In *Visualizing Conversation* by Donath, Karahalios, and Viegas the authors describe different ways to explore the interactions between participants in a text-based environment. I found Chat Circles to be a good way to show the different groups and conversation threads that can occur in one message board or chat room. It removes the confusion of many different topics running concurrently. Also, the circles changing in size allows a sense of time to be imbued to a more persistent form of conversation. I found the analysis of a reason for vacuous conversations to be interesting, although it is stated more as fact then supposition. “Chat systems are often criticized for the inanity of the conversations, one cause of which is this need to maintain presence by constant speech, even when one has nothing to say (pg 2).” I also feel that this issue of creating presence would still apply in an environment where people who are not speaking are displayed smaller than those who are currently talking. As a user however, it would be very beneficial to be able to see the “pulse” of the conversation, and to be able to visualize circles of conversation. I feel that a way of differentiating between users other than color would be more beneficial for multiple reasons. As stated, color affects the perceived emotions of the person talking, and there are not enough colors for each user to have a uniquely identifiable color. This is especially the case where people are unlikely to choose colors that they do not like, such as brown or puce. Common colors can lead to confusion between people. Unique names are the usual method of identification. In Chat Circles, this is maintained, however the names are displayed in a small size. This could make it hard to find a specific person you want to talk to, if you are not in the same conversation circle as they are. I like the visualization of the textual history in Chat Circles, however I find the mapping between the actual conversations and the line diagrams of the history confusing. The lines relate better to a traditional linear conversation, rather than a conversation between potentially many
different groups. Loom is similar to Chat Circles is that it gives a visualization of conversation. However, Usenet groups are inherently less real-time driven. Loom can present visual information on a variety of Usenet data. The individual postings data I found to be a good analysis of posting tendencies, though I would like to see the color from the mood visualizations applied to this as well. Then you could get an analysis of who tended to be hot-headed, and who gave more informative posts. The setting that displays connections between sequential posts I found to be confusing, and more random appearing than I could easily navigate. The mood visualization I thought was the most fascinating, and a more complex analysis of text could lead to valuable observations in every range of topic. Just the simple angry/peaceful/informative/other leads to valuable insights about a community and its members.
In *Medium Effects: Turn-Taking and Back Channels* Lynn Cherney addresses the issue of back channels and turn taking in MUDs. Back channels are the use of positive comments or non-lexical responses such as nodding to indicate that the user is paying attention and wants to hear more. This paper was interesting because I had never considered the use of back-channels as a fundamental point of conversation, but they have transferred from the spoken medium to written and perform similar but different functions. I liked that the paper considers email a different medium than text-based chat, and explores some of the less obvious differences. The face of someone replying in an email confirms their attention, and there is no need for showing current presence in a medium that is expected to have a greater time delay between responses. Much of the paper is spent exploring how text can emulate a real life conversation. However, I liked that they explored the benefits of text over video or spoken works. The main benefit discussed was the persistence, which is fundamental different than a live conversation that isn't recorded. If some of the misunderstandings and confusions that arise from not having body language or verbal cues can be solved, online discussions could be more valuable than spoken conversations. Something I would do differently is differentiate more strongly between types of conversations. The lecturer-listener conversation is mentioned as a footnote about an anomaly in a study, however this type of conversation has extremely different back channel patterns than a regular conversation.
The article *Managing the Virtual Commons: Cooperation and Conflict in Computer Communities* by Peter Kollock and Marc Smith is about social interactions in web-based formats, specifically Usenet. The article does a good overview of the problems that arise in societies where there is a free-rider problem. A free-rider problem is where something that benefits an individual is detrimental to society as a whole. To have a successful community you have to minimize the free riders who are benefiting from the trouble of others. The article lists things that should be accomplished to have a successful community, such as group boundaries and lists one of the most important as low-cost conflict resolution mechanisms. It is comprehensive as to why these are necessary and the problems that occur when they are lacking. However, clear ways to combat the problems are often missing or discussed only briefly. Including potential solutions with the problems would be beneficial to the usefulness of the paper.