Paper #1 Critique

This essay was entitled Thunderwire, and explores the topic of audio. Audio data and the challenge that comes along with visualizing something that is not at all visual is one that has always interested me. I am excited to be finally starting on a project involved with working with audio as I feel it is a new challenge that is only beginning to be addressed and can be taken in a lot of different ways. I am also even more interested because of my huge passion for music. I have been a huge music fan all through out my college years, and it is something that profoundly affects my life and being able to view something as well as listen to it is also very important. As MTV has shown over the years, people love to have a visual image to imagine their favorite songs with and it really helps certain songs out if you can get more of the feeling expressed in a song into visual form as well. It is well known that you can get much more information out of using your eyes and eyesight in general than you ever get out of using your ears and listening.

This paper explores the idea of an audio social space. This is interesting because this paper is very old, but really sees into the future of how music is currently used and how people interact with it. In fact, many musical social spaces do exist today and they have a variety of reasons to. For example, iTunes is a good example of a musical marketplace. People go there to buy music, but can also preview songs, see what everyone else is buying most of, and even see what other bands they might want to try out giving a listen to if they own certain other albums. On the other hand, Last.fm is a completely social audio space. The users of Last.fm share the music they are currently listening to, as well as the music they have been listening to while they were away from their computer. This site does not have specific music tracks, and nothing for sale, but merely existed because people like seeing what their friends listen to and also what people who listen to similar music are listening to.

The study conducted seemed interesting and relevant, and I wonder how it would have done in today’s business world. The largely social aspect of it, and the fact that I was surprised going into the study, I would have thought that most people would turn off the mike as often as possible and forget to turn it off during phone calls, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. This would most likely be harder to do the bigger the office is, because not everyone is as close of friends. I also wonder about when people want to share something else with just one person, would they do it over the speakers, or would they have to go and physically find the person. I would think problems like this, as well as things such as not knowing who else is on when you sign on, or which person is talking at the current moment. It seems like multiple conversations would be hard to keep going, but a joined conversation would be ideal for this situation.
Paper #2 Critique

This paper decides to visualize speech, which I think is a very interesting topic. I found this sort of project, which helps people with disabilities to use computers better is very interesting. I took a user interfaces class last semester, and someone in the class did a project which allowed blind users to feel a raised version of the webpage, which allowed them to view images seen on a webpage. They already make screen readers which allow the blind to read faster than normal people sometimes, because the reader can go so fast, and actually talk faster than a normal person talks. Most people can’t understand a screen reader when they start out, and have to train themselves to use it. I actually talked with a company involved in this during the last job fair, not extremely similar, but the company is working on allowing mute people to speak simply by moving their throats and thinking about what they were going to say.

The researchers decided to make the sentences that people spoke appear as blobs that look kind of like worms swimming around on the table in front of the user. This is interesting and keeps the user amused for a bit while they experiment and see what they can do to change the image of the table around. On the other hand, I fail to see the use in this. I like for visualizations to have some sort of purpose, and I do not really feel that this is especially artsy enough to be recognized by the art world, nor does it bring enough to the table to be revolutionary in other ways. This also goes the same for the other visualization which tosses out syllables out of the shadow of a persons head. These sort of visualizations do not really provide any useful information, but exist simply to entertain the user for a few seconds. Users who decide to interact with these machines frequently use it for a few minutes, try to break the machine by overloading it, or trying to do something that the machine hasn’t seen before, and then just playing with the words. This reminds me of the visualization we saw earlier this year which had falling quotations and your shadow held up certain letters and then you could bounce the letters around and drop certain ones, but it held a similar immaturity being that there was nothing meaningful underneath the visualization, it was a simple toy that most people would get bored with in minutes.

The Jaaps solo project is more interesting, as he talks, black balls come out of his mouth, and when the user touches the ball, it plays back the part of the sound that the ball related to. This is something that is interesting, and also stores the information so that you can go back and play around with it later. However, the problem remains in how to separate out the good noise from the bad and how to organize the good pieces of sound that you do want to keep. At a certain point, the user has to wonder if it is a cycle and if we won’t go back to organizing the audio files in ways similar to the way we organize file cabinets, such as iTunes already does!
Paper #3 Critique

This last paper is a familiar one, because it is the work of our own Tony Bergstrom and Prof. Karahalios. The idea is that conversations can be monitored through a circle which is constantly shrinking away at the middle, just like a real conversation fades away into the past. This is a cool idea to me because I do like the look and idea of the visualization. I am a big fan of circles and spirals and other natural looking things because I feel that people can really relate to things that they see often in nature. However, a few things stick out to me.

I wonder why the decision was made to keep the rings going in a circular direction and not in a spiral shape. The circle comes to a close at the end of the loop, drops down, and the next circle begins, but when this happens we not only lose the continuation of a previous conversations and lose the ability to compare to older parts, but also it seems like the new circle indicates a new part of the conversation when in fact, the same conversation can be carried on over multiple rungs of the circle. Second, I wonder about the use of the height of the bars being the volume of the conversation. This is certainly interesting to look at, but does it really signify the most important thing about the conversation that we want to look at? This seems relatively unimportant in the long scale and perhaps could have used some natural language processing instead to determine when the most important parts of conversation are and were. I do feel like the colors that are shown when people are overlapping talking are not the clearest. Instead of using the inside part of the bars to tell which people are talking, which is easy to overlook, I might suggest using one half of the bar for each person, or maybe even coming up with a better way of doing that, since as it is right now, it is very difficult to tell which people are talking at the same time when just glancing at the visualization.

Another thing to worry about when using the conversation clock is that people can see it as they talk and so are more inclined to monitor their speaking habits depending on the visualization. Certain people who talk more might talk less to give everyone else a chance, and vice versa, but this is not necessarily a good thing. In addition, people might talk more during natural conversational pauses and make noises to see anything go up on the screen, or even coughing, which was mentioned in class to be a major problem. Things like coughing and laughing are probably most often the loudest things and therefore are signaled on the visualization to be the most important things, when in many cases, they should have been ignored and the conversation would not have been affected at all.