Re: Flash Forums/ForumReader

Flash forums are essentially a time-limited variant of regular web forums. Usenet and bulletin board content is fairly permanent, with the possibility of threads being revisited after a long period of activity. Flash forum threads and topics are typically only available for a window of a few days or so.

Due to this temporal limit, flash-forum content tends to consist of mainly current events. Slashdot is given as an example in the article. Today, Slashdot tends to be on the slower side of the relatively new flash-forum genre. Articles on Slashdot appear after they have headlined on sites such as Digg and Reddit. This is probably due to the varying styles of moderation; Slashdot employs individuals, while Digg and Reddit use registered community members.

Collective, diffuse authorship is characteristic of most flash forums but the implementation varies. Articles submitted by Slashdot community members must be approved before appearing for comment; this likely explains the time lag compared to other sites. This leads to less substantial yet more salient topics reaching the front page. While Slashdot may have an article critiquing memes reach its front page, Reddit or Digg would have the memes themselves.

Memes such as lolcats appear not only in the topic of articles but in the comments as well. “It's a trap!” or “Do a barrel roll!” will appear somewhat randomly in comments. This sort of off-topic interaction epitomizes the social nature of flash forums. The sites and topics insure readership with some degree of common ground; this leads to spontaneous interaction. In contrary to the authors' findings, flash forum threads tend to be quite deep. One common reason for this is continued puns – each commenter trying to outdo the last. In community moderated sites, there is a tendency to comment on popular entries instead of starting new threads. This increases thread depth as well, and is common because it ensures that one's post is immediately visible.

A particularly good idea from ForumReader is that of “read wear”. This is a a good way to make reading patterns obvious. A particularly interesting example is that of fading interest in comment scanning. Most people read the first few comment threads, and only the first few replies of each thread at that. This reinforces the motivation for replying to a popular comment rather than starting a new thread for the topic.

Perhaps the most puzzling finding is that text analytics and a thumbnail view together is less effective than either alone. The authors are likely correct in assuming that this results from an information overload. If there were an easy way to naturally integrate the overview with the analytics the full potential could be realized. The fact that a black box analytics package is used probably limits this potential. A truly custom package is the most promising avenue for improvement.
**Re: CodeSaw**

CodeSaw provides a simple and practical way to visualize contributions to a software project. The most wonderful aspect of the visualization is the ability to compare mailing list chatter with actual code contributions. Secondary is the intuitive (drag and drop) method of comparing individual developers’ contributions. CodeSaw is an incredibly useful tool for visualizing a distributed community’s interaction.

Developers separated geographically typically have a much tougher time coordinating the distribution of work. Ideally, face-to-face meetings should be ideal for this task. In reality, the nature of these meetings allows for more charismatic developers to excel. Better people skills allow such figures to inflate their reputations and over-represent their actual contributions. Less socially adept but technically brilliant developers may be overshadowed and under-appreciated.

Where CodeSaw truly shines is in its ability to remedy this problem. The overwhelming majority of developer sentiment was a feeling of vindication. Developers who felt that they had shouldered most of the work could finally prove their case. In the same vein, CodeSaw separates the chaff from the wheat. Those who “talk the talk” but don’t “walk the walk” are immediately obvious. While this may lead to contention among participants, it can also lead to accolades for heavy lifters.

A sad and strange phenomenon is the sense of loneliness that some developers exhibited. This may be due to the size of the projects sampled. Larger projects are likelier to have more people contributing. Still, this observation exposes an intriguing aspect of human psychology: more information is not always better.

When the actual level of contribution from each member is shown, an illusory impression of community may be shattered. Many open-source developers’ contributions are motivated by a feeling of belonging resultant directly form this. When absent, the motivation for this also ceases to hold its importance. While it makes sense that most projects will have a core team, “phantom” members are a downer upon discovery. An improvement might be a view longer than a year in scope; members chatty recently may have been previously influential in terms of code.

The ability to give visualized activity context is also incredibly useful. Milestones plotted against time help to tell the project’s story. Messages left on the timeline enrich the viewing experience for all participants. The idea of small multiples is ideal for this project; comparison is greatly enhanced because of it. Triangles are an excellent choice; the well-defined points allow for easier comparisons over time. Now all CodeSaw needs is a larger audience to prove its worth.
Re: Bridging The Gap

Weblogs, the authors argue, bridge the gap between static web pages and computer mediated communication. Instead of merely serving as collections of links or filters of conventional media, blogs enable personal expression. The “moment in time” nature of each post draws on CMC, but the permanence of the medium reflects personal web pages.

Previous studies indicated a completely different nature in the realm of weblogs. They found that blogs tended to act similarly to flash forums. While many blogs lacked the volume of commentary supplied by flash-forum communities, they followed the event-comment format. This is likely due to the fact that many of the more popular blogs follow this format. These blogs attract mainstream media attention due to this popularity, and consequently attract more attention.

The authors’ choice of blogs in their sample likely influences their findings greatly. The fact that they limit blogs to those with a decent amount of text in each post excludes many filter-type blogs. In such blogs, a photo or link to an article with a short summary are common. These blogs are “filtered out (so to speak) by default. The choice to include relatively recently created blogs with relatively few posts also biases the sample towards personal blogs. Filter blogs are more likely to have established communities.

Blogs like Metafilter are a great example (unsurprisingly) of the “filter” category. Ask Metafilter is even more interesting, with short questions posed that are answered by the consensus of the community. This is yet another example of the pervasiveness of the filter category of weblogs, and the strength of social interaction as a motivating factor. That filter blogs were still second most frequent in the sample taken by the authors truly speaks to their popularity.

K-logs were used as an example of another under-represented category of blogs. That many k-logs may be closed to the public by nature is irrelevant to their status on the continuum. The authors have provided no evidence that they are a forum for interaction or even that they are distinct from online journals. Think about Darwin’s notebook from his trip on the Beagle. How are k-logs any more than its social analog?

The conclusion that blogs are merely an amalgamation of features from old news sources is simply a result of the study’s failure to reconcile two separate categories; an attempt to make discrete variables continuous. The low amount of comments found, the badges and the lack of a guest book are all symptoms of a poor sample. Blogger does indeed make it easy for people to create a presence on the web. So much so, that not all such pages should be counted in a meaningful sample.