Social Translucence: An Approach to Designing Systems that Support Social Processes

“Socially translucent systems” are digital systems that support coherent behavior by making participants and activities visible to everyone in the system. These systems have three characteristics: visibility, awareness, and accountability. A translucent system is different from a transparent system. In translucent systems there is a vital tension between privacy and visibility.

I liked the example with the glass on the door to illustrate the properties of socially translucent systems. This example made me think of Don Norman’s book, “The Design of Everyday Things.” In the book he mentioned that a door with a glass on it is a better design than one without it because it prevents people from slamming the door on other people as they walk by. The example in this paper talks about how people would act differently if the glass were added, which is something that wasn’t mentioned in Don Norman’s book. I liked that the paper focused on people’s reactions, and not just on the design of the door.

The paper states that, “although our examples are architectural, there is considerable work in the HCI tradition that also bears on these issues.” The authors give examples of works in HCI, but they don’t discuss them in depth; each example is explained in about a sentence. In the beginning of the paper the authors mention taking inspiration from work in the areas of architecture and urban design. Although they claim that just like architects they are also interested in creating contexts that support various forms of human-human interaction, I think it would’ve been more appropriate to give more elaborate examples of works in HCI.

When describing the marbles in Babble on page 73, the authors state that marbles outside the circle represent those who are logged on but are in other conversations. Later, in the same paragraph, they state that “When people leave the current conversation their marbles move outside the circle; when they enter the conversation, their marbles move into the circle.” This seems like a contradiction, and if it isn’t it should be clarified. Is there no distinction between being inactive in a conversation and being logged out of the conversation?

The authors discuss whether or not they should display private conversations that are being held. They argue that a pro of this would be informing users of this feature, while a con would be giving away too much information. I think that this information should not be displayed. If I’m having a conversation with somebody, even though what we’re saying isn’t displayed to others, I might not even want other people to know I’m having a private conversation with this person. I think there are many ways that the feature can be advertised, without having to use real-world examples to illustrate it. In my opinion, showing snippets of private conversations would question the privacy of the feature.
Social Translucence: Designing Social Infrastructures That Make Collective Activity Visible

The authors of this paper believe that designing digital systems that make perceptually based social cues visible to other users will make it easier for people to carry on coherent discussions, observe and imitate other’s actions, engage in peer pressure, create, notice and conform to social conventions, and to engage in other forms of collective interactions. I am not clear as to why we would want a system that would help people engage in peer pressure and conform to social conventions. I think the authors should’ve elaborated more on the benefits of such system. “Social translucence” is used as a rubric for designing this system. It must provide cues that are socially salient but not make all socially salient information visible.

I think it’s interesting that Babble doesn’t show that someone is paying attention, only that he/she has clicked or typed. This is similar to human-human interaction; when talking to someone, they might be staring back at you, pretending to pay attention, but they really aren’t. In this case, you don’t realize that they aren’t paying attention. Just like in face-to-face conversations, there is no way to tell for sure if someone is paying attention or not.

I am confused with the lecture example. I was under the impression that if a user is typing or scrolling, his/her dot is moved to the center. In the lecture example, the speaker is in the center, but all other dots are in the outer edge of the circle. It seems that in this case no one is paying attention. It seems that if people were actively listening there would be no way to tell who is the speaker (because they would all be in the middle of the circle).

I really like the auction visualization. I think that being able to visualize other people that are placing bids on an item and representing the amount of the bid based on the distance toward the center of the circle definitely makes it seem more like in-person auctions. I think that the information being displayed is a lot more useful than just having the highest bidder displayed. To me it seems somewhat game-like in the sense that people would want to bid more in order to get their dot closer to the center of the circle.

The visualization for online lines seems like it would be extremely beneficial to callers, but I don’t see it as being beneficial to the people being called. For example, when I call a help desk and I’m placed on hold, I usually wait, hoping that I will be helped soon. After 10 minutes go by, I still don’t want to hang up because then I’ll feel like the 10 minutes went to waste. I end up waiting and eventually get a customer service person to answer my call. If there were a visualization that I could look at and see that my estimated wait was of more than 15 minutes, I would probably hang up. This would cause me to save time, but would not be beneficial to the customer service people. I think the authors should’ve discussed more benefits that this visualization would offer to those serving the customers.