Usenet Group Visualization (updated)

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1 The basic idea

This visualization is meant to be partly useful and partly just fun or interesting-looking. The threaded topics of a usenet group are converted into 3-dimensional randomized branching objects which look like cartoon-like trees. The topics exist together in a simple 3d environment in which the user can navigate.

Getting close to a tree (or shrub), the user can see the name of the topic. Zooming into the branches reveals more information as the semi-transparent foliage fades away. Clicking on a branch displays a linear view of the discussion from the base of the tree to that point. If new posts have been added, growing fresh branches, an apple will appear on the end of the branch. ‘Picking’ the apple lets the user see the posts that are new.

On loading the visualisation of a group which the user may or may not have visited before, the user can quickly see what the atmosphere of the group is. An automatic classification mechanism which can determine the tone of posts is used to alter the appearance of the trees and surrounding landscape to reflect the emotions they contain.

2 Concepts

2.1 3d trees with threads as branches

- branches are closer to trunk (vertical) if they have 1) longer posts and 2) more descendants
- branches have physical width related to length of posts (minus quotes)
- different types of conversations arise that may lead to trees of naturally different appearance. randomized fractal growth algorithms could also use other generated parameters from the topic posts to alter the appearance of the tree.
2.2 Interface usage

- click on branch to see conversation thread up to that point
- new, unread thread-parts have apples. user 'picks' an apple to see the new content
- static mode: nothing moves, the user can zoom in on specific topics to choose branches
- history mode: the trees grow and die showing the pictorial history of the group

2.3 Tree aesthetics and indicators

- should look like actual tree, textured and randomized
- foliage from a distance that fades out when closer to see branches
- as threads grow old and unused, the leaves fade and the tree dies

2.4 Environmental indicators

- the ground and sky are indicators of the group’s tone and health/activity
- threads classified as negative give the branch/tree a withered look
- whole trees with negative tone have a scorched area surrounding them
- groups which become inactive take on a desolate, scorched look

2.5 Other possible ideas

- posters could be represented by simple 3d animated avatars.
- occasional posters would be something innocuous, like rabbits.
- longtime posters who are classified as helpful are represented by wizards
- trolls are, well, trolls
- the avatars could have some simple actions/animations:
  - walking, especially around areas where they’ve posted
  - speech bubbles with quotes from their sigs or posts
  - topics with both good posts/posters and trolls could have fighting avatars? probably hard to animate.

3 Concept Art
Figure 1: A happy usenet group. The ground is lush and green, bunnies are prancing around, the trees have foliage, and the weather is nice.

Figure 2: This group has been abandoned or overrun by trolls (at least at this moment in the group’s history). The land is dry and parched, the sun beats down on hideous trolls waiting to flame the innocent poster.