ForumReader
The authors of this article seem to have written their paper mainly to introduce their new social visualization concept: ForumReader. ForumReader is a piece of software that attempts to make simple the process of navigating and reading posts on a flash forum such as Slashdot. While such simplifying visualization have been made (or attempted) for slightly more organized online social communities such as Usenet, no such simplifying visualizations, or so claim the authors, have been made for flash forums. One might believe that, because they appear to share so many surface similarities, newsgroups and flash forums are alike enough that a piece of software that makes the navigation of one easier would also make easier the navigation of the other. Such is not true, however (or so say the authors), because of several key differences: flash forums tend to be highly concentrated in a topical sense, have many posts, shallow reply trees, few repeat authors, and an artificially-imposed time constraint.

ForumReader has many components, the foremost of which seems to be a graphical, thumb-nail display. Each post in this display is represented by a small rectangle, where the height of the rectangle corresponds to the length of the post and the level of indentation of the rectangle corresponds to that post’s reply depth. When a certain rectangle (post) is clicked on, the text of that post appears in a window to the right of the graphical display. This allows for quick and easy navigation of the flash forum over long (post) distances. Additionally, ForumReader has an eClassifier scatterplot that places similar messages close to one another.

During their test of ForumReader, the authors discovered that, while overall ‘forum productivity’ increased when the user was allowed to use either the thumbnail display or the eClassifier scatterplot, ‘forum productivity’ actually decreased when users were presented with both of these navigation features. This seems to make a good deal of sense. Having two very new interfaces placed in front of you can be a very intimidating thing and this intimidation can lead to hesitation and, ultimately, decreased productivity. Additionally, if a clear path is not given to someone who is exploring a new interface (or anything else, for that matter), confusion often ensues, limiting progress and productivity. Clearly, then, it is necessary to take into account not only the usability of each individual feature being added to a visualization but also the usability of the visualization as a whole (i.e. after all of the pieces have been added together).

According to the results of the trials it seems that the visualization is indeed a good one. This fact is also made quite evident in the obviously large amount of effort that went into creating ForumReader. Looking at the one screenshot presented in the article, however, I found the interface to be somewhat cluttered. While it seemed to make sense after reading what each component would be used for (it’s hard to say what makes sense until one has actually used the interface), the interface itself, with so many components, still seemed quite intimidating. This observation makes it clear that content organization and layout is almost as important as the content itself when creating a visualization.
**CodeSaw**

For this article, it seems as though the authors simply wanted to tell the reader about their creation: CodeSaw. CodeSaw is a visualization application meant to (graphically) show how different people contribute to the development of distributed software (e.g. open source software such as firebox or gaim). Rather than simply defining and displaying a person’s contribution to a project in terms of amount of code added or changed, CodeSaw also takes into account how many lines of text a person sends to the project email. By doing this, CodeSaw acknowledges both the direct (committing code) and the indirect (making comments, conversing, and critiquing) contributions of a person. The authors also explain how CodeSaw is the end result of a long set of iterations and thus takes into account many issues and problems uncovered by users of CodeSaw.

CodeSaw is, in its most basic form, quite simple. It displays at most the contributions of eight different code contributors at a time. Each of these up to eight individual contribution visualizations displays its information in a linear manner, displaying the progression of time on the horizontal axis. Each person’s code contributions is represented by triangles of varying size (the greater the area, the larger the contribution) rising up from his horizontal line while each person’s email contribution is represented by triangles that point down from the line. That is, each person’s contribution are shown on a horizontal timeline where up-pointing ‘saw teeth’ represent code contributions and down-pointing ‘saw teeth’ represent email contributions. This ‘saw tooth’ visualization ultimately produces a display which many who were interviewed during its creation found to be quite attractive and aesthetically appealing.

I personally found CodeSaw to be a very good visualization. I find that the visualizations I like the most are ones that need very little explanation (or even better, no explanation at all) in order to be properly understood. While, without context or a brief, one paragraph explanation, CodeSaw may not make much sense, it is a visualization that almost anyone, given a few minutes to interact with it, will be able to understand. Also, the visualization seems like it would be very useful in group projects, especially those of the open source variety. Indeed, because it allows one to easily gauge the contribution levels of each member of a project team, CodeSaw makes it extremely easy to see which team members have failed to do their part and which ones deserve praise for contributing so much to the group effort. Additionally, CodeSaw’s ability to display project history seems extremely useful. Viewing a project’s history is a very intuitive (and non-text-based) form allows an outsider to make educated insights concerning a certain individual’s profession or even the state of his home-life.

Another thing I found to be interesting was the CodeSaw’s implementation of spacial messaging. Indeed, seeing small speech bubbles left by one’s fellow (and often quite distant) teammates would most likely greatly increase the sense of community within the team (increasing interaction is almost always a good thing). The motivation that drove the creators of CodeSaw to do this, however, I thought were questionable. The person who tested an early version of CodeSaw indicated that she felt very lonely when using the visualization. This person also explained that she was essentially the sole contributor to the project. It seems to me that if one is the sole contributor to a project that loneliness is, perhaps, the proper emotion one should feel. However, the lonely tester did seem to make a sound point concerning how bug-reporters and similar folk were not well represented by the visualization.
Weblogs

In this article, it seems as if the authors are setting out simply to see if the current definition of a blog is an accurate one. Along with this, the authors are also attempting to determine if sufficiently many qualities are shared by the majority of existing blogs in order to claim that the blog should define a new genre. Additionally, if it is discovered that the blog is indeed worthy of its own genre, the authors hope to discover whether the blog defines a completely new (emergent) genre, a derivative (reproduced) genre, or some combination of the two.

Through their research, the authors made some surprising discoveries, many of which contradicted the prior belief of what elements defined the common blog. Previously, it was thought that most blogs were simply information filters. That is, the author of the blog would, more often than not, use his daily postings as a way of alerting his readers of exciting stories in the news or interesting posts on other blogs. Thus, it was thought that most blogs contained very little ‘new’ information and that they served mainly to redirect readers to actual sources of information. Additionally, it was thought that blogs were often places where readers and writers conversed and interacted in a way similar to how different posters interact in a forum or other such web-based group discussion. Both of these beliefs, that blogs are filters and discussion centers, were found to be the exception rather than the norm. The authors found that the vast majority of blogs (even excluding those found on personal-oriented blogging sites such as livejournal) were in fact more like personal journals, acting as a way for the writer to express himself and to make those expressions available to others. Additionally, it was discovered that most blog posts receive very few replies and that those that do often receive only a short string of them. In the end, the authors concluded that, because of their mild discussion-oriented atmosphere and fairly frequently (often once per day) content updates, blogs were not so much a new genre as they were a cross between two existing genres: the webpage and the forum.

To me, the conclusion made by the authors seems to be at least somewhat valid. Indeed, many blogs do, at first glance, appear to be something like a forum. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that, since many of the posts are simply textual translations of the daily doings or the latest thoughts of the writer that require no response, not as much discussion occurs on a blog as on a forum. Also, blogs offer a wonderful opportunity for the author to showcase himself through an ‘about me’ page. Indeed, such an ‘about me’ page is quite similar to a regular personal website (i.e. a non-blog site). However, because blogs offer a convenient and easy way to update ones ‘website’ on a daily basis, the blog is a much more fluid source of information than a regular website. Additionally, almost every blog I have had the pleasure of reading has been a personal one, each post explaining what the author happened to do on a particular day (many of these blogs were written by individuals vacationing or living somewhere exotic for a time, meaning that the daily doings of that person would often be quite interesting). Thus, the authors’ definition of the blog as a more dynamic and social website or a more personal and less discussion-oriented forum seems to be a good one.

Ultimately, I believe that blogging has become so popular because blogs provide a simple means for the writer to broadcast himself to the world. The need to feel that one is part of a larger community (i.e. that one belongs) and the need to feel some sense of efficacy are two very strong human motivators.
The ability of the blog to satiate both of these needs so easily is what has, in my opinion, lead the blog to become so pervasive a thing within the internet community.