Why widgets?

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Opera is trying it again. Apple has tried with Dashboard. But it still has failed to deliver that killer widget. Or am I just to minimalistic to appreciate widgets?

The whole point of widgets seems to be that the creator of the widget can use rounded corners, alpha transparency and drop shadows in a way that a regular behaving application isn't allowed to have because an application is supposed to follow the rules of the graphical user interface of the operating system it is running in. So instead of a single solid general purpose RSS reader or media player we're supposed to use half−assed custom branded RSS reader or skinned media player widgets for every single feed? That might be nice for the creator of a widget or in a locked down branded enterprise environment, but nobody else cares.

But what widgets also show is that nobody cares about what the user interface should be offering to applications in terms of functionality. Partly because it is broken already. If an application isn't very usable when it's window is less than 1024 pixels wide, and makes no sense having it's window over 1600 pixels wide, why not just give up that illusion of flexibility and pick a fixed size for the window and optimize for that static environment? And does the graphical interface of an application survive all the customization that can be done on fonts, dpi, colors or even the windowing system itself? So why keep trying to cater for that illusion of flexibility?

Because what I do like could be considered full−screen widgets: running an application in full screen mode without any graphical elements of the interface visible. The browser for example is then just the page, without toolbars, scroll bars or anything. The interface is reduced to keyboard shortcuts, just like when running applications in 80x25 text interfaces in the days of MS−DOS. Unless you have a big screen or several screens where it would make sense to view several windows next to each other, optimizing applications to run full screen − and I don't mean in a window maximized to fill the screen − makes sense. That's why on the tiny screens of mobile devices that is the way to go. Switching between a couple of applications becomes a more important task for an interface than offering to try to show them running all at the same time. Windows as the graphical representation of a multi−tasking operating system is technically more advanced then what users can handle. They just get confused when you can insert any application windowless inside a document in another application.

The logical companion to a full screen application are small alpha transparent pop−ups to receive notifications from other applications, in a Growl like way, but they should be more widget like so they can contain more interactive elements. A windows system and applications that are aimed at providing this functionality, combined with strict guidelines so the pop−ups don't grow into applications themselves and you end up with the same issues would be nice to have. While I don't like the iPad as it's currently proposed, it could be the first step towards systems that leverage full−screen fixed mode application design for somewhat bigger screens. Apple has the track record pull something like that off, and else Steve has to do it like with the NeXT.

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