Sam: an Assistant in Your Inbox

Project overview

I’d like to have someone manage information for me (e.g., keep track of notes, send reminders), but I feel that it’d be narcissistic to hire someone to be my personal assistant.

There are a number personal information management (PIM) applications that could meet my needs, but I dislike their somewhat strict reliance on forms for data input. I’d prefer a more human–friendly approach to the human–computer interaction.

One application that met my human–friendly requirement was I Want Sandy (IWS). IWS users “talked to” the application through email in a similar way they’d communicate with a real human being. Users could issue commands like “Remind me to buy eggs at 5PM today” or “Remember Aimee’s birthday is June 12”, and IWS would remind them or store information as appropriate. However, IWS was shut down a little less than a year ago, on December 19, 2008.

For my senior project, I plan to create my vision of I Want Sandy. That is, I plan to create a virtual personal assistant that will “remember” information (plain text or binary files) for me and remind me when things are due or when events will happen. The primary way users will interact with the application will be through email, using plain English (or, if necessary, a simple syntax based on plain English). The application will also provide a browser–based interface for when email isn’t appropriate.

Special equipment/facilities needed

None.
Tentative schedule

September 28 – October 9
• Set up development environment to the point of sending/receiving emails to/from the application
• Determine (tentative) command syntax
• Research language parsing and processing

October 12 – October 23
• Build support for storing and retrieving notes

October 26 – November 6
• Research parsing dates and times
• Build support for storing, retrieving, and dispatching one–time reminders through email and SMS

November 9 – December 4
• Build support for storing and retrieving calendar events
• Update reminders to be repeatable and hook them into calendar events

January 4 – January 15
• Build support for storing and retrieving lists

January 18 – January 29
• Build support for storing and retrieving files

February 1 – February 26
• Polish browser–based UI
• Apply tweaks and fixes to address issues that rise during development
• Limited public testing (tentative)

March 1 – March 12
• Perform “administrative” project tasks (submitting to Kennedy Library, writing summaries, etc.)