

Designing a virtual fridge

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Is your fridge a pristine expanse of white enamel, or is it covered in multi-coloured magnets, photographs, postcards and notes? As Norman discovered several years ago, the fridge phenomenon is global and anecdotal evidence suggests it is common across cultural and social groups.

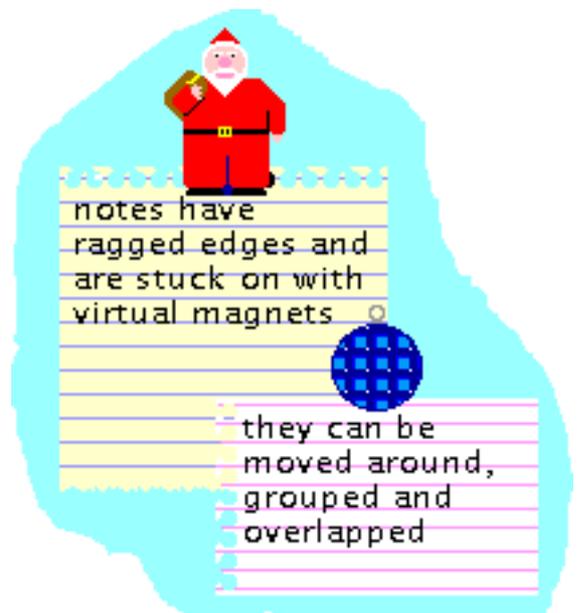
Appliance manufacturers are aware of the power of the fridge, incorporating wireless networking and splash proof LCD screens into fridge doors. Soon it will be possible to email, surf the net and control the microwave from the fridge – yes you won't have to walk across the kitchen!

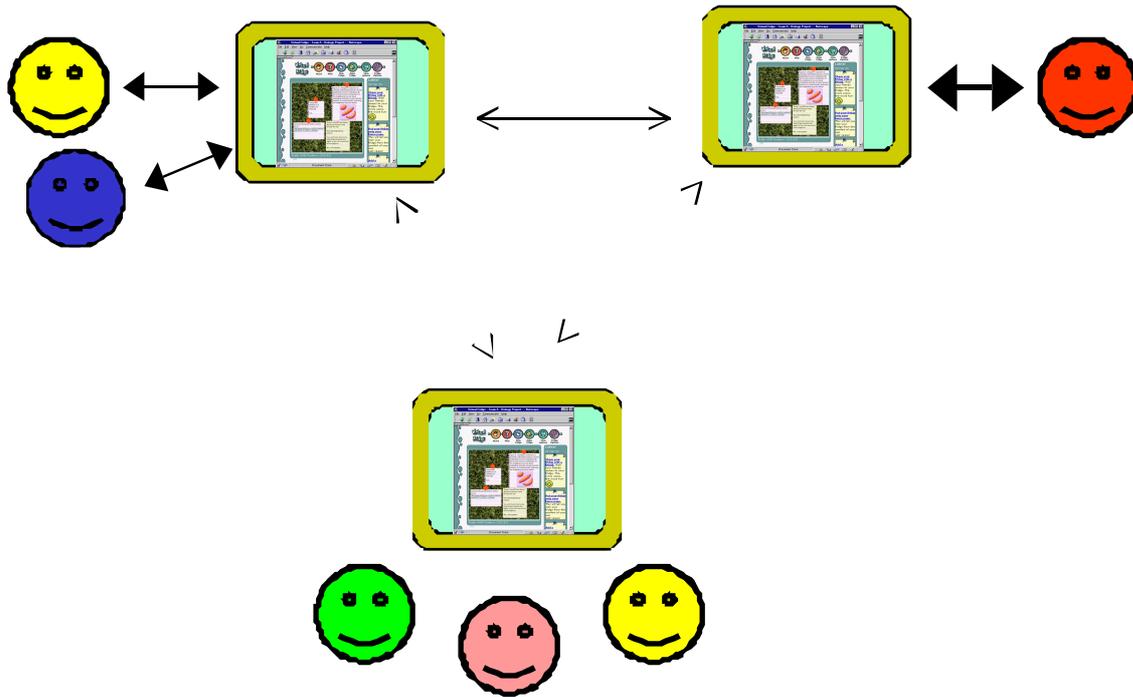
Over the last 18 months there has been an explosion of web-based communication services aimed at families and informal groups (e.g. Yahoo clubs, Adobe eCircles). However, the majority of these simply take 1960's bulletin board technology (originally designed by technologists for technologists), add a few graphics and label themselves a family area.

Virtual Fridge (vfridge) is a commercial web service designed for informal communication and sharing amongst families, school children, and groups of friends. In contrast to the externally structured, text-oriented, hierarchical bulletin-board, vfridge instead takes the metaphor of the fridge giving users a shared 2D surface on the Internet where they can stick notes, photos etc. with 'magnets'. This builds on experience over many years (e.g. Xerox Whiteboards, York Conferencer), that given 2D shared surfaces, users create their own structures using the intrinsic affordances of space (overlapping, grouping, alignment).

Of course the crucial thing about vfridge is that it is fun. Little Tommy in Taunton can decorate his vfridge, fuzzy-felt style, and then Granny in Glasgow can see what he's done. And not just little Tommy, grown computer scientists given a palette of Christmas magnets have been known to densely decorate a fridge with mini-Santas!

The fridge metaphor sets high standards: how do you achieve the fluidity of physical human-fridge interaction, when all you have is a web interface!! We haven't solved all the problems yet, but where we have succeeded, the mastery is in the detail. One example is the mechanism used to generate torn off notes in a variety of styles. Another is the user authentication mechanism.





*families work several to a computer
vfridge allows multiple simultaneous logins at the same machine*

Most distributed groupware uses the model of individual users interacting with individual computers (remote meeting room systems are an exception). However, if you watch a family using standard 'family' web software something different happens, two or three people hang over the screen at the same time. When Ann claims the keyboard from Jane, one of two things happen: you may see messages of the form "This says its from Jane, but it's really Ann.", or, alternatively, Ann logs out, logs in again as herself, navigates to the appropriate message board and then enters her message ... then when Jane wants to say something ... For chat systems the latter is particularly disconcerting for the remote participants as all they see is a system message saying "Jane has left."!!

vfridge allows multiple simultaneous users with fast swapping of the 'current user'. It recognises that we are moving from a one-man-and-his-computer world to one where multiple people (of all genders and ages) interact with multiple devices in different locations.

vfridge is part of a broader perspective that the Internet can be used as a medium for sharing. This is in sharp contrast to the publish and consume model of traditional web pages. This demands the creation of private but commonly owned spaces for open and closed groups. vfridge is one such space, an early homestead in the claiming of cyberspace for the masses.

virtual fridge can be found at: <http://www.vfridge.com/>

It is currently in final development, but if you would like to try out pre-release versions please contact Alan <alan@vfridge.com>