Re: Managing the Virtual Commons

Why are private beaches cleaner than those open to the public? Kollock and Smith address the issue of market externalities with respect to an intangible good: information. Walking down the steps leading to an underground subway station, cigarette butts and gum that has lost its elasticity litter the ground. Mistakenly wander onto someone’s lawn and prepare to be berated. The authors argue that Usenet is an example of the tragedy of the commons, and as such suffers from free riders.

For a flat monthly fee (at least for now) and the cost of a few kilowatt-hours, access to the network of computers composing the public internet enables the near instantaneous exchange of information. Systems such as Facebook, web forums and Usenet provide a structure for focused interaction. Facebook specializes in interpersonal interaction; centered on relationships between individuals extended by topical groups and fan pages. Forums and Usenet employ a threaded approach, focusing on conversations between members about a specific topic nested within a more general category.

As noted by the authors, Usenet groups normally have no more than their name to suggest acceptable content. Forums tend to have users known as moderators dedicated to weeding out off-topic posts or unhelpful members. Each approach is limited by the difficulty implicit in enforcing rules or applying sanctions to virtual residents.

Intangible and possibly anonymous participants in a virtual conversation need not conform to the same social norms that govern conduct in the physical world. Free riders acting destructively toward a tangible common good can be photographed and fined, or perhaps even arrested on the spot. Those who mar public sands with rubbish can be fined, yet those who misappropriate Usenet bandwidth with spam are typically ignored. Since no central authority generally exists, other members of the community have no recourse.

Use of a communal kill file presents difficulties such as determining what constitutes a majority in a group whose membership is in flux and choosing an optimal method for banishment. Banning a member by nickname is useless since this is easily changed. Blocking a specific IP raises further questions, such as whether it is fair to deny access to others connecting from the address and what to do with members lacking static IPs (as with DSL) or connecting by proxy.

Membership in a physical community allows for a much wider range of realizable methods of censure. The physical presence of other members enables prompt and prudent action, and the recognition of this serves to keep unhelpful possibilities from being acted upon. Israel’s kibbutz communities exemplified this, as physical banishment meant vulnerability to the external threats that held the groups together. These communities had established rules and etiquette as well as, arguably, an agreed upon external authority provided by religious doctrine.

A fictional example of communal life can be found in Harry Harrison’s Winter in Eden, where the self-proclaimed “Daughters of Life” attempt to found a new settlement on the principle of equality of all membership. This approach leads to indecisiveness and almost starvation as every member becomes a free rider and the collective horse disappears from beneath each member’s seat. The problem is solved when a native community is discovered and employed...
as laborers. Interestingly enough, the kibbutz communities seem to have taken this approach as well.

Virtual communities such as Usenet may not have an external authority, and problems such as grandstanding or lurking do not carry the consequence of physical extinction if left unresolved. Consequently, trolls (members who flame or grandstand) have little incentive to cease their activities and can be ignored at best. Communities can attempt to moderate themselves; offensive members of multi-player online action games can be kicked or banned with majority vote. Moderators can move off-topic threads, but little more can be done without ceding a good deal of control to an external authority.

**Re: Medium Effects**

A cry of “Fire!” rings out in a movie theatre, and the entire audience rushes the exit. An inexperienced recruiter allows a prospective hire to ramble without direction. The evacuation proceeds slowly, as its chaotic nature limits its efficiency. The interviewee sweats and stutters, unsure of success. The movie patrons’ inability to take turns filling the aisles and leaving the theatre reduces each individual’s satisfaction. Lack of feedback from the interviewer causes the new graduate to lose confidence.

In the CM world of MUDs and MOOs, utterances cannot overlap by the nature of the medium. To carry through the analogy, only one person fits through the door at a time. Much trickier is the definition of a person; that is, what it means to pass through a door. Utterances are not necessarily complete thoughts, and there may be many utterances to a turn. Forms of mediation such as the conch in *Lord of the Flies* (a token-ring scheme) or the teacher-student/boss-employee structure do not seem to apply. Since no such organization is imposed, a definition for a turn is difficult to come by.

Cherney argues that the composition of a turn is not decided by the speaker but by the length of time the speaker holds the ‘floor’. At first glance, this seems to conflict with the idea that each speaker can participate in multiple conversations in parallel. Cherney addresses this by allowing multiple topical floors to coexist at once.

Imagine a large family enjoying brunch; seated at a long table, having many small conversations defined by the members’ physical proximity. Topics change from time to time within each group and members can change groups simply by leaning in the opposite direction. With MUDs, changing conversational groups takes significantly less effort. Still, the motivation behind the formation of groups is mutual interest. Family members with similar interests tend to sit together and discuss multiple subjects. MUD conversations - while perhaps initially populated topically - may not disintegrate once the topic has changed. The point being that a turn cannot be defined primarily by topic and consequently must involve some degree of individual intent.

Standalone back channels, pre-starts and repair mechanisms can be safely distinguished from turns. These can be thought of as conversational...
lubricants in that their purpose is to facilitate communication rather than add substance. Indeed, utterance length drops as the number of people available to speak increases. Picture a town hall meeting; residents may applaud or sigh at their seats, but stepping up to the microphone signals that they have something to contribute to the discussion. Absence of communication cannot be used to punctuate a turn as in ‘real life’, since physical demands do take precedence over virtual. (Oddly, Cherney disputes this with little explanation.) A more logical turn boundary is perhaps the addition of new and relevant information by another speaker.

In attempting to define a turn, the role of back channels is put forth as generally separate. While they may be used in concert, they do not contribute additional content. This is evidenced by the exclusion of required responses; a confirmation essentially restates an interrogative as an imperative. Back channels are especially important in a virtual medium where tone, eye contact and body language are unavailable.

In place of these, MUDizens (MUD denizens) emote. Similar to the “/me” command in IRC, the emote operator (“:”) allows the expression of emotions. Instead of responding to a statement with “Karen says, ‘fun!’” an emoting MUDizen might produce “Karen smiles”. While both methods describe the MUDizen’s emotional state, the emote operator explicitly reproduces a physical reaction in text form. Emoticons (“emote icons”, perhaps) represent an extension of words, as they depict different facial expressions. ( :-) ) Eye contact is replaced by inclusion of names in directed remarks.

When utterances are undirected and vague, repair mechanisms are necessary in the form of back channels. These mechanisms may manifest themselves in the form of naming people or duplicating previous statements. If presence is established and maintained using back channels such as “mhm, uhuh, yea”, repair mechanisms may be needed less frequently. This parallels phone conversations, where repeats and restarts are used when the other person falls silent. Fairly recently, IM (Instant Messaging) clients have begun to display a message to the effect of “Typing...” to help maintain presence. Overall, text back channels must be more explicit to convey the same level of information of a physical response.

Re: Visualizing Conversation

A group of friends huddles close at a party, straining to hear each other over the band. Prompted by a change in the music, one participant leans close to his neighbor and shouts “I love this song!” While the neighbor’s hearing may be adversely affected, he or she receives the message in its entirety and the rest of the group gets the gist of it. Outside of that particular social circle, the bass drowns out most of what is said. Similar groups can be found throughout the apartment, and mostly dyads populate the dance floor.

An apartment party is perhaps a fitting analogy for chat circles. A party provides a time and place for a gathering and background noise forces grouping by proximity. Lurkers are obvious in both situations; wallflowers in ‘real life’ would produce small circles when visualized. Real life seems to be a widely accepted misnomer, as CMC is arguably more real due to the possibility of logging. The analogy breaks down when pairs are considered given that there is no obvious way to have private two-way conversations. This is possible in IRC in the form of PM (Private Messaging) and would be a useful feature for chat circles to adopt.
Selecting another’s circle might send a request for a private conversation. The visualization might also cause circles to glow brighter to reflect an increase in volume. This might be determined by the ratio of all-caps text and exclamation marks to normal text.

Methods for visualizing archived conversations have the potential to render text communication even more concrete. While the ability to replay the interaction is useful - memories are indexed spatially - the true potential of logs lies elsewhere. A timeline is merely a concise way to summarize a conversation; visuals of aggregate information invite participants to explore. A word tree; an ordering of conversations or remarks by size or intensity; and above all, the ability to narrow these views by search would truly exploit the log’s potential.

Loom, on the other hand, accesses information that is recordable by its very nature. The act of posting information to a Usenet group differs in temporal scope from making a remark in any variety of chat. It does not require all participants to be present at once, and this implies some level of permanence.

Naturally, then, a visualization of this data will be separate. Each viewing seems to constitute a discrete event. This separation may be detrimental to Loom’s usability or at most primarily used to glean a general sense of perspective. Integration of such a visualization into a Usenet client could be even more useful. Imagine color-coding groups or even topics as opposed to a squares on a grid. Allow filtering and sorting of groups by tone; rearrange posts in a thread by connection. Implemented in this manner, the visualization does the work of transferring the gist recognized into readily available actions.

The New York Times’ interactive media group does an excellent job of emphasizing available actions. In their visualization of the 2008 Presidential Election Results, the group allows visitors to filter a large amount of data simply and naturally. Instead of different charts for each method of displaying data, visitors have can sort the data with the map as a visual aid at any level.

Further the fabric metaphor of Loom by interleaving graphics with text. Individually, a visualization can function as a type of map. GPS systems extend maps by changing according to context, and visualizations would benefit from the same approach. A flight path projected onto the windshield of a plane’s cockpit makes a navigator unnecessary. Information in a useful physical and temporal space could reduce a pilot’s distraction. Leaving messages Hear&There is a good start, why not apply this idea to other types of information?