The first paper we read is about flash forums. A flash forum is differentiated from more typical news groups such as USENET because the user base is much larger, more focused and does not have as much thread based response. This article is particularly interesting to me because I am currently working on a visualization for Twitter.com. Previously to reading this article, I didn’t think there was much room for interpretation between these two kinds of groups. I thought that Twitter was a service used by many and didn’t really account for threaded conversations, and in my mind, that was a huge problem.

This article made me really rethink my previous ideas. Twitter may be a sort of flash forum website, because the number of users is immense, and threads are relatively short for the most part, and are more rare than in most newsgroups. This fact may change in the future, and in fact, I think that if Twitter wants to survive long term, it does need to get people talking more, but as of right now, some people could certainly make the case that it is a flash forum type of site. In addition, while flash forums have time limits, Twitter posts, or tweets, only have few hours before they are typically buried under everyone else’s posts, so this is another thing Twitter has in common with flash forums.

The article seemed interesting, but I found many of the graphs very confusing. I thought that it was hard to tell what the figures provided by the researchers were actually saying. It seems that certain ways of looking at the textual data provided a more linear way of looking through the messages and others simply provided a more visual way of looking at messages in the same order as they were previously read. Figure 2 supposedly showed off the visualizations that the researchers had come up with, but I found it very difficult to understand how the thumbnail visualization would show more data, and also how the layered view was any better than the straight text view that flash forums are typically like.

The researchers claim that the users liked their visualizations, but never really backed that up, I didn’t think. They said that most users liked the visualizations and thought they improved their viewing experience, but also that users were over whelmed by the range of visualizations, and felt like the new views cluttered their viewing screen and confused the data that was already confusing enough.
Paper #2 Critique

This paper discusses a new way of examining distributed programming projects. In layman’s terms, this means that people will theoretically be able to tell more easily which open source projects they are working on and when different changes to their projects are being made.

At first glance, this project seems immediately comparable to the wikipedia visualization called History Flow. This visualization showed layers depicting different sections of code that had been added or lost after an update by a specific member. In a way, this is similar, but the CodeSaw takes it a step further as well. There are multiple variations on the history flow set up. The smaller timelines are the developer visualizations, and the big chart is the actual code. I am interested to know how this would scale. For larger projects, I could see it being a problem that so many people are contributing, and if the visualization is only showing the top ten contributors or so, than this could be a problem if a lesser contributing individual changes a crucial part of the project. Another way to combat this is only showing the last ten contributors, but this also displays the same problem, so perhaps a tabbed version in which users can view by either most recent, top contributors, or simply by searching certain developers would be best.

Another part of this project that I like is that anyone can use it and look at it and immediately see and understand what is going on. I like most nature-based visualizations for this reason, and in general, feel like they are easier for the general public to use. For most visualizations, people must have data of their own to contribute in order to view a visualization, or at least to fully be interested in what the visualization is showing. In this visualization, however, anyone can come in and either see what they have contributed in comparison to the other developers, or at least look at the timeline of the project and see who has contributed most, and where and when important modifications were made. I can see why designers could feel detached from the process and finding it hard to place certain changes with certain people so this visualization really helps bridge the gap and puts at least a color or place on the list for a specific person, and concrete proof of how much they are contributing and how important their contributions are.

Finally, it is always interesting to see how people use the visualization themselves. Most people switched between analyzing their own coding habits, and associating good weeks and bad weeks with how often developers contributed. The tradeoff between people programming and people commenting on the project is also important and probably one that could make a few people reconsider their day-to-day contributions to the project.
Paper #3 Critique

This discussion revolves around blogs and how they are related to similar online mediums, and makes predictions about the future of blog usage. I find this very interesting on a personal level. When I was in seventh grade, I had an English teacher who made us keep journals every week, and we had to write a minimum of 400 words per week, which was a lot back then for us. However, this got me into the habit of keeping a journal and I was pretty good about it for a while and now I go in and out of phases in which I write a lot and then I don’t for a longer time, but I would always like to get back into the habit. Regardless, this is related because when blogs first came out, I always felt like they were the next step in diaries and journals, and that’s what people would use them for.

However, with the invention of sites such as livejournal, people began sharing their journals online. This was amazing to me because journals were always such a private thing for me, and I could never even imagine sharing mine with strangers or even worse, friends, who these stories were about! So in my opinion, blogs died down for a while, and then we started seeing what we would now recognize as a blog today on peoples personal websites. These blogs were not just about people’s lives, although they could be, they usually had a theme, and the popular ones touched on modern pop culture or the latest stories in the news and blogs evolved into what they are now. This seems to me closest compared to opinion columnists in the local newspaper. People find a person whose opinion they like and who’s writing style best suits them and decide to follow them and get their information about the latest news from this person who they probably don’t even know.

Because of all this, it was very surprising to me that over 70 percent of the blogs that were studied were classified as personal journals. The research for this paper was done in 2003, and I wonder how much this data has changed in the past five years, but I bet that most of the most popular blogs would no longer be classified as such. In my guess, most would still be personal, because tons of people want to get their thoughts out into the world, but the most popular blogs would be much more based on k-logs and mixed types of blogs. For the most part, opinion is what people want when reading blogs, and personal blogs that simply talk about what went on in someone’s day are not very exciting to people who don’t even know the person who’s blog they are reading. However, the blog entries seemed pretty diverse for the time that the study was done, using blogs averaging a year and a half old, and using one that was nearly 3 years old. For the 2003 time period in which this study was done, it seems that this study is very relevant and also meaningful to the blog culture in general. I also think the predictions are nice, since html is becoming easier and easier for those not in the know to use, and blogs are certainly burring the line between journal and something much more in current times.