Chat Circles
Viegas and Donath

This was a really interesting paper – I really liked the concept behind the system and I think it was pretty well executed. I did try out the software at several different times but never seemed to find anyone else there, so I wasn’t quite able to evaluate how well it works in real life. However, it seemed pretty cool in general. Some thoughts:

a) I liked the hearing range thing, although I wasn’t able to tell if it would allow you to hear some parts of a conversation and not others (if some members of a group were in your range and others weren’t)

b) One of the advantages of a non-hearing range based system are that you can overhear conversations and join something that sounds interesting – you can hear interesting snippets within the cacophony. It seems like their proposed extensions (content notification system) would allow for this, but I’m not sure.

c) I noticed that sometimes people placed themselves too close to other people, and when they said something it obscured what the other person was saying. While an interesting effect, I’d tend to think of that as a negative artifact of the system.

d) I really liked the way they represented their chat history – it provided a nice, at-a-glance view of the conversation and allowed for easy interpretation of turn-taking, dominance and such. Although I know they were focused more on an IRC-like setting, I think a history method like this would be great for an AIM-like setting as well. Most AIM clients already let you log all your conversations with timestamps, and some simple PHP code could convert that into a visual, interactive representation similar to the ChatCircles history representation. I think it would be incredibly useful too, and would be interested in the significance of visual patterns in such a representation. Just doing my daily routine for three weeks would produce an enormous amount of data for this ;). Perhaps something similar to Elaine Huang’s ‘Life In IM’ work? (http://www.cc.gatech.edu/grads/h/Elaine.Huang/im_life.html)
**The Palace**

For a collection of reasons, I couldn’t actually get this running on any system I had access to (largely because I don’t have admin rights on much of anything, and their Java client is broken). Nonetheless, it looked interesting, and although I’m sure it is used heavily by a ton of people, I can’t see myself using it for anything more than the experience. Personally I would prefer a chat interface that focuses on the content of the conversation and not the presentation so much, but that really is a personal thing, and I know a lot of people who don’t always feel the same way. From other people’s descriptions of it and screenshots, it seems reminiscent of something Neal Stephenson described in Snowcrash, although I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not.

**Gestural Avatars**

Hannes Vilhjalmsson

I thought these projects were pretty cool and well thought out. I know I’ve seen a video of a REA demo, and I remember being impressed by its perception of non-verbal cues, but I can’t seem to locate it again. Other, miscellaneous thoughts:

I think something like MACK would be really interesting to implement for the video wall on the ground floor of Siebel.

Although the descriptions all seemed really cool, I was really itching to get my hands on a download or a demo or something that I could use to see how well it really worked, but couldn’t find anything significant. I realize some of them were hardware and system specific, but it is easy to envision something like BEAT and BodyChat II being available for download.

The Language Training project (his current project) seemed really interesting too, and looks like a neat approach – again, I wish there was more information that I could get my hands on instead of just a press release.
The Illusion of Life: Chapter 3 and Principles of Traditional Animation Applied to 3D Computer Animation
Thomas & Johnston and Lasseter

I have lumped both these papers together because the content was similar, if not identical – a lot of it was verbatim, and despite the fact that Lasseter cites Thomas and Johnston on occasion, that still makes me a little uneasy. Out of the two, I felt Thomas and Johnston’s was a more entertaining read, perhaps because they were writing for a book and not for a research paper.

The content was pretty interesting – not being in the field, I don’t know nearly enough to evaluate it in terms of its treatment of animation, but it was neat to see something I always thought of as art treated, dissected and codified as a science. Both readings painted Walt Disney as the solitary prophet of animation as it should truly be done – it certainly seemed like he knew what he was doing.

I didn’t realize that there was such a formal procedure to animation, and I tried to watch some older Disney reels to see if I could spot the staging, the anticipation and the like. It was pretty interesting as an exercise, although I’m not sure how much of it is applicable to online communication spaces. I remember reading about the Aladdin project that had borrowed and extended ideas that Walt Disney had used for stage performance, and it seems like those would perhaps be a little more closely related to the kind of stuff we’re interested in.

Rose had mentioned that we were using emoticons in IM’s and getting pretty far with it, without any of the effort that the animators put in to make their make-believe world seem real. I think a key part of that is the animators are trying to populate their make-believe worlds with the illusion of life and believability, while our make-believe worlds already have life and merely have to represent it. I think I like our job better.