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FIREFOX EXTENSIONS FOR BUSINESS USE

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ABSTRACT

This is a quick and very subjective survey of existing Firefox extensions. The goal of this survey is to list the most promising Firefox extensions exploiting Web 2.0 technologies and excepted to be suitable for business use. The full list of tagged and rated Firefox extensions, the full results of this survey, is available as a separate document. In this report, I'll take a closer look only to the most interesting extensions of only two categories: social networking and annotation.

KEYWORDS: Web 2.0, Firefox extensions, social networking, social bookmarking, social annotation, annotation

1 INTRODUCTION

This is a quick and very subjective survey of existing Firefox extensions. The goal of this survey is to list the most promising Firefox extensions exploiting Web 2.0 technologies and excepted to be suitable for business use.

This survey was made by skimming through over 1900 Firefox extensions at Mozilla Foundation's public Firefox Extension repository[1], selecting about 280 most promising extensions from them, tagging them by their purpose[2] and finally rating them after their quality and innovativeness. The selection was mostly made only by descriptions of the extensions, but some of the most interesting extensions were also quickly tested.

Firefox extensions are user-installable add-ons for Mozilla Foundation's Firefox web browser[3]. By using JavaScript[4] programming language for their business logic and XUL-markup[5] for their user interface, Firefox extensions are allowed to replace and extend browser's user interface (which is also programmed mostly with JavaScript and XUL) almost without any limits. Extensions can, for example, tune up Firefox's existing user interface with small fixes (e.g. 11, 28, 33, 37), augment opened web pages with additional content related information (e.g. 17, 18, 19, 21) or enhance usability of individual Web 2.0 services (e.g. 13, 14, 35) with *real* user interface components and make them look and feel more like *real* applications (e.g. 4, 16, 25).

The full list of tagged and rated Firefox extensions, the full results of this survey, is available as a separate document. Here I'll take a closer look only to the most interesting extensions of only two categories: social networking and annotation.

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[1] Mozilla Foundation's Firefox public extensions repository is available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/browse/type:1.

[2] The extensions were tagged with one or more of the following labels: accessibility, adaptation, adaptive, aggregation, annotation, augmentation, bookmarking, context aware, convergence, discover links, discover people, file sharing, history, hyperlinks, information visualization, instant messaging, manipulation, navigation, observation, RSS, registration required, searching, semantic web, service dependent, social annotation, social bookmarking, social networking, social reviewing, stand-alone and synchronization.

[3] Firefox is available as a free download from: http://www.mozilla.org/firefox/.

[4] JavaScript has been standardized as ECMAScript. See http://www.ecma-international.org/publications/standards/Ecma-262.htm.

[5] XUL is Mozilla Foundation's user interface language used by Firefox and other Mozilla's products. See: http://www.mozilla.org/projects/xul/.

2 SOCIAL NETWORKING EXTENSIONS

The amount of social bookmarking and social networking services in the Web 2.0 world is just overwhelming. And almost every service has also its own extension for Firefox. If you are using a just one social networking or bookmarking service, your choice is simple: just install the (often official) extension that is available for the service you use (e.g. 3, 6, 9, 22, 23, 31, 36).

As a disappointment, most of the extensions for social networking and bookmarking services are just shortcut-buttons (or alike) for different parts of the service they support. Luckily, there is always a few exceptions. Extensions for social bookmarking services often integrate their bookmarks with Firefox's user interface (e.g. 5) and some even try to synchronize their bookmarks with Firefox's ones (e.g. 30). Still only a very few extensions, LinkedIn Companion (22) as the best example, seem to go a bit further and augment other web services with their users' social data.

When I began this survey I was excepting to find many more convergence extensions than I eventually did. By *convergence*, I mean the integration of distinct services and aggregation of their content. Therefore, by *convergence extensions* I mean Firefox extensions, which are built to be unified user interfaces (or information aggregators) for one or more distinct services. Finally, I found only a few extensions that converge existing Web 2.0 services and are worth to mention about:

- BlogRovr – an agent like blog observer, which searches subscribed blogs for posts related to the current page that the user is browsing (2).

- meebo – a user interface for a web based instant messaging service that let's its users to chat on any of the popular instant messaging networks (25)

- Shareaholic – one button to send a page to any of the most popular social bookmarking services (29)

So, why the lack of convergence extensions is a problem? Because maybe the greatest problem in using Firefox extensions is, that in practice, only a very limited number of extensions can be installed and used simultaneously. A typical extension embeds at least a one extra button, toolbar, menuitem or sidebar to Firefox's user interface. While this might be fine with just one extension installed, it may be a problem with more extensions simultaneously in use. And that's the case, if we have to install a new Firefox extension for every new Web 2.0 service we want to use. In addition, extensions also hook their own code within Firefox's

web browsing routines and more code needs more time to be run. Therefore, with too many extensions installed, the user interface may become both bloated and unresponsive.

Even if there wasn't so many convergence extensions for Web 2.0 services yet, there exists an interesting fork of the original Firefox web browser as a whole. Flock [6], which calls itself as *The Social Web Browser*, is an independent open source web browser based on the source code of the original Firefox, but focused on converging social web services. It will be interesting to see will it fly on its own or will it, eventually, be replaced by convergence extensions for the original Firefox.

Finally, there is a group of social networking services, which attempt to network people as they browse the web and are therefore dependent on their browser extensions. To mention a few of them:

– Gabbly (15) – an instant messaging service that provides a distinct chat channel for every web page for messaging with the other people on the same page

– Me.dium (24) – a social networking service that let's you follow your friends browsing and discover where other people traveled from your current location.

– Others Online (26) – a traditional social networking service that suggests you new contacts relevant to your web browsing on every page you visit

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[6] Flock, *"The Social Web Browser"*, can be downloaded for free from: http://www.flock.com/.

3 ANNOTATION AND NOTE TAKING EXTENSIONS

The second topic in this surveys is Firefox extensions designed for annotation and note taking. As opposite to extensions build to support social networking services, most of the extensions described here are stand-alone and, thus, work independent from any web service and store their data locally on the hard drive (usually under the personal directory of Firefox's profile data) of the computer in use. Although, also service dependent social annotation services and on-line notebook services exist.

I begin with stand-alone extensions. Even the stand-alone extensions were the minority of the surveyed extensions, quality of the best of them appeared to be pleasing at least. Still, with some of them there appears to be a common technical problem: annotations can't be printed – the annoted page is simply printed without the annotations. The following extensions work as stand-alone and independent form any web service:

- Dog-Ears (8) – allows inserting several numbered location bookmarks onto a single web page; inserted *dog ears* are automatically saved when inserted, automatically reloaded when revisiting the page, but they don't appear when printing the page

- FireShot (10) – a Windows only annotation extension for Firefox; it opens a snapshot of the web page as a pop-up window, enables easy annotation for it and allows to save the results as an image file

- Internote (20) – allows inserting nice looking yellow stickies with notes onto web pages; stickies are automatically saved when inserted, automatically reloaded when revisiting the page, but they don't appear when printing the page

- ScrapBook (27) – a digital scrapbook within Firefox for storing snippets of web pages; it also allows to annotate webpages while scrapping them; its annotations are preserved when printing the annoted page

- Web Marker (38) – a simple highlighting tool for Firefox; it doesn't save the highlighting automatically, but allows to store the highlighted page as a such bookmark from which the highlighting can be reproduced, for example, in another Firefox with Web Marker extension installed; the highlighting doesn't appear when printing the highlighted page

– Zotero (39) – more a bibliography manager than a note taking tool for Firefox, but it also allows to save snapshots of web pages for later use.

As compared to stand-alone extensions, extensions for social and service dependent services were a disappointment. Even if there exist services with usable interface on their extensions, the social part seems to be missing: current services allow only to make totally private or totally public annotations (not suitable for normal collaborative group work; Diigo (7) seems to be an exception), and their public annotations are mostly useless, since none of them have a user base large enough to neither make the public annotations easy to find or of good quality enough.

Here, at last, I take a short look at the seemingly best service dependent annotation and notetaking extensions for Firefox and extensions for social annotation services:

– Annotate Any Webpage (1) – a shortcut button to a free annotation web service, which allows to add simple annotations to a single web page, print the annoted page or share the address to the annoted page, which is stored as public on the web (by the service)

– Dappad notebook sidebar (4) – an user interface for Dappad virtual notebook service; notes can be stored as private or public; public notes by other users can searched

– Diigo (7) – a social annotation service with support for groups; annotation includes highlighting and sticky notes, which are stored by the service and reloaded automatically when revisiting the annoted page; service has aggregation tools for made annotations

– Fleck (12) – a social annotation tool with pleasing user interface; shows if the current web page has annotation on the service, but is capable of, eventually, displaying only annotations by one user at time

– Stickis (32) – a simple social annotation tool to leave comments to any web page for other Stickis' users to find them later on; can't be installed with BlogRovr extension (2)

– Trailfire (34) – a combination of social bookmarking and annotation service, which tries to implement Vannevar Bush's ideas of trails on the current web; several web sites can be bookmarked as a single directed trail with comments within bubbles embedded onto the included pages.

LIST OF EXTENSIONS

[1] Annotate any webpage. Add comments to any web page and then easily email, blog, print or save it. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/4267.

[2] Blogrovr. BlogRovR shows you what YOUR favorite bloggers have to say about anything you're browsing, unintrusively and as you browse. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/4689.

[3] Clipmarks. Clip the best parts of web pages. Whether it's a paragraph, sentence, image or video. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/1407.

[4] Dappad notebook sidebar. Lets you write and read notes in the Firefox sidebar. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/3970.

[5] Del.icio.us bookmarks. Integrates your browser with del.icio.us. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/3615.

[6] Del.icio.us post. Posts current page or link to del.icio.us. Adds an entry to the context menu and a button to the toolbar. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/527.

[7] Diigo. Web Highlighter and Sticky Notes. Social bookmarking with annotation and interest groups. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/2792.

[8] Dog ears. Mark important parts of a webpage to easily relocate them. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/4482.

[9] Facebook toolbar. Integrate your Facebook life into your browser. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/3794.

[10] Fireshot. Adds the ability to take a screenshot of web page (entire of visible part), edit it, add annotations and save (PNG, JPEG, BMP), copy to clipboard, send to external editor or e-mail it. Windows only. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/5648.

[11] Fission. Fission combines address bar and progress bar (Safari style). Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/1951.

[12] Fleck. Fleck allows you to add Notes and Bullets to websites. You can then share these annotated pages with other people. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/3908.

[13] Full cal. See a larger calendar view on Google Calendar. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/4097.

[14] Full map. See more of the actual map on Google Maps. Rotate through 3

modes. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/4026.

[15] Gabbly chat sidebar. Chat using the AJAX application, gabbly.com from the sidebar. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/2488.

[16] Google calendar notifier. Provides robust notifications and display of your Google Calendars for today, as well as showing any upcoming all day events for tomorrow. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/2528.

[17] Googlepedia. Shows you a relevant Wikipedia article along with your search results. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/2517.

[18] Googlepreview. Inserts preview images (thumbnails) of web sites and Amazon products into the Google and Yahoo search results pages. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/189.

[19] Imdb preview. Preview movie and actor posters when hovering over their IMDb links. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/2477.

[20] Internote. Persistent sticky notes for Firefox. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/2011.

[21] Link alert. Changes the cursor to indicate the target of a link. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/3199.

[22] Linkedin companion for firefox. Brings you immediate access to your LinkedIn network. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/1512.

[23] Livejournal addons. This extension is destined to facilitate use of LiveJournal services. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/4536.

[24] Me.dium. With Me.dium you and your friends can see each other moving around the internet. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/4365.

[25] meebo. Instant messaging across all major IM networks built right into Firefox. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/5700.

[26] Others online. Discover people relevant to your Web browsing and other interests, on every page you visit, while you're signed in. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/5765.

[27] Scrapbook. Helps you to save Web pages and organize the collection. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/427.

[28] Search marker. Places tickmarks on the side of the page indicating where in the document the search term was found. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/1823.

[29] Shareaholic. Submit the web page you are currently viewing to digg, del.icio.us, facebook, google bookmarks, magnolia, reddit, stumbleupon, truemors, twitter. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/5457.

[30] Simpledelicious. Provides realtime syncing with your Del.icio.us bookmarks and ease of use right from your browser menu. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/4688.

[31] Smart digg button. The Smart Digg Button allows you to see whether or not the web page you are currently viewing has been submitted to Digg and lets you submit it if it hasn't. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/4878.

[32] Stickis. Comment and categorize what you browse. Available from: http://www.stickis.com/.

[33] Tab scope. Preview and navigate tab contents through popup. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/4882.

[34] Trailfire. With this addon and Firefox you mark pages that you find interesting by leaving notes right there on page. These notes are linked together into trails that you organize any way you want. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/3524.

[35] Twitterbar. Post to Twitter from your address bar. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/4664.

[36] Unofficial myspace toolbar. Automatically login to Myspace, instantly access your messages, view hidden comments, create styled comments/bulletins and more with this intuitive and customizable toolbar. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/2895.

[37] Visual bookmarks. Bookmarks with thumbnails and detailed previews of their targets. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/5396.

[38] Web marker. Web-Marker is your marker pen for the web. It lets you mark web pages and share them with the world. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/2679.

[39] Zotero. Zotero [zoh-TAIR-oh] is a free, easy-to-use Firefox extension to help you collect, manage, and cite your research sources. Available from: https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/3504.