Paper #1 Critique

This paper is called Social Translucence, which is defined in the introduction as a system in which people are able to support coherent behavior by making activities of the person who is the user visible to other users. This essay brings up a good point, which I like to think about often. They assert that group based collaboration is something that is not done well right now. This is not because of the technologies that are holding people back, but rather that we lack good programs or other ways of utilizing this technology to collaborate with others. This is a huge problem, and I completely agree with the authors that this is the case. I have thought for a while that technology was moving much faster than people can keep up with, and this is something that needs to be worked on. This is why the field of HCI and human-based design is so important, because these problems can be solved, and in 50 years we will look back and laugh at how bad technology was and how badly it “fit” the average user. If technology is new and advanced and improved, we should spend just as much time making sure that people can easily use it and put this new technology to use, instead of having to learn something much harder, like a complicated system to use the new technology.

The authors propose three different foundations of a new socially translucent system; visibility, awareness, and accountability. It is important that people use this new system as a sort of window, so they can view what is going on and perhaps even affect what is going on on the other side of the window, but do not have the ability to change things around without the approval of the original user. In addition, it is important that people know approximately how many people are interested in their specific topic at any certain time. This reminds me a lot of the inspiration for the chat circles visualization. In that visualization, people could have conversations in a room, but only could communicate with people closer by them. This is very similar because people could see how many people were in the room, where they were in the room, and could move closer to or farther away from certain people and conversations if they had the desire.

The proposed system, Babble is interesting, but I feel as if it has some drawbacks too. The marble view is interesting to view a current overview of the community, but may not be useful for one on one interaction. By looking at these marbles, you can tell which conversations are more popular and which people are involved in certain conversations, but I dislike the lack of constant avatar for each user. Between sessions of Babble, people will not be able to see which users have consistently been involved in the conversations, and perhaps which types of conversations a certain user often joins. This kind of history lets people know how dependable any single user is, and most likely, if they have been a member for a long time and have a lot of highly rated comments, they will most likely be more dependable and well-respected than someone who is new to the system. I would have liked to see something associated with this implemented in Babble. This could also affect the status of conversations, since in the paper, the authors mention some users’ fear of having their conversations being used against them at a later date.
This next paper is a continuation of the last paper. This one focuses more specifically on making social cues from an online community more visible and therefore more useful to the whole community. In this version of Babble, they have added some new cool additions to their previous ideas. The Babble timeline shows previous recent activity on the Babble conversations. This view is useful for conversations which don’t necessarily take place over the course of a single day. This allows users to see who has been posting in certain conversations, when people started paying attention to a conversation, and when people were posting lots of responses.

The other visualization which is interesting is called the lecture proxy. This one lets you see in real time how a lecture is going. I think this would be really interesting and it would be cool to see which people are most involved in asking questions, but I also think there could be some problems with this. If it is a lecture like most of the ones I have been to, the lecturer talks for a long time and then some people get to ask questions in the last few minutes, usually only one question per person. This could result in a pretty boring conversation visualization, but I think that if this were applied to a question and answer session, or maybe a typical college discussion class, this would be really interesting. In addition to this, I wonder about how this visualization would look over a long period, if there were long delays in between people asking questions, would people be forgotten and move back to the right side, or do they stay closer to the speaker.

Next, they provide visualizations for two different online scenes, an auction and a line. These are both very cool, and I think could be very helpful if used in current online scenarios. For example, if the site eBay was to use the auction visualization, I would find it very interesting to view and see how many people are watching an item and how many people are actually bidding. If there was some sort of history involved as well, it would be almost perfect and I would want to look at it to see if there was a bidding war going on between two people or if lots of different people were all splitting bids. The important thing that this changes about eBay is that the auctions are less like silent auctions now, and when you have a better idea of what you’re up against, it is more desirable to the user if they can see how many people they are competing with. The line visualization is really cool too, and I wish someone would come up with something like this for phone lines, because this is where I most frequently come across this problem. If I knew approximately how long I would be waiting in a line to get something, it is much less frustrating to be on hold for long amounts of time. If the first time you enter the line you are given an estimate of how long the line will be, you can make a decision on whether or not to stay in line and therefore will not spend unwanted time waiting in line.