Reading critique: Visualizing Conversation

One focus of “Visualizing Conversation” is Chat Circles. This visualization attempts to convey the identities of participants and represent the natural flow of conversation. It utilizes color to represent unique users and historical trends to show the evolution of exchanges between people. Chat Circles tries to capture an atmosphere of a real conversation.

In Chat Circles, the interface is the primary concern because the goal is to improve multi-user real time chat. The brightness of the circles creatively addresses the concern over a traditional chat’s uncertainty regarding a user’s level of activity. Also, zones are implemented to convey auditory metaphor that encourages conversational threads to become spatially localized. To mimic real conversation further, a posted message is displayed for only a few seconds before it fades. A user can see other zones activities in the space as well but cannot see what’s being written which allows for checking out the conversations around a person, without actually “hearing” them, much like in real life.

Although not included, additional features that could help capture conversation is action and emotion. If a user types in ALL CAPS or has “!!!”, it would be amusing to see the circle jump up and down slightly. Also, if a user is embarrassed the circle could change into an emoticon of embarrassment or perhaps glow red. And even if there are users that are not typing or seemingly active, they could portray that they are listening by doing an action instead, which may help lower the insecurity of lurkers.

There are certain limitations of Chat Circles that were noticed as well. The interface can only tolerate a limited number of users before visualization becomes too disorganized and crowded. Also addressed in the paper, the limited colors to represent individuals may generate confusion and lack of a unique identity. Following more than one conversation, a key component to virtual chatting these days, is also extremely difficult due to the spatial limitations. Also the key difference is, unlike real conversation where words are often lost and forgotten, the visualization captures everything in the archive.

An interface similar to Chat Circles that may be relevant is found in multiplayer role playing games. Like Chat Circles, the chats are spatially localized and messages only displayed for a few seconds. In addition, each person is represented by a unique character and can have facial expressions as well as move around. The character can even display being idle by fading or sleeping. If someone wants to move to a different conversation, he or she will also have to move and the area around will change. The main difference is, the size of the individual does not grow with the amount of text written. The additional features in the multiplayer role have been key to mimicking live conversation and making games like Second Life successful.
Reading Critique: Medium Effects – Turn Taking and Back channels

Cherney describes the behaviors of users in text based chat, specifically, a Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) interface. The lack of two-way communication and wide distribution of back channels are centralized parts of a MUD because they help maintain the real-time feel. However, when distance collaboration is a component to the communication, exchanges in turns is not negotiated but rather possession of the floor becomes the focus.

Although MUDs can more easily achieve multiple participant floors than face-to-face conversation, floor manipulation seems to be an abstract process. Cherney suspects that whoever changes subjects and gets responses has power and social influence of within the community. To add to that, interest and relevance of the topic are also important factors in gaining the floor. People who do not keep the last point in mind tend to create non-propositional floors that center around themselves with no relevance to the people who are in the MUD with them.

Interestingly, it’s also noted appositional beginnings such as “well” and “but” can also aid getting the floor because it signals a need for further explanation. Perhaps “…” added with an appositional beginning hint at a longer explanation. There are other textual devices for establishing context that mean to replace visual or auditory channels such as “eerrhm” or /me pauses that may hint that the user is trying to get the floor. All of these can be considered additional strategies that a person may have to be knowledgeable about in order to control the flow in a MUD.

Nowadays, many chat clients have a way so that people can see who in their chat is also typing. This helps moderate turn exchange because it signals that other people currently have the floor and want to speak. In one-to-one conversation, I often check and see if the other person has finished typing before I hold the floor again. Although many users can type at once, usually if this method of exchange is used, only one person will attempt to take the floor at once. In a sense, that makes the conversation more similar to face-to-face where typing is similar to talking face-to-face. This however, may not be realistic with a large number of people.

Sometimes, I wonder if the habit of rapid “turn exchange” and often off-topic remarks in online communication is making its way to real-life conversation as well. More than ever now, especially in group conversations of more than 8 people, the trends are similar. People talking over one another, random drifts in conversation where neither agenda nor topic is really discussed, and continual side conversations are common. This may just be my own bad experiences with large group projects but since there are so many studies on how users adjust to the mediums provided to make them like real life conversations, how are those mediums changing real life conversations in return?

On a note back to social virtualization, the question could be answered by visualizing audio conversation and comparing it to text conversation to see the main differences and perhaps see them grow more similar or different as far as turn exchange goes throughout the years.
The collective goods and free-rider problem is brought into the computer communication context in Kollack and Smith’s “Managing the Virtual Commons: Cooperation and Conflict in Computer Communities.” Though Kollack and Smith focus on analyzing Usenet, the challenges with striking the ideal balance between individual and group interests are not unlike the same issues in society and international relations. Major findings from a study by Ostrom of how village communities manage collective goods bring suggestions to improve virtual cooperation. Some of the suggestions mentioned include defining boundaries, designing localized rules, and sanctioning user action. However, complications left open ended are how to formalize boundaries, rules, and sanctions to successfully change behavior.

Ostrom makes it clear that without clearly defined boundaries, free-riders can easily attach themselves to the community and those invested will not get the return expected. The name is one of the ways that Usenet is defining a boundary and attracting interested users. One way of increasing the stability of a group is by actively restricting its membership. The two ways of doing this brought up in the paper are moderating the users that come in or having access to a killfile that can essentially allow another users ignore someone. Both of these can currently be used in Usenet but have their downsides. Emphasis on private, moderated newsgroups makes it difficult to join in the first place and the killfile does not remove others responses to the filtered-out user.

However, an interesting point that Ostrom noted that “if individuals are not likely to interact in the future, there is a huge temptation to behave selfishly and free-ride.” Repeated interaction is perhaps the single most important factor in encouraging cooperation. Although this was used as support for creating boundaries, it can also suggest an alternative way of controlling membership. Instead of using a killfile or moderating incoming users, users should only be allowed to participate with a known referral from another user already in the group. This implies that both people know each other and may have future and repeated interactions. Then, both will have stake in the transaction. The person referring has their reputation within the group at stake so he or she must decide wisely who to include into the group. Also the person joining the group has their relationship with their referrer at stake.

This can potentially impact how new users pay attention to the dynamics of the group as well as their own response and participation. It can trickle down to effect the other challenges in enforcing rules and sanctioning actions. The responsibility having the new user know the rules is now that of both the referrer and the referred. Individual and group interests are more likely to be balanced with each decision because of the partnership. Sanctioning can also possibly affect both as well, especially when a community such as Usenet relies on informal sanctions effecting reputation.

At the conclusion of the paper, Kollack and Smith suggest deepening the knowledge of computer communications by interviewing participants and preparing a network-based survey instrument. Although not explicitly mentioned, many of the interactions and relationships between people can potentially be captured by social visualization techniques. Although it won’t help define a set of rules,
but the visualization can aggregate the mass of threads to help people determine for themselves which rules have historically made a change, where conflicts often take place in, and whether sanctions are effective. This can help them understand more about cooperation in the virtual community and then efficiently design a system to address the continuing challenges.