CS 498 KGK: Critique 1

Visualizing Conversation

Chat Circles
I believe that the single best feature of chat circles is its simplicity and its ability to properly translate the human mind’s (or at least what my mind’s) conception of what a very basic and primordial conversation ought to look like to a computer monitor. The image of many circles, some large and bright and some small and dim, gathered together in several small clusters, each of which, when they deem it prudent to speak with their neighboring circles, expands and brightens, is exactly how I believe a community of conversing circles would look and behave. Because of this, a person who has neither heard of nor experienced chat circles almost certainly would, upon seeing the visualization for the first time, immediately understand what he was viewing. This ability to be immediately recognized is indeed a great strength of chat circles. Furthermore, although I have not had the opportunity to see first-hand chat circles in action, I can only imagine that, with a sufficiently large community of chatters, chat circles would provide the user with a visually magnificent (or at least somewhat pretty) experience.

Additionally, the use of proximity for allowing one circle to ‘hear’ another circle is certainly an interesting idea and one that could potentially solve the rather annoying problem of having to clarify to whom one was responding when one makes a comment. It is indeed quite annoying to have to make to comments (the intended comment and the clarification) when only one should be needed.

Even with these positive qualities (recap: simplicity, beauty, proximity), chat circles is not perfect. The foremost problem with chat circles is that it seems to be quite difficult to determine exactly with whom you are chatting. Minor differences in color (especially when those colors may change from one chat to the next) seem an inadequate means of identification. If the name of the chatter were to appear somewhere on the screen, that would be better (the paper seems to indicate that it appears somewhere on the circle; I was unable to see this on the circles in the screenshots, however). Additionally, it could potentially be very annoying to have to be close to those circles to which you would like to speak. If, for example, a chatter was interested in two different conversations but, because the conversations were taking place sufficiently far apart, could not listen to both, that chatter may become very frustrated. If the chatter was allowed to adjust his own ‘radius of proximity’, perhaps the problem would be remedied. Lastly, I believe that if the archival timeline could be viewed in such a way that all responses were on a single timeline, it would be better. As it is, it is somewhat difficult, because of the sometimes rather large distance the eye must travel when comparing two different chatters, to understand the flow of a conversation.

Loom
I found the most basic form of loom to be the best. With only a very small amount of information, a user can easily understand what the visualization is attempting to relay. Although not terribly pleasing to the eye, one can after looking for just a few seconds take away the desired bits of information – a sign
of a good visualization. When *loom* moves on to tracing the connections between sequential posts, however, trouble arises. It took me several minutes of looking over the *loom* screenshots to actually understand what was happening. I found the many bright colors and the often long lines (where length in the vertical direction has no real meaning) of the connections to be quite confusing (and even a bit intimidating). After I understood exactly how the visualization worked, however, I did find that I was able to derive a good amount of otherwise essentially inaccessible information in a relatively short amount of time. Thus, one might say that the worst part of *loom* is its mildly steep learning curve.

Additionally, I found the ‘mood extractor’ portion of *loom* to be quite interesting and effective. Without any explanation of the visualization, it becomes clear that, after looking upon the sea of red dots, one is looking upon a rather angry scene. However, while the colors are themselves intuitive, the layout of the dots is not. I was unable to initially understand the layout of the dots and only after discussing with a fellow classmate was able to determine why the dots were organized as they were (or at least come up with a reasonable explanation). One final problem with the ‘mood extractor’ is that it (admittedly) may not classify the posts into an appropriate set of moods.

**Medium Effects**

While reading the information presented in the *previous literature* section, I found myself disagreeing with much of what was said (at least in terms of such things as instant messaging or an in-game chat). It seemed to me that everything being said was indicating that face-to-face conversations and instant messenger conversations were very dissimilar things. In my own experiences with programs like instant messengers or an in-game chat service, I have found communication to be very natural and, more to the point, much like a regular conversation. I could easily imagine myself speaking the words that my fingers were sending to the screen and likewise could easily imagine that my friend or roommate (the latter is usually both, but sometime...) was saying what he typed back to me in response. In particular, I found the notions that fewer backchannels were used in instant messaging (or MUD or what have you) and that instant messaging impedes repair to be rather nonsensical (the belief that instant messaging produced longer turns also seemed rather suspect). Thus, after reading the last paragraph of the section, I was quite happy to learn that the author was planning to challenge these notions later in the article.

Aside from the (what I thought to be rather ridiculous) overcomplicating of conversational components, I found myself agreeing with most of what the author had to say concerning backchannels, turn-taking, and message repair. While using a one-way communication system such as IM or MUD does (as was stated in the article) often lead to a string of slightly out-of-sync messages, the messages can often be easily understood by those involved in the communication. Thus, while this is indeed slightly different from a regular, face-to-face conversation, it is not terribly much so; one can, with minimal effort, fit together the miss-ordered messages into a very normal and natural conversation. Additionally, if one out-of-sync message happens to, based on its rather odd and incorrect position among the other responses, relay an unintended meaning, the act of repairing the message is a simple and even natural process. Rarely do I need to sit and think for a long period before forming a repair response to one of my own messages (I am able to naturally form messages such as ‘and of course what I said referred to what you said two lines above’). Also, I found that the topic of *appositional starts* was one in which one
could find even more similarities between face-to-face and one-way, text-base conversing. I Oftentimes when physically speaking with someone (or a group of someones), will make a long drawn out “sooooo” or “welllll” before making a point. Doing this gives me time me to piece together and form a sentence from some of my thoughts and also allows me to ‘take the floor’ before I have pieced together these thoughts (but after I know that I indeed have some relevant thoughts to express). The author of the article seems also to have found that this habit exists in the world of the MUDders. If someone in a MUD wants to take the floor, he needs only to quickly type out an appositional starter word before continuing to type his statement. Furthermore, and especially in an in-game chat situation, I find that I often use social openings and closings to preface and conclude my text-based conversation (the wave is a personal favorite). This is indeed quite similar to a real-world conversation where an exchange of ‘hello’s and ‘goodbye’s often bookend a conversation. At the end of the article, then, I found myself largely agreeing with the author in that I believe that, while the difference in medium (text and a computer screen as opposed to sound and the open air) necessitates some conversational modifications, communication, whether it be by text or by voice, retains over all media some characteristics.

**Usenet**

I have to assume that the primary reason that the authors had for doing this research and for writing this article was that they believed that, since Usenet was such a success, the e-society of Usenet must share some common qualities with successful (non-electronic) cultures of the past. And indeed, this does seem like a worthwhile topic and one that, after being further pursued and more closely examined, could lead to some interesting insights. After reading only the first bit of the comparison, however, it becomes apparent that Usenet is in fact quite different from and shares only a very few characteristics with successful societies of the past.

As a starting point, the authors begin by analyzing the effects of group-size on the overall productivity and prosperity of a community. In a physical community, increased group size allows individual members of the group to more easily hide and to free-load without taking the notice of their neighbors. The authors of the article then go on to explain how the effect of increasing group-size in the Usenet community is essentially the exact opposite. A larger user-base simply means that more people will be upset when an individual member of the community fails to do as he ought, meaning that the overall reaction from the community to this individual’s disruptive or irresponsible behavior will be larger than it would have been had the community been smaller. Indeed, this does seem to be the case when the offending individual posts an offensive message to a newsgroup. However, it seems that Usenet’s large user-base allows one to easily take advantage of the Usenet community be only reading the posts, never contributing any of his own. In this way, then, Usenet is similar to successful societies of the past.

Additionally, the authors note that most successful societies of the past have some list of guidelines that each of the members of the community must follow in order to ensure peace and prosperity. Furthermore, the authors indicate that this set of rules in most cases should be adapted to the local conditions of the area and should also be written by the people of the community. While not all newsgroups have a set of rules (or, rather, FAQs) that a poster should follow if he would like to post to that newsgroup, the rule-sets of those that do are (necessarily) written by members of the Usenet
community. This, at least, seems to be a quality that has contributed to the great amount of success experienced by Usenet. While having a set of rules is good (and having a set of rules written by the people even better), however, having no means of enforcing those rules renders them almost useless. Relying on individual integrity and honor will work only until one of those individuals breaks and does something deemed to be unacceptable and wrong and in doing so reminds the rest of the community that they too can do whatever they would like without suffering any serious consequences. I believe that it is this quality, along with the fact that a Usenet user almost certainly never does (and almost certainly never should) feel threatened in any way, that is responsible for the large amount of flaming and other such discouraged acts on Usenet. A poster knows that, regardless of what they say or do on the newsgroups, there is no group, internal to Usenet or otherwise, that has in any legitimate capacity the ability to harm him or his possessions (other than being placed in a kill file, a feat that some may consider to be some twisted victory).

Sharing so few characteristics with successful societies of the past, one might wonder how it is that anything of use is gained through Usenet (and indeed many have found it to be quite useful and a very rich source of information). I believe that it is the ease of use of Usenet that makes it so successful. Even with all of the flaming and off-topic posts, it is not too difficult to sift through the posts to find something of use. Additionally, Usenet offers a wonderful opportunity for those more knowledgeable members of society to showcase their intellectual might (which can often be quite satisfying) very easily. It is for these reasons, that Usenet posts can be read and written very easily, that I believe Usenet has managed to attain such a high degree of success.