Foreword

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Since they were first described by the architect Christopher Alexander in 1970s, patterns have become a widely accepted means to describe proven solutions to recurring problems. The explicit goal of patterns is to empower users and developers to find and evaluate solutions in a field in which they are not experts. In architecture as well as in human–computer–human interaction design, one can find the same groups of stakeholders: researchers, who want to know more about successful technology; and architects and developers who have to create and design the technology and identify the users or customers who want to use the technology.

As with the original Alexandrian patterns, one should thus focus the pattern itself on the intended users. And as with the Alexandrian patterns, the user group of patterns shifts from developers to end users of the system as the patterns begin to focus on system usage and interaction rather than on technical internals of a computer system.

Within the field of HCI and software design there is an active community promoting the idea of patterns to convey and share best practices both from a technical perspective and from an end-user perspective. This special issue presents patterns and experiences with patterns for collaborative systems.

The call for this special issue attracted 14 submissions. Pure pattern papers have gone through at least three rounds of shepherding before they have been reviewed. Each of the 14 papers is reviewed by at least two reviewers. Based on the reviewers' recommendations six papers were finally accepted.

The accepted papers can be split up in three themes that represent current areas of interest concerning patterns for collaborative systems: design and development of collaborative systems, collaboration and interaction design, and experiences when using patterns for designing collaborative systems.

The first part consists of three papers focusing on the design and development of collaborative systems. The first paper by Avgeriou and Tandler discusses architectural issues when developing collaborative applications in general. It describes issues that have to be considered when designing a collaboration infrastructure. The two following papers deal with more specific questions concerning the design and development of CSCL platforms. Santoro et al. illustrate best practices for supporting the planning and interaction in CSCL environments. Georgiakakis and Retalis address a comparable theme with a different pattern format. They investigate communication and awareness mechanisms for supporting asynchronous network-supported collaborative learning.

The second part concerning collaboration and interaction design consists of two papers. The first contribution by Arvola addresses design patterns for co-located collaboration. The second paper by de Vreede et al. introduces thinkLets, which are used in collaboration engineering to design collaboration processes. The authors compare their concept of thinkLets with pattern approaches and point out interesting analogies.

Finally, the last contribution by Schümmer and Lukosch takes a closer look at the underlying theory of patterns and investigates how fresh ideas of Christopher Alexander can influence how we understand and apply patterns for collaborative systems.

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