1 Social Translucence, Babble

The paper(s) by Erickson et al describe a theory of what core principles make physical interaction successful. The authors identify three categories, activity, awareness, and accountability, which are normally automatic in real-life interaction. The problem is that our evolved social cues and intuitive sense don’t function the same way online. The authors present the idea of social translucence as a guideline that can produce interfaces which better facilitate communication. An example which serves as an illustration and a framework for future solutions is their conversational interface Babble.

Probably what I liked best about Babble was that it focused both on real-time interaction and on the archived group history as a knowledge base. Chat within an organization is usually focused on a set of common goals and information, but this is not a point I’ve seen other chat visualizations use. Sometimes the history of a discussion on a topic can be the most useful resource on that topic in the future. Even if this isn’t the case, information should flow the other way, too; it should be easy to include the shared information in future chats. It seems like Babble could be a great platform for this.

The problems and scenarios discussed by the paper are similar to some issues we’ve read about before, especially Usenet. Like with Babble, Usenet is a discussion forum in which groups have a common purpose, whether tightly or loosely directed. Also in usenet, summarization of information is an important issue; Usenet has developed its own norms for gathering discussions into an FAQ, for instance. Also, the issue of searchability and the treatment of newcomers is similar to problems discussed in the paper.

Some of the advice offered in the paper seemed to conflict with other researchers’ findings. For instance, in the papers we read concerning interaction in MUDs, a major point was that users tended to find ways to adapt their conversational style to the tools available. Especially the development of actions and asides in MUDs. The authors of Babble seemed to fear that unexpected reactions would weaken the tool’s usefulness, but I don’t think this is the case. The online tool will inevitably have different strengths and weaknesses than physical interaction.

Some improvements I would suggest for a Babble-like interface would be to add simple expressions or animations to the representative circles, to introduce the possibility of side channels that could enrich the social interaction of the chat. In real conversations with a significant number of people, there are side conversations going on at the same time, even at the level of looks and glances. I would suggest the addition of more channels of communication, at different ranges of visibility from private 1-to-1 to passive but visible actions.