Social Translucence:

This paper offers what is essentially a slice of the geologic strata that is the research in social computing and visualization, lying in between the bedrock of Usenet and MUD studies and the topsoil of current work in visualization. It is one of the many bridging links between the archaeologically distant and the thriving present. While foundational, its vintage shows, and many of the points brought up are addressed by simple recognition of current technology and services.

The initial presentation of social translucence brought to mind something as mundane as the Facebook Newsfeed, which depending on fellow users' preferences, gives the user great visibility into social data and 'cues' that, otherwise seen in proximity, would not normally be gleaned in a digital world. The example of putting a glass pane in a door was a little more illuminating to the purpose of social translucence: rather than to feed our voyueristic tendencies, it is meant to also provide some awareness and accountability in digital social communication, rather than what is ostensibly research into others' personal lives.

The other metaphor explained brought up a design concept that harkened back to last semester - that of constraints and affordances. The nature of the exercise of placing paper on the floor is starkly different from placing paper on a table or other flat surface which would only allow users to hover around the edges and only converse successfully with neighbors rather than other participants across the space. Like doses of radiation, the example brought up the fact that information decreases with the inverse square of distance. The connection here is that the affordances inherent in free-range space aids in social translucence and best leverages our abilities in social cognition. The research in this area seems it would lend greatly to my fascination.

The taxonomy of approaches to portraying social cues in digital systems still holds some water, but observations made suffer from a lack of relevance. It would be fascinating to see how this paper would regard the realistic approach in the current era given the advent of broadband and improvements in the quality of videoconferencing systems. It seems that you could replace the marbles in the social proxy with real-time thumbnail videos of conversation participants in order to glean non-verbal factors or whether or not a participant is present or attendent. Foreseeably, the problems of privacy, a finite amount of user attention, and ability to cope with simultaneous data streams remain the same as ever. Though the technology may exist, the limiting factor is human.

I would generally agree with the statement made about the mimetic approach, although the irony of the situation is a regression in technological utilization. Rather than some graphical facsimile, like an emoticon with spectrum of possible feelings, the newest trend in representing your current status is through text. The popularity of Twitter and Facebook status updates is baffling. That we aren't taking video of ourselves with our smartphones and uploading them to something like Vwidder (a hypothetical Video Twitter, Patent Pending) speaks to our either our laziness or desire for a simpler solution in updating our friends on how or what we're currently doing.

Here is where I actually address the visualization. It reminded me too much of Chat Circles in that one of the primary dimensions is the fellow users' attendance to the conversation. The problems addressed in the paper regarding the display of exterior conversations are just as easily addressed in Chat Circles. The longitudinal display has an analog in Chat
Circles. The paper even drops a passing reference to Chat Circles. I could cite the creators' lack of originality, but it seems that the advent of Babbles in 1998(?) predates the work done at MIT. In any case, the theoretical constructs laid out in the paper seem foundational for work done between its publishing and now and into the future.

Supporting Community:

This article provides a good executive summary of the paper critiqued above and also shows some progress in implementation and illumination as to the outcome of Babbles, as well as some useful extensions to the concept.

The interface now includes color. This observation seems trite, but it is perhaps the first step in developing an attractive and usable interface. The different users are distinguished by their marble's color, meta-data in the inline chat display is colored differently from users' posts, etc. The second obvious layout decision was the inclusion of the in-line text as well as what appears to be a thread browser. This decision was likely due to the intended users: people in "small- to medium-sized corporate groups." My experience in corporate world points to a desire for dashboard-type application screens where everything can be gleaned easily at once. The same may hold for other settings, but the impetus of economizing both the users' real estate and attention seems to be strongest there. That the timeline is not grouped in this window seems to fit with this hypothesis - that the value added in the information is not as valuable in the present tense, but rather for additional, more thoughtful analysis of the group's interaction.

Given our familiarity with Babbles and an introduction to its screens in a production mode, the key part of this article becomes the discussion on social proxies. The distance-bubble analogy is the repeated element across all of the examples presented; the distance one's symbol appears from a center focus is proportional to how peripheral the user is from the activity presented. That this appears across all examples speaks to only one facet of social translucence - the extent to which one participates. Perhaps this is the greatest outcome of the concept and a simple, overarching comment on social interactions. It would be interesting to explore what other of our social tendencies can be revealed through an application of social translucence.

Regarding the examples: they speak very simply what is hidden and therein lies their strength. The interesting question raised here is how it would affect those activities it is designed to visualize if they were placed in proximity to the activating mechanism. Would it induce the struggling auctionee to drop out in frustration? Would it spur a massive, escalating bidding war and further encourage the seller to fuel the flames? Would the person on queue in the help center stay on and be emboldened to do something useful with their life for the number of minutes predicted? The possible effects on group dynamics can only be speculated upon without a longitudinal study of some sort.