Flash Forums and ForumReader: Navigating a New Kind of Large-scale Online Discussion

Now that newer papers are being assigned as readings, I can see more well-defined examples (maybe only because I’ve personally viewed them) of the data being analyzed. In some previous papers, for instance, a general MUD conversation was examined. Here we have specific types of communities; Slashdot and IBM are probably more technology-oriented than whoever would be using everyday chat applications.

Keeping that in mind, ForumReader does a good job of representing this data. I have not seen an IBM intranet, so I don’t know how the posts are displayed, but on the new Slashdot website, viewing modes similar to a zoomed-in thumbnail view were/are available for browsers to use.

I like the fact that different depths were considered as individual forums in each of the types of community. In particular, the Slashdot analysis is similar to what I used in the visualization for Digg which I presented last week: the initial post is the basis for a flash forum of discussion, rather than the entire category of posts; and under each of the posts or articles is a bunch of threads which can spawn a multitude of children threads. However, Slashdot and Digg are far from the same type of community, and, at the very least, the same visualization technique applied to both sets of data would show drastic differences.

From the comments in class about my visualization and from the figures in the paper, it seems like my implementation would be a seamless (I’m hoping) combination of most of the elements in ForumReader. The zoomed-out thumbnail view would give a general overview of each flash forum. Limiting the scope of the viewing pane would eventually enable individual posts to be displayed as text. Finally, text searching can be done in real time and would navigate the view to results, either in order or zoomed out with all occurrences highlighted.

Without going into details about the separate implementations of ForumReader, I agree wholeheartedly with the conclusions reached using the tool. Although something may be able to help participants in flash forums in the future, there is the always-present condition of having users with enough common sense and motivation to use the tool. Unless it were properly integrated and extremely easy to use, I think most would be too lazy to bother running a separate application.
**CodeSaw: A Social Visualization of Distributed Software Development**

Section 4.1 (Design Rationale) concisely explained the motives and goals of CodeSaw. I liked the clear examples in the social data analysis, as they demonstrate what I feel is one of the most important features of CodeSaw. One can tell what kind of schedule someone has based on their activity levels over extended periods of time without going too deep into privacy issues (which were cited as a concern near the conclusion of the paper). This, in combination with seeing overall activity “shares” in the entire group which can define specific roles on the team, could show just how dedicated someone is to a project.

Although two design implications focusing on keeping the display quick and simple by only visualizing essential information are obviously in agreement, I’m curious as to how exactly users would interact with the visualization to explore context (the immediately previously listed design implication). The paper describes what the test subjects wanted to see but gives little else to guess upon. In this case users thought too much information was hidden, and in the other two areas users didn’t want to be overwhelmed.

It would’ve been interesting to see screenshots of some iterations of the design process of CodeSaw. While the descriptions tell what went wrong in some prototype, I think the best way to see how a visualization can improve is to actually visually see it.

Finding universal balances in such systems is probably what takes up a big bulk of the time spent developing one, it’s good to see that CodeSaw was tested in the real world with real projects. Using such tests saves lots of time that would’ve otherwise been wasted later on. From the statistics given, it appears that CodeSaw was targeted at larger and/or busier projects. The survey results are interesting in themselves because they may have unintentionally specified that target audience. Since CodeSaw basically analyzes committed actions, only those larger and/or busier projects would appear popular and active. Others, like the project with fewer than five developers, would need the visualization to somehow take total traffic and community activity into account.
Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs

I was glad to see a paper on something as relatively new as weblogs. So far I have not seen any article showcasing a study or analysis as extensive as this one. The previous blog research featured in this paper seem neither in-depth nor very completely done from objective point of view. It’s nice to have an analysis from someone other than a blogger.

A persistent issue of the article was Rebecca Blood’s claim that blogs are uniquely digital, originally derived from lists of new items and/or links. I, like the authors of the paper, find this statement to be false. I don’t know how Blood arrived at the conclusion because she gave counter-examples herself. With the exception of permanently stored comments and asynchronous conversations within individual entry topics, each type of blog has an offline counterpart from which it originated (journals and diaries being one example). However, if commenting is the foundation for the argument that blogs are uniquely digital, then it’s possible to argue the same point for every method of online communication and interaction, whether it be author-to-audience or person-to-person/people-to-people.

As a medium of communication blogs seem to benefit authors who are “genuine” and don’t worry about things like keeping visitors on their own website(s), etc., leading to my next point. Honest blogs, no matter how “technically selfish” they are, seem to end up more successful than obviously “motivationally selfish” ones.

One type of weblog of which I didn’t see too much mention is the purely commercial or promotional blog. Upon his/her first visit someone may think the website legitimately fits into one of the categories described in the paper, but upon closer inspection or participation in the “community”, he/she can find that certain restrictions (besides legal ones) may be imposed on the content that’s allowed to be publicly displayed on that blog. A dead giveaway of an educational blog with ulterior motives, for example, is very low readership along with an overload of advertisements. The author(s) probably just want to make a quick buck on the side by posting possibly stolen content. I’ve seen mostly blogs of the “filter” type attempt this, and it’s almost funny what they try to do.