READING 3 - Communities: Flash forums and forumReader: navigating a new kind of large-scale online discussion; CodeSaw: A Social Visualization of Distributed Software Development; Bridging The Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs

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

By Kushal Dave, Martin Wattenberg, and Michael Muller

Critiqued by: Mani Golparvar-Fard [-mgolpar2], CS498kgk

This paper mainly addresses flash forums which are (1) large in size, (2) authorships are more diffuse, and (3) threads are significantly shallower and distinct (the topics are more focused and constrained in time) as opposed to traditional forums such as UseNet and (4) there is a short time frame for conversation. Examples of such forums are IBM Jams. I have personally experienced these forums and I agree that these forums are certainly powerful ways for gathering a significant number of viewpoints from users on particular issue in a short period of time, though they challenge users. Even though Moderation as a technique for voting and controlling topics is introduced, yet sometimes these systems fail to surface valuable posts in a timely manner (Also addressed by Lampe, Resnick and Slash and Burn, CHI 2004).

In this paper, authors have introduced ForumReader a visual navigation and automatic topic extraction technology which highlights important issues considering the large size and quality of forums.

I personally experienced IBM Jam and my personal goal was aligned with the goals outlines in the paper: looking for new ideas, finding support and figuring out the important issues people address within specific domains of knowledge yet I also experienced the Scale issue. The large size of these forums makes topics to significantly overlap in different themes across sub-threads which make it tough to track all related posts. Nonetheless, the limited time was a powerful component in making posts to appear faster (Since Jam is for 3 days) and I experienced coming across many interesting posts.

In my opinion, the ForumReader visualization toolkit presented in this paper is a powerful tool for interaction a user with the content of a forum, since an impediment to using these forums is the absence of an appropriate interface. Real-time visual text search is certainly one of the interesting features of the toolkit allowing the entire corpus to be searched in real-time and matches to be visualized with updating the thumbnail. The supplementary feature of readWear which creates a focus for the user by representing where they have already been and providing useful landmark information is also appealing. The feedback on the toolkit when developed as Jamanalyzer concurs its robustness in a natural user environment. Especially the ability to find how much others are finding a message valuable and seeing the voting data is significant. Nonetheless, I did not find having two features together problematic through agreeing to the notion that providing too many options to users will be overwhelming. In my opinion authors pose an important future direction by addressing the need for adding a feature to be able to find dissimilar topics. This feature will allow new posts to be posted in appropriate locations and brings more awareness in a forum.
CodeSaw: A Social Visualization of Distributed Software Development

By Gilbert and Karahalios

Critiqued by: Mani Golparvar-Fard [~mgolpar2], CS498kgk

This paper presents CodeSaw, a social visualization application for Open Source development community where there is no face to face interaction, there is a limited resource on scheduling and in most cases there is no plan for development. CodeSaw visualizes code repository changes as well as project communication. The authors visualize group dynamics and individual roles and claim that CodeSaw positively affects the Open Source programming community and provides a feel of satisfaction to their developers. This is very good for open source communities since it allows developers to see their contributions. Furthermore, a novel technique entitled as “Spatial Messaging” is also introduced which allows users to leave comments on visualization itself. It is shown that this feature, without replacing traditional communication channels is able to remove the feeling of loneliness that earlier versions of CodeSaw was creating in communities with a few developers.

I found the idea of developing CodeSaw really interesting, since in previous critiques I came with a similar idea to somehow visualize interactions in shared repositories like CVS or SVN though my idea was on using a tool similar to that of CodeSaw for Software Configuration Management in controlled practices like Extreme Programming. Bringing the feeling of contribution to the open source community and having them feel that they work in a team not as individuals in my opinion is one of the major contributions of this system. In addition, the fact that only essential information is visualized as opposed to all information is a major contribution, since the authors have been able to figure out the essential information required through their online feedbacks. The implemented “small multiples” concept to allow users learn more about involvement of each other and performing zooming on information was cleverly chosen since it sustains the abstract representation of information, while still allows the information to be further analyzed at a more details scale.

One interesting application of CodeSaw is finding software engineering patterns and roles which have been successfully presented in the paper. I think this will definitely bring a new understanding for the people who do research in Software Engineering community. The notion that CodeSaw does not violate privacy of the users is also appealing.

Nevertheless it is arguable that one issue with spatial messaging component could be the notion that any member can leave a comment on the visualization trend. In the paper, there is no discussion on access of different people on spatial messaging. It is discussed that CodeSaw may bring increased production to a project, though this claim is not properly tested either. I think still CodeSaw needs to be tested.
Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs

By Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright

Critiqued by: Mani Golparvar-Fard [~mgolpar2], CS498kgk

This paper seeks the characteristics of blogs as socially-transformative and democratizing potential tool, having an individualistic and friendly form of self-expression. A limited empirical snapshot of weblog at the time paper was written is presented. Within the paper, 203 weblogs are analyzed according to their contents and external presentations. Blogs, socially interactive and community-like environments according to (Blood 2002) are categorized as filters (where bloggers pre-surf the web and direct readers to selected contents), personal journals and notebooks (k-logs). It is suggested that blogs are not new but they are just emergent genres drive by interactive web technologies and they just blur the distinctions between HTML documents and test-based computer-mediated communications.

In my opinion, most of the results presented in this paper are apparent to reader. In one instance, the authors mention most blogs are personal journals (at the time the paper was written) and it says these 203 blogs are randomly chosen from the net. I think it would have been better to work with a smaller set of blogs and thoroughly study them on how they are used and evolved over time as opposed to studying a significant number of blogs together. I think there are lots of key applications for blogs that are not much visible when they are studies extensively together and as a large group. Furthermore, since the authors limited themselves to automatically generated blogs, they did not get to study more interesting and structured blogs.

Besides, a massive portion of the conclusions depicted in this paper are based on the software and its assumptions which make this study subjective to some degree. In one case in the paper, it is reported that an overwhelming majority of logs are created by single individuals. This is really interesting because so far I was always under the impression that it is exactly the other way around of what is reported here. Perhaps it is because the study tends to be mostly on young adults residing in United States. At least from what I can see in our campus, spouses of many international students get attracted to blogs and web-logging. As an instance, some of them mainly use blogs to share their experiences in living a small town and present their life in a personal journal format. These samples are considered outliers when only a smaller group of people in the states are used as the case study. Overall, in my opinion, the research data presented in this paper is very limited and the conclusions drawn do not represent the underlying principles of interaction within weblogs nor their characteristics.