroups, and (limited) advertising via Google Adwords.

2.2. Process

Then, as part of user-driven, agile development, feedback will be collected from users on possible improvements: both ongoing, from users on the web, and from a small group of philosophers/students in a usability test. Some of these improvements will then be implemented, after which we plan to repeat the process, with another round of usability testing and improvements.

2.3. Improvements

A possible improvement so far identified is simplifying the application, for example by (temporarily) limiting the number of voting-communities (peergroups) to one. This would have the additional advantage of reducing the number of users that are needed to reach critical mass, because votes are no longer limited to, and divided between groups. While it is hard to determine what the critical mass of LogiLogi would be, from what we saw in the LIRMM case, it most likely lies between 30 to 60 active users per peergroup (or for the whole site, if there is only one peergroup). To examine this further, a small literature study of the notion of critical mass, and of the factors influencing its size (especially for hypertext based applications, close to the humanities) will also be undertaken.

Another place for improvement is the editing and annotation process: its responsiveness, especially, could be improved. LogiLogi currently requires people to open a new page when they want to insert annotations or links, while it would be a lot easier if this could be done while reading the text, at least for simple annotations. And finally, a demo-video will be created, which quickly explains what LogiLogi is, and how it can be used.

2.4. Report

In our poster we will present LogiLogi, explain the notion of critical mass, and report on developments in the number of users. In addition, the strategies and improvements we applied, and their practical, and causal relationships will be explained, where possible. Also, we will not just be reporting the number of registered users, or unique visitors, but also on the number of documents, annotations, replies, and votes given over the time-period from December 2009 until June 2010. Thus a detailed view will be given of the process of gaining critical mass.

3. Conclusion

Whether we succeed or not in gaining a critical mass for LogiLogi, there will be meaningful results from this experiment, as it not only involves presenting, or further improving an already quite usable interactive Digital Humanities application, but foremostly trying to give it a critical mass of users, and exploring this process, producing insights and a valuable case-study (of success or failure) for future Digital Humanities projects to learn from: projects which will, most likely, be more interactive than their predecessors, and thus will sooner or later face the same challenge of gaining a critical mass of users.

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