Flash Forums and Forum Reader: Navigating a New Kind of Large Scale Online Discussion
Kushal Dave, Martin Wattenberg, Michael Muller

This article is rightly titled. For a beginner, the concept of Flash Forums is completely new to me. As a novice in this area of computer-mediated communication, it was eye-opening to learn that forums also can be of different types based on their inherent characteristics and not only be limited to different genres. Although this article was hard to grasp when the authors describe their newly created tool Forum Reader and its deployment to Flash Forums, it is not hard to gauge the potential for effectiveness in online forum navigation and research.

Some of the flash forums discussed in this article are Slashdot and IBM Jams. Characteristics of these flash forums are different from Usenet forums in terms of authorship, large size, focused topic and limited time making it difficult to navigate for information as well as posing a platform to gain thousands of immediate opinions on a certain topic. To not miss out on this opportunity, the authors have created and deployed a tool that makes navigation easier in byzantine flash forums. Although I could not understand the crux of their tool – forum reader, I could understand that it could help visualizing information in form of thumbnail maps and highlighting and also from the feedback from people who used it. From looking at the data in a visually organized graphical format, it would help users navigate through the forum much easily and also help businesses and researchers know where and what the general pulse of the markets is.
Codesaw: A Social Visualization of Distributed Software Development
Eric Gilbert, Karrie Karahalios

Software development is one of the areas that is fascinating. Simply because it has a hard-to-pin-down quality to it and it is perhaps the fastest growing industries under the influence of tremendous competition and constant change. In addition to that, computer sciences has created a new culture and a new medium of communication that is intertwined with our sense of being today. In this light and keeping this article in context, open source software is one of the revolutions taking over today’s software marketplace that can be best attributed to the authors’ declaration that “Projects like Linux, Apache and Mozilla have propelled the open source “movement” into the popular consciousness through their media attention.”

The authors developed and implemented CodeSaw to open source projects to “reveal roles” and bring to light “novel interactions.” The idea underlying the CodeSaw philosophy of a ‘community mirror’ is novel. Not only is this concept easy to understand for a beginner like me, but what is really impressive is that the authors apply a social approach to software development and make it a one-of-a-kind study that look at the real people behind the software codes. I especially liked the areas where the authors highlighted their design implications to be people centric, leading to a co-mingling of two disciplines such as sociology and technology – a good example of the kind of research I am primarily interested in.

As regards visualizations, I thought that the data fed into CodeSaw and the visualizations thereof were simple to understand and most striking. The sharp peaks and dips of activity in
coding and communication were graphic and really packed meaning into the data that was being studied.

This study reveals the rhythms in activity and tries to find correlations and relationships between the programmers or correlations between activity and time of the year etc. The example in Fig. 3 tries to guess the relationship between the two developers however it could be wholly possible that relationships needn’t naturally exist between them, instead the only common denominator between them could be the open source project that they are devoted to.

However, on a different note, what interests me is the kind of behavior exhibited in these programmers and developers while they create something that requires time, effort and talent in the absence of any external motivation, agenda or incentive. This could have many social implications, for example, software developers usually comprise a community of an esoteric cult following, or perhaps their motivations towards contributing for “greater good” in an absence of any recognition or award could reveal a “helping humanity” kind of mentality that could exist.

Overall, I think CodeSaw is an interesting project in social psychology and social visualization. But on a personal note, the amount of data that can be revealed with CodeSaw and its future applications and the political power that could be made available with that kind of information in the very light of the “Big Brother“ era that exists in society today, in addition with the never-ending debate of consumer ethics and user-privacy, leaves me enlightened but at the same time concerned.