This paper describes two very sophisticated visualizations: Chat Circles and Loom. Both visualizations do a pretty good job visualizing the data that they are given. Chat Circles concentrates on chat room information, and Loom is a tool for visualizing Usenet groups. Of the two, I definitely feel like Loom is a much more practical visualization.

From the start, I was never entirely sold on the idea of Chat Circles. I very much liked how the user's avatar was a circle on the visualization plane, and how it changed to match the users activity. However, immediately my concern turned to people abusing this fact. From the looks of the prototype pictures, players chat will be displayed inside their circle. What is to stop a user from spamming text to make their circle enormous? This visualization gives the user power over their appearance through text. Unfortunately, I think the visualization would end up distracting from conversations and end up making them about one appearance and less about the interaction.

I felt like the second visualization, Loom, was a much more practical application of a social visualization. The fact that the creators of Loom were able to see differences between two distinct newsgroups was significant in my mind. It showed to me, that the visualization really is showing information that really does go unseen through traditional methods. That information, while unseen, is significant and can be used to identify where it come from. In the case of this paper, it was between soc.culture.greek and comp.lang.java.gui newsgroups.

One of the things that concerned me about Loom was their mentioning of categories. Originally, the authors tried to categorize posts according to moods: angry, informative, peaceful and other. While they give an examples of how some of these emotions were determined, for some reason I was not entirely convinced that this filter would accurately categorize the posts. The only solution I would have would be to sort it by subject, or type of information or the like.

Overall, I was impressed with both visualizations. As mentioned above, however, I feel like Loom would be both more practical and useful and Chat Circles in a day to day situation.
Medium Effects: Turn-Taking and Back Channels
By Lynn Cherney

This article talks about how the normal rules of verbal conversation are adapted to online environments. Cherney specifically examines MUD chat channels, in which several users are likely to be speaking at once.

Cherney identifies a number of obstacles that this situation presents to replicating face-to-face interaction. For example, in verbal conversation, one person can interrupt another, controlling the medium at the same time as the first speaker. However, this is fairly rare, and usually considered impolite. In a chat channel, on the other hand, it is expected that several people will be typing at once. No one can technically control the medium at the same time as another person which is why Cherney prefers the "floor" model for understanding the dynamics of these conversations. People are competing for the floor, that is, for dominance. If several people are responding to what one speaker wants to talk about, then that speaker has the floor.

MUD users come up with many ways of getting around the limitations of the text-based chat channel. For instance, it is common for several sub-conversations to take place at once. This is because without seeing people’s faces and gestures, it is hard to know who is getting ready to speak, or who is not done speaking. To make up for this, someone might quickly type "hmm" or "well" to signify that (s)he is about to type out a longer statement and wants the others to pay attention to it. It is also common for people to reply to statements made relatively long ago, because of the length of time it takes to type and the number of responses that might have popped up in the channel during that time.

I found it interesting to look at how the conventions of online chat today had their origins in MUD and other early internet social venues. Today, many of these conventions (short statements, specifying whom your response is directed at) are still operational in blog comment queues, instant messaging, Facebook, and others. Many more (specifying who you’re speaking to, etc) are only true when several people are speaking at once, which is most common in niche online environments that attract the internet-savvy, such as MMOs. These environments seem like the direct descendents of MUDs. They demonstrate that while some of the back-channels specific to online chat might be adapted from verbal speech, some of them are actually part of a complex code created by a group of people to achieve a specific purpose.
Managing the Virtual Commons:

Cooperation and Conflict in Computer Communities

Peter Kollock and Marc Smith

Kollock and Smith use this paper to describe newsgroups and their strengths and flaws. Unfortunately, almost immediately this paper shows its age in its description of the exponentially increasing user base. Nevertheless, the idea of cooperation extends beyond the scope of newsgroups and can be applied to the more modern forms of communication used on the internet today.

One of the central aspects of newsgroups is the fact that they rely on a certain amount of cooperation between users. In the newsgroup environment, it is not entirely unlikely for an unpopular post to get flamed, buried, or something worse. If there is no general consensus for the group to act in a way that promotes dialog and interaction, then people will just do whatever they want. If this means insulting someone they disagree with, then that is what will happen. People will use the anonymity of the internet and of the newsgroup to their advantage.

These behaviors are avoided with the use of rules, administrators, and other methods. By enforcing rules and moderating users, a sense of community is established. People want to play by the rules to be included.

One aspect of this paper that I didn't entirely understand is the "free-rider." They speak of these people as if they are the problem. I for one, read multiple message board and forums as a "free-rider." I am not taking up, or destroying the community at these places. I simply share a similar interest to this particular community and care about what other people have to say about different topics. Towards the end of the paper, they lump the acts of being off-topic, or violating unspoken rules as part of the "free-rider" entity. So, it appears to me that, they are not very clear as to what they want this to be.