Paper #1 Critique

This paper discussed and compared two different visualizations of conversational programs for computers. The first of these visualizations is called Chat Circles and consists of colored circles representing different people talking in a chat room online. The second visualization is called Loom and represents people talking in a threaded chat room, such as a message board group. While Chat Circles shows what is happening now and emphasizes people talking in small groups in private, Loom attempts to show the total posting overview for a chat room and display how much users post in general while not worrying too much about how any individual moment or post looks.

What really interests me about this paper is mainly displayed in the Chat Circles sections. I find it very interesting to think about what my conversations in chat rooms look like and how they would be represented in this kind of setting. The visualization is interesting to look at, and I imagine that if viewed while a large number of people were using the program, that the display could be very visually appealing. I think it’s intriguing to think about if people would really explore the space as if it were really a real room, or if people would stick to their location. The program is set up like a cocktail party, so people can only hear what others are saying if they are close by, and the size of their bubble depends on what was last said and how much was said. In this way, people who don’t say much or like to listen, such as is very common in most chat rooms or message boards, will seem like outcasts and creepy eavesdroppers. This is one of the things I disagree with about this visualization, because, the circles do not give enough of a background about what the user is like or what the users interests are. A simple avatar or descriptive handle or even some sort of image in the background could go a long way towards catalyzing a conversation. People would have much more to talk about if they could see some potential things that they have in common with each other before a word is even said. Just like in real life, people will use an avatar to represent something about themselves and the more representations possible, the more likely new users will find other people who have at least one thing in common with them.

The second visualization is called Loom and shows more about what patterns can be observed long term in chat rooms and message boards. This is not really too appealing to me because I feel like this is something that can be looked at once and forgotten or written off. The final images could show that certain users post an excessive amount, or that certain times were unpopular for internet users, but that is about all. The content setting is much more useful because I think it would be much more interesting and applicable to know if your favorite group is especially angry, or if all of your posts are classified as angry posts, just so you know how other people are receiving your message tones. However, there seems to be a bit of work left to do here, because it seems unlikely that so many posts should really be classified as angry. It seems to me like there could be more levels of emotion, or at least the current levels could be refined to show some different range of emotions across the board.
Paper #2 Critique

This paper discusses back channeling and turn-taking. The beginning paragraphs discuss the importance of turn-taking in one-to-one messaging. The interesting thing is that, when face-to-face, people usually discuss one item at a time, and take turns speaking and answering questions, which most people are very good at since they have been learning how to talk since they were born. On the other hand, current online communication is very different. Emails usually are very good at turn-taking, but discuss multiple ideas in parallel, occasionally causing confusion or people forgetting to address all of the topics from the previous email. IM programs do neither well, because often people don’t realize that it is their turn to talk, or that the other user is not done finishing their statements yet. In addition, people are often confused about which sentence others are responding to, since people often address questions out of turn or give answers that can be applied to multiple questions. Interesting solutions to this problem have been proposed, such as IM programs that show each individual character as it is typed. I think this would be very interesting to try out, and I would like to test it in person, although the fact that it is not widely used already implies that there are major drawbacks to it.

Another thing discussed is silences in conversations. Some people forget that they are online, some people are distracted away, and some just fall asleep or neglect to pay attention to their conversations. This is a very annoying problem for me personally because I often find myself in situations where I cannot talk online for long and someone wants to have a long conversation with me, or I get distracted when in the middle of a conversation and totally forget about what I was previously doing, sometimes for extended amounts of time.

Back channels are also discussed as a way to communicate non-text expressions to other users. This is another thing I would like to see more of in the current IM expressions, because my system does not allow for this to happen and therefore it is hard for people to understand everything which is meant by a user in conversation. Some things are hard to express in text and people can much better tell what people mean using visual hints. These things, such as nods, winks, hm’s and um’s are not only helpers when trying to discover what someone’s true meaning is, but also when trying to indicate whose turn it is to speak and to let other people know if you are done talking or plan on continuing your conversational turn.
This essay discusses the problems found in a shared internet common area and the difficulties found when attempting to solve a problem with multiple people involved. The classic example they use to describe the sort of problem that they are talking about is the “tragedy of the commons” problem. In this dilemma, herders can use a common patch of grass to feed their animals, and each herder has an equal right to it, but if all the herders use the common area, they grass will die and no one will have grass and all the animals, and therefore the herders, will suffer the dire consequences.

The location used to run the study on is the USENET community. I personally have never had any opportunity to use the USENET setting for any purpose and have no background in it, but I have heard teachers from throughout my college years refer back to it often. Usenet appears to have the typical message board problems, having users who ask questions without answering and use up bandwidth with no regard for others, and this paper seeks to explore this phenomenon. The solution to this problem that Usenet came up with was a list of rules that could be applied to all parts of the Usenet board. This is interesting in that in order to enforce laws in the newsgroup, the members must actually create something of a government that seems pretty strict. This tiny online community suffers the same problems of a huge civilization and perhaps more so, because users are anonymous in the online world. Usenet was forced to resort to kill files and specific rules for each community, and if these rules are broken, laws had to be enforced. Unlike the real world, there could not really be repercussions, such as jail time or fines for simply breaking rules on an online forum, so this makes Usenet all the harder to regulate.

The Usenet actually handles problems is usually by simply ignoring the problem, and it usually goes away, because it is rare that actual force is actually necessary. I feel that this is similar to a school playground, or some other community in which no one has any actual power over anyone else, but no one wants to resort to physical violence, so people cope by ignoring bullies and separating into groups which share similar beliefs and preferences. These groups are the reason why Usenet has been popular for so long, but without proper authority to actually punish anyone, like most internet newsgroups that get popular, Usenet will eventually fall or grow so overrun by malcontents that no one will use it. This is the reason I don’t use free newsgroups like this, and in my opinion, an option to consider would be larger penalties for joining, such as a monetary fee, so that administrators can actually take something away from the users if they break any rules.