

large-scale persistent conversations

essays and sketches

Large scale persistent conversations such as newsgroups and bulletin boards are a new communication medium. They make it possible for people from all over the world to engage in conversations on a variety of topics. Yet, the textual media that makes them so accessible also makes many useful and communicative social patterns invisible. This week we will think about ways of visualizing these conversations.

Their two key features - that they are large-scale and persistent - should guide your work. A: there are lots of people involved. How can the visualization help to differentiate among them and highlight their different roles? B: Their activity is writing text and this text becomes the foundation and setting for subsequent interaction within the group. How can the visualization show both the structure of the accumulated text and the activity that occurs upon it?

- Read the papers listed above. The first three will give you background on the structure of large scale conversations and on the problems involved in visualizing them; the second three are examples of visualizations (which you can skim).
- Look at several Usenet newsgroups or other large public online text-based forum. (But look at all within the same interface, i.e. 4 newsgroups or 4 slashdot boards, not a mix). Keep these questions in mind: What are the salient patterns that you see? Are the threads long or short? Are there lots of participants? Do a few people dominate the conversation? How much of the discussion is on topic, how much is spam, how much is flaming? Would you describe it as supportive, informative, humorous? Are there topics that return over time (look in the archives to see what it was like a year or more ago). Is there a rhythm you can detect to particular discussions - how long do threads remain active?
- Make two sketches of different visualizations of these conversations. For the first sketch, think about the work we did on conversations a few weeks ago - revisit some of the ideas about making the people the salient element in the visualization. For the second sketch, think about the readings for last week's class on time - "Artifacts of the Presence Era" and the Wiki history (which I realize we did not discuss in class). Here, the key element is the accumulation of material. Use this concept as the structuring element in your second sketch.
For both sketches, ground your work in actual material from a real large-scale persistent conversation.