Social Translucence (short)

In this paper, the authors discuss the topic of electronic social interaction and why cooperation through electronic media seems to be so much more difficult than cooperation in the physical world. The authors attribute this difficulty with electronic cooperation to the (usual) lack of social cues in electronic media. That is, things that humans take for granted in situations of physical cooperation (e.g. eye contact, a shrug, twiddling fingers) are often absent in the electronic scene. After making their initial point, the authors move on to discussing various visualizations that attempt to relay through an electronic medium these often-missing social cues.

The authors discuss four main visualizations that they have made in order to improve interaction and cooperation in four different social situations. The first of these visualizations, babble, attempts to visualize a simple conversation. When a person is ‘in’ a conversation (but is not necessarily participating in it), that person appears, represented as a small circle, within a large ‘circle of conversation’. This makes it clearly visible to all of those involved in the chat who can and who cannot see and respond to what is being said. Additionally, if a person posts are is actively reading the posts of others, his circle moves toward the center of the ‘circle of conversation’. Because of this, a user is able to easily discern the leaders of a given conversation in much the same way that he would be able to do so in a physical conversation. The authors then move on to discuss a visualization for a lecture, a visualization for an auction, and a visualization for a waiting line. Each of these visualizations attempts to show its corresponding social situation in a way that emulates the physical world. The lecture is a single circle separated from an audience of circles, the auction is a group of circles surrounding the item on which they are bidding, and a waiting line is a winding line of circles leading up to a counter. Each visualization, though simple, is extremely intuitive and thus is quite effective.

The idea of taking a situation where individuals interact electronically and visualizing it as a similar situation that exists in the physical world is a sound one. When electronic scenarios are visualized in this way, no real explanation of what the visualization means or how the visualization is used is needed. The user, because he has lived and participated in events taking place in the physical world, should (in theory) already be familiar with the interface and thus should know all that he needs to know. While making visualizations in this way sounds like a very good idea, it may sometimes be quite difficult (or even impossible) to find a appropriate physical-world analogue. Thus, physically-based visualizations will not be able to solve every visualization problem.

Furthermore, one must be weary of using social norms as a means of creating presumably-intuitive visualizations. Social norms will only continue to be considered as such if they remain commonplace. However, if a social norm on which a visualization is based goes out-of-style, that visualization may no longer be as easy-to-use as before it was. Additionally, if electronic interactions become more common than physical ones, it may be that a user will not have a firm enough ground in the physical metaphor to be able to effectively interact with a physically-based visualization.
Social Translucence (long)

In this paper, the authors seem to be primarily concerned with basically the same topic that they were concerned with in the previous paper (i.e. that paper written about above in 'Social Translucence (short)'). That is, the authors here discuss why face-to-face interactions are so good, focusing on understanding the social nuances and social cues present in physical conversation. They discuss, for instance, how people in a face-to-face conversation will move closer to one another in order to be able to communicate more effectively if the room in which they are conversing has an exceptionally high ambience. It is the hope of the authors to, through the discussions here presented, devise entirely new visualizations (or perhaps just new aspects of existing visualizations) that utilize as a metaphor these face-to-face interactions.

The authors point out that, in face-to-face conversations, people have the ability to relay visual information such as facial expressions in addition to the actual auditory content of the conversation. This coupled with the fact that the conversations both are non-persistent and also allow for easy rephrasing or clarification requests. Furthermore, face-to-face conversations allow for the oh-so-important tone. Digital conversations that one often finds in the online scene usually come in the form of text posts and are thus not capable of (non-explicitly) conveying inflection and tone. Without these conversational devises, it becomes very difficult to use sarcasm or other such common conversational tactics that are used frequently in social situations.

Additionally, the authors point out that, when recreating a physical situation through digital media, there are three basic forms that these visualizations can take: realistic, mimetic, and abstract. The Realistic method is just that – it attempts to display the picture of the person with whom you are speaking in addition to the sound of his voice (e.g. video conferencing). The mimetic form is a slight abstraction of the mimetic form in that it too imparts your conversation partner with some sort of face and ‘voice’, but that those things are simply aspects of a digital avatar and not the person himself. Lastly, the abstract form is a form which again (as one – given the name – might expect) progresses further down the path of abstraction. As in physical, face-to-face conversation, social cues will be present here; however, the social cues in an abstract visualization will be much different than those in its physically-based analogue. That is, the digital social cues will, rather than be a simply clone of the social cues of their physically-based counterparts, be cues created in a way that best suites the digital media. It is on this abstract form that the paper focuses.

I find myself in agreement with the authors that the focus of physically-based visualizations should be on the abstract rather than on something more concrete (i.e. something that is more of a thoughtless copy rather than something that is carefully and cleverly conceived). While it would be nice if everything that works so well in one situation would work equally well in all situations, that is simply not the case. For this reason, it is necessary that certain things be changed when translating from the physical world into the digital one. I believe that applications such as ‘chat circles’ are the perfect example of how to do this translation properly. Rather than representing participants in a chat as small, human-looking avatars whose mouths would move whenever that avatar’s owner made a post, the participants are represented by (very non-human) circles. Each time the participant makes a comment,
the circle flashes and grows ever so slightly. While it is clear that participants in a face-to-face conversation neither flash nor grow physically as they speak, these cues work quite well in the digital world.