Visualizing Conversation

The authors of Visualizing Conversation discuss two methods for graphically representing persistent conversations. The first is Chat Circles, a method for interacting and representing real-time conversation, and Loom, a method for representing asynchronous communication in Usenet.

Chat Circles simplifies the standard avatar-based chat system, by removing the personal and emotive representations, and replacing them with size-morphing circles. The system coaxes users into contribute to the creation of the representation, not by post-analysis, but with rules that subtly encourage users to move around and participate. By limiting the conversation that a user can participate in to a certain radius, a user must choose the conversations he wants to participate in by moving his circle nearer to the other participants, creating a sense of community.

The interface could benefit from a visual cue for the user to define the radius of the circle he can hear. Also, some work could be done to improve the archival interface. The vertical lines for each user are not very much more descriptive than a chat transcript on its own. In fact, the archival interface serves to individualize users rather than show their interactions with others. It does little to expose the underlying social context of the conversation like the real-time interface does.
Loom is a simple visualization for Usenet groups. The basic view shows posters on the vertical axis and time on the horizontal axis. Points on the graph are posts by users. Connections between the points connect threads with the same title. Long lines indicate longer running threads, and single points indicate posts without replies. As the authors state, Loom is not a finished product.

In figure 7a one’s attention is immediately drawn to the yellow line that jumps from the bottom of the graph to the top of the graph. This feature could be used to reveal something much more interesting. If users are sorted so that the users that they most frequently interact with, then lines like this could indicate topics that reach the whole group and therefore relate to more people. These could draw attention to the more interesting threads of the newsgroup.

Loom also has a feature that shows a grid of small multiples in which it features a natural language processor that attempts to distinguish the emotion of the posts. This might be a good feature if extended to the first mentioned view of Loom. If the lines took the colors of the emotions of the posters, the change in colors of the lines could show the evolution of the conversation. A user could then easily tell when a thread is about to die or is devolving into a ‘flame war’.
Medium Effects

Though MUDs have recently lost much of the popularity they once had, the research presented in this paper is still relevant to the next generation evolution of MMORPGs like EverQuest 2 and World of Warcraft. It seems that although communicating through a computer is unlike face-to-face communication, that users will still find ways to make their communications understandable.

Computers now replace many things that we used to do person-to-person. Although not all of what we used to know about what was done before computers will be directly represented in a digital state, when given enough freedom users will find analogues for these behaviors.

This research is a good reference to the behavior of users in conversations, and can be very useful to researchers or even programmers in the context of social computing. Combined with natural language processing, much can be learned about the behavior of people in social environments in a digital environment. Since logging conversations over a network of computers is much more feasible than logging auditory conversations, great strides can be taken in the research of behavior and psychology in social environments.
Managing the Virtual Commons

The authors of this paper present the principle of “the tragedy of the commons” as regards to Usenet. Usenet is a worldwide network of users posting to different groups. As in any social situation, a form of decorum and etiquette are required. This paper presents somewhat interestingly that although certain actions are almost globally taboo (such as the “***** MAKE MONEY FAST*****” example), there are actually groups for almost any topic, including blatant arguing and bickering, to mindless insults (such as the alt.flaming group). This just goes to show the coverage of interests to which a global forum can extend.

However, it is important to realize that although there is a place for everyone in Usenet, there can still be situations where the tragedy of the commons exists. For example, the alt.sexual.abuse.recovery channel is a wonderful channel for people who have gone through a traumatic event like this to pull through, but it only exists when people communicate with each other. It exists both because people care enough to help, and because people are willing to share their experiences. Conversation cannot exist in half-duplex. People speaking must also be willing to reply, and likewise people replying must also be willing to start topics.