Visualizing Conversation
Judith Donath, Karrie Karahalios and Fernanda Viégas

The topic Visualizing Conversation is interesting in its element. That is, being able to “visualize” conversations even when not physically present where they happen. Before I began reading the paper I thought this would be complicated as the spoken word conveys a message through a person’s tone, emotion, body language and gestures. The idea of online conversation as text despite its obviousness is illuminating. I agree that written word needs mastery and skill to convey purposeful messages however, in an online conversation that is less deliberate and more careless, it is hard to convey the body of information that a physical interaction does. It was interesting to note that textual conversation also can convey emotion and more social information than meets the eye. Persistence of conversations in chat circles and looms shed light on the graphical representations or the “face” of online conversations.

Online conversations today are manifested as chats that are ubiquitous as they are addictive! I agree with the concept of having a “burden of maintaining presence” and “[c]hat 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” as mentioned in the text-based chat systems. Apart from this, the evident lack of avatars in graphical chat systems for expressing tone and emotion is a “communication gap” in the online social space today. An point that comes to my mind is the relatability and level of formality in chat systems. With the possibility of having avatars that can emote, chat conversations that are of a formal nature cannot benefit from this feature, in fact they can be misrepresent or fail to convey the importance of the situation. Therefore the online expressions possible today fit well in informal conversations. Another issue regarding chat circles and online conversations in general is the validity and the reliability of what is said online, that is, if chats are same as real-life. Chats enable people to wear a mask and not be themselves; for example, some would be
more bold and daring in a chat than in real-life and some are known to be more sociable online than in reality. The point this bring up is of the validity and the reliability of what is said in chat discussions.

The visualizations of Loom were also interesting pertaining to threaded conversations. Being able to gauge a person’s role in the conversation and the manner in which conversations branch out to other topics pose as a valuable tool to see patterns in conversation and also understand what people talk about, how a conversation “thread” stems from another and also why people talk about the things they do.

While explaining the role of color in chat circles and Looms, it is an interesting science that humans perceive color emotionally. However I think denoting a certain mood with a particular color may be a tricky thing. I say this as I know that different cultures assign different moods and emotions to colors. For example, while red means danger in the Western world, it means sanctity and sacredness in some east Asian countries. It would be interesting and advantageous to explore the semiotics of color and emotion for further research in visualizing conversations.

**Medium Effects: Turn Taking and Back Channels**

**Lynn Cherney**

The definitions of turn-taking and back-channels at the beginning of the paper are ideal as they pick up from where the previous article leaves off. As the previous article, *Visualizing Conversation*, begins to visualize online conversations and throws light upon the difficulties in conveying social information, *Medium Effects* helps to fill that gap by analyzing turn-taking and back-channels that are typical of online conversations - “The [opportunity for] smooth turn-taking, interruption, requests for clarification, and speaker change have been identified as important aspects of interactivity….Feedback signals of understanding and attention, which
have been called back channels, have also been deemed important in conversation.” The concept of silences as pause and gap and interruptions was worthy of note as they may mean a lot and nothing at the same time. However, apart from articulated sentences, these silences, utterances and intonations can lend meaning to the conversation, and more importantly to the interaction and affect. Another point of note was where back-channels represent “a common way in which conversational co-operation is communicated and monitored” through nods, body movements and interjections. These back-channels, as the author reveals, are missing in email messages. This then draws clear distinction between emails and chats. Somewhere in the middle of the paper the author introduces the topic of back-channels and turn-taking in MUD’s. Being new to these terminologies and reading up on Wikipedia, I understand that MUD’s are Multi-User Dungeons that are “multi-user real-time virtual words described entirely in text.” Although MUD’s are more known in the gaming community (as per Wikipedia), MOO’s are more popular and beneficial in distance education and virtual conferences. While I understand the applications of text-based communication, I think that distance learning and virtual conferences have come a long way since the advent of video-conferencing. However, due to my limited knowledge in this field I am yet to understand the advanced applications that were talked about in this paper.

Managing the Virtual Commons: Cooperation and Conflict in Computer Communities
Peter Kollock and Marc Smith

This article discusses the management of virtual common spaces such as Usenet groups while placing emphasis on the social dilemmas of online communities. Although it is believed that
“networked communications [, it is argued,] will usher in a renewed era of democratic participation and revitalized community,” the problems of maintaining a non-governed and non-hierarchical social structure remain. The social dilemmas existing in Usenet groups or in any online community are of cooperation. One of the problems faced is the free-ride problem, or an overuse/misuse of bandwidth. All the issues listed with a careless use of bandwidth such as “posting extremely long articles; reproducing long sections of text from a previous post rather than summarizing or excerpting only the relevant passages; including long signatures full of comments and diagrams at the end of a post; and posting the same message to many newsgroups instead of one or a small, well-chosen set” are fairly common as I have experienced this myself while posting on blogs or forums. Another common problem faced in Usenet groups is “grandstanding” where “Users who do post to many newsgroups without regard to the topic” which leads to the erosion of decorum in the group. The author then discusses some of the ways usenet groups are managed by outlining boundaries, monitoring, modification of rules and conflict resolutions. The increase in problems of cooperation as the number of members of users increase is an important finding in this field as it leads to future research in online community behavior and management. However one thing that can be noticed in today’s communities is that many are “moderated” by someone who may or may not be the initiator of the group or community. This can be a possible solution to the dilemmas of cooperation in Usenet groups. However the philosophy of maintaining a completely democratic common ground where one can practice absolute freedom of expression remains a question.