

# Revealing individual and collective pasts: Visualizations of online social archives

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## **Abstract**

As mediated communication becomes an increasingly central part of everyday life, people have started going online to conduct business, to get emotional support, to find communities of interest, and to look for potential romantic partners. Most of these social activities take place primarily through the exchange of conversational texts that, over time, accrue into vast archives. As valuable as these collections of documents may be for our comprehension of the online social world, they are usually cumbersome, impenetrable records of the past.

This thesis posits that history visualization - the visualization of people's past presence and activities in mediated environments - helps users make better sense of the online social spaces they inhabit and the relationships they maintain. Here, a progressive series of experimental visualizations explores different ways in which history may enhance social legibility. The projects visualize the history of people's activities in four different environments: a graphical chat room, a wiki site, Usenet newsgroups, and email. History and the persistent nature of online communication are the common threads connecting these projects. Evaluation of these tools shows that history visualizations can be utilized in a variety of ways, ranging from aids for quicker impression formation and mirrors for self-reflection, to catalysts for storytelling and artifacts for posterity.

Thesis Supervisor: Judith S. Donath  
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

*On the net, community usually boils down to finding ways to let users talk to each other.*

– Cherny, 1999

Online communication is becoming an increasingly important part of everyday life. People go online to look for jobs, keep in touch with friends and family, conduct business, discuss politics, talk about hobbies, and look for potential partners. Most of these social interactions leave behind records of some sort: exchanged email messages, IM logs, newsgroup postings, blog entries, etc. Hidden in these growing archives of interactions are useful social patterns that, if more easily perceived, could greatly improve the social dynamics of the online world. This thesis presents visualizations of interaction archives and explores the different ways in which these systems might help users' understand the mediated environments they inhabit and the online relationships they maintain.

The Internet has fostered environments that support social interaction at an unprecedented scale. Hundreds, thousands of people come together in online public spaces to exchange ideas, ask questions, and comment on daily life events. A single person can easily stay in touch with several hundred people all over the globe over email. These public and private exchanges leave behind massive amounts of persistent traces that are highly representative of the relationships that people maintain. Yet, these traces are mainly invisible and unusable to users today. In a sense, this thesis is about making the invisible visible.

The projects presented here focus on two different kinds of online archives: public collections of social interactions – such as the ones found in online communities – and personal communication archives – such as a person's private email files. Collective archives of communication are different from personal ones in important ways. In public online spaces, users usually interact with lots of people they never see, people they have never met in real life. Participation in public conversation can vary from a couple to hundreds of people. Most newcomers come and go without leaving lasting marks in communal conversation whereas others stay and become key participants in their communities. Flame wars and trolling might occur from time to time and groups will devise strategies for ameliorating such anti-social behavior. For the most part,

participants are unfamiliar with the entire collection of messages that have been exchanged in the communities in which they participate.

Personal archives of communication, on the other hand, tend to be much more familiar to their owners. Whereas online communities are usually formed around a specific set of common interests – politics, hobbies, health issues, education, etc. – a person’s email archive will, very likely, bring together the various facets of this person’s life – from work-related messages to family life, conversations with friends, daily errands. The structure of conversations in personal email is also different from most public interactions because it tends to be much more dyadic than the group-oriented conversations in online communities. Finally, the sheer fact that personal email is, for the most part, *private* deeply impacts the kinds of exchanges present in personal email archives.

In short, the social purpose of public and private archives of online conversations is significantly different. The projects in this thesis have been designed with these differences in mind.

## 1.1 My Approach

In essence, this thesis is concerned with extracting information from large collections of data. This is hardly a new problem. The idea of visualizing data for better comprehension also has an extensive history (Ware 2000). So, what is different about this thesis?

The differences lie in the “*what*,” “*how*,” and “*why*” of my visualization enquiry.

### ***What is being visualized?***

All the projects in this thesis visualize persistent archives of social interactions. This means that these projects deal with individuals and their interactions with the spaces and the people they come into contact. I am not visualizing physical, chemical, or biological phenomena. Instead, I visualize the social fabric of everyday life: friend and foe, family members and acquaintances. I visualize people’s dealings with the ordinary and the dramatic events in their lives: day-to-day errands, classes, meetings, travels, weddings, graduations, illnesses, funerals.

In so doing, I have chosen to limit myself neither to one type of persistent archive nor to one kind of online environment. Instead, my projects explore a variety of online archives. This choice means that every project is fundamentally different from the other; dealing with different social spaces, people, and online architectures. This approach has allowed me to explore how visual access to historical data might affect distinct online settings – public and private spaces, synchronous and asynchronous environments, conversation-based and artifact-based communities. In this way, this thesis informs how history visualizations can impact a series of online social environments.

### ***How am I choosing which dimensions of the data to visualize?***

Most datasets have several more dimensions than can be legibly represented in a single visualization. Therefore, one of the most challenging tasks of any visualization expert is to choose which dimensions to include in a system. Creators of visualization tools often rely on two parameters to decide which dimensions of a dataset to represent: the raw dimensions present in the data and the questions they are interested in exploring with the visualization they are about to create.

To these two parameters, the work presented here adds a third one: empirical findings from a variety of social sciences – ranging from social psychology to communication studies. Whenever possible, the choice of which dimensions to visualize in this thesis has been guided by the theories and empirical results from these fields.

Communication studies in particular, can be of great value to designers of information visualization tools because they highlight the kinds of cues users of online spaces utilize as they interact. These studies spell out some of the inner workings of social processes such as online impression formation and the impact that different cues have on interpersonal communications processes.

### ***Why am I visualizing these data?***

I decided to focus my PhD thesis on the visualization of online history because I was intrigued by a seeming paradox: the amount of persistent social data floating online seemed to be inversely proportional to the amount of use people got out of these data. It seemed to me that, even though people were able to keep ever-more detailed logs of their actions online, they lacked the ability to retrieve information from these archives in intelligible, useful ways. And yet, it was clear that these archives could be important sources of information about the people that create them and their experience as social beings.

So the research question I set out to explore was:

#### ***Does visualizing the cues & patterns present in social archives help users understand the spaces they inhabit and the relationships they maintain online?***

In order to answer this question, I set out to build visualizations of social data for social uses. Instead of building visualizations for outsiders to “study” online users, I became interested in creating visualizations for the owners of the data, the end users, to utilize. As simple as this approach may sound, it is a clear departure from how visualizations are usually thought of today. The great majority of visualization systems – even the ones that depict social data – are developed so that scientists, analysts, and other outside experts can look at someone else’s data. By developing systems that are aimed at the communities and individuals who created the datasets being visualized, this thesis expands our knowledge of how visualizations can be used and what impact they might have on users of online social spaces.

## 1.2 Familiarity with persistent archives

Even though the projects in this thesis are organized in chapters of *collective* and *personal* memories, there is an additional dimension along which it is useful to think about these systems: the axis of familiarity. A person's familiarity with the archives being visualized determines how she/he might use the visualizations presented here.

To a certain extent, all the projects in the *Collective Memories* chapter visualize archives with which the user is assumed to be unfamiliar. The objective of these visualizations is to get the user quickly acquainted with some of the basic features of the public social space she/he is exploring: the number of participants in a newsgroups, how each participant usually behaves in the group, the editing history of wiki pages, and so forth. The scenario is one where the user exploits the visualization for discovery: how is one community different from the other? Who are the key players?

In contrast, the *Personal Memories* chapter presents visualizations that depict archives with which the user is supposedly already familiar: one's private email archive, IM conversation logs, etc. Even though visualizations can be used for discovery in these cases – as when a visualization shows that a user has a lot more email contacts than she/he remembered – the process is essentially one of prodding a person's memory, rather than one of true discovery.

The framing of these projects under the dimension of familiarity gives us the flexibility of asking what happens when public archives become familiar to the user. For instance, if one has been an active member of an online community for a couple of years, there is a good chance that this person is already familiar with a bulk of this community's persistent archive and is aware of who the other members are. In a case like this, having history visualizations would not so much allow the user to *discover* the unknown social dynamics of her/his community as much as it would allow her/him to remember past communal interactions and to keep tabs on current behavioral trends. Perhaps when one is an active member of an online community, visualizations should focus on different aspects of that community's archive. It might be that, as a person's familiarity with a community's past grows, tools should depict more of the contents of interactions, instead of focusing on quantitative measures – frequency, size, etc. – of interactions. If one is already familiar with a community's history, the desirable elements for a visualization to highlight might be what has changed since one's last visit, or what a user's favorite participants have contributed since the last log in. This way, visualization systems could adapt according to the evolving level of familiarity and participation of users in online public spaces.

As important as these questions are, they fall outside the scope of this thesis. The work presented here does not cover users' evolving interactions with visualization tools as they become more familiar with the archives of the communities to which they belong. Future work in this direction would certainly add invaluable knowledge to the line of enquiry discussed here.

## 1.3 On Collaboration

During my tenure at the Media Lab, I had the good fortune of collaborating with several fellow graduate students whose expertise in a variety of areas added invaluable insights to my enquiry of persistent archives and helped shape several of the projects presented in this thesis.

Moreover, two of the projects in chapter II were done while I was interning in industrial research laboratories, which means that they were done outside of my academic advisor's supervision. The ability to establish successful collaborations with sociologists, linguists, mathematicians, engineers, historians, and computer scientists has been one of the great joys of my Ph.D. career.

Given that this dissertation is written from my perspective as an individual researcher, it is important to clarify different people's contributions to each project and my own role in them. It is also essential to keep in mind, as I point out people's different roles, that these projects benefited from a true spirit of collaboration where each person's contribution interacted with and was enriched by those of others. These collaborations amounted to much more than the sum of their parts.

This section gives the reader an overview of each project and different people's roles in them.

Every project in this thesis came about because of my interest in visualizing persistent archives and history. Even though there were other researchers involved, the systems presented here did not exist independently before. Each one of them was designed and implemented because of my motivation to explore the visual representation of history. Luckily, I was successful in inspiring my talented colleagues to collaborate with me in the various projects.

Newsgroup Crowds and Authorlines, visualizations of individuals in Usenet newsgroups, were created and implemented entirely by me under the supervision of Marc Smith, at Microsoft Research. I also conducted the user study of these two visualizations.

History Flow, a visualization of evolving wiki pages, is, in several respects, the hardest project for which to discuss individual contributions. The visualization was created when I was interning at IBM research, under the guidance of Martin Wattenberg. Because both Dr. Wattenberg and I are active visualization researchers, we worked closely together in the various aspects of this system. From brainstorming about the visualization technique to implementing and testing the system, this was a truly hands-on project for both of us.

Chat Circles is an older system, one that I created during my Masters degree at the Media Lab. It began as a project I did for Prof. Judith Donath's "Virtual Communities" class. Later, Prof. Donath and I decided to turn Chat Circles into a research project and I re-implemented the chatroom prototype I had for her class. As scaling and optimization issues became crucial, I hired an MIT computer science (CS) undergraduate student to help out with the implementation. Matt Lee, the undergraduate working with me, became the mastermind behind the Chat Circles server-client architecture. Finally, when I started my Ph.D., I decided to add persistent traces to Chat Circles. Andrew Fiore, one of my graduate student colleagues at SMG, and I ran a user study of the impact these traces had on Chat Circles users. This study is described in chapter II.

Artifacts of the Presence Era, a visualization of people's presence in a museum, was a group project lead by me. The museum's desire to document how its current building was used by patrons on a daily basis matched my interest in visualizing evolving history. Ethan Perry, a graduate student in the Sociable Media Group, and Ethan Howe, an undergraduate at MIT, were my partners in this project. The three of us worked very closely in the implementation of this art installation. The idea that the piece would represent history as a series of accumulating, interactive layers, and that things such as ambient sound and light would shape these layers, was

mine. Ethan Howe focused on implementing video and audio capture in the system. Ethan Perry worked out the shaping and compressing algorithm for the layers in the visualization. I supervised the overall implementation, created the interfaces for the two visualizations, and decided how the art installation would be presented in the museum.

PostHistory, a visualization of email traffic, was done by me and David H. Nguen, a CS colleague from Georgia Tech. I designed and implemented the interface for visualization and David coded the backend, data storage and enquiry, of the system. I conducted the PostHistory user study.

Mountain, a visualization of the accumulation of email contacts over time, was done entirely by me.

Themail, a visualization of email content, was done together with Scott Golder, a linguist and colleague in the Sociable Media group. I was interested in finding out how someone's conversation over email with a given person differs from conversations with all other people in this person's email archive. Based on this line of enquiry, I designed and implemented the visualization (front end portion) and Scott worked on the backend, content processing portion of the system. Scott shared his workload with Shreyes Seshasai, an undergraduate CS student at MIT. The Themail user study was conducted by me.

So far, the work in this thesis has been published in seven papers in academic conferences ranging from Human Computer Interaction and Computer Graphics to Information Visualization and Social Networks. I am the first author in all of these papers. Some of this work has also been featured in four art exhibits in New York City and Boston.

Whenever the pronoun "I" is used in this thesis, it refers to aspects of projects that were carried out solely by me.

All projects done in the Sociable Media Group were executed under the supervision of my advisor, Prof. Judith Donath. These projects have benefited from our close collaboration both on concept and design – in particular, Prof. Donath has provided significant input in the design of Artifacts of the Presence Era and Themail.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that, as useful as it might be to point out people's individual contributions to these projects, these parts did not function as isolated pieces of a puzzle. The work in this thesis has been genuinely enriched by my collaborators' expertise and contributions. I am truly indebted to my colleagues and supervisors for having added so much to these projects.



## 2 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Public Spaces – *an exercise*



Place 1



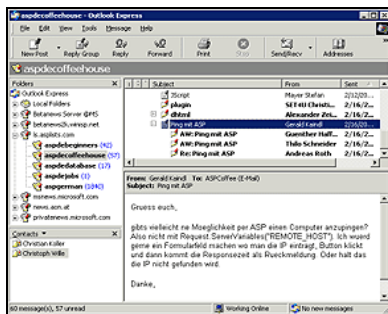
Place 2

Take a minute to look at the pictures of the two public spaces on the previous page. What words would you use to describe each place?

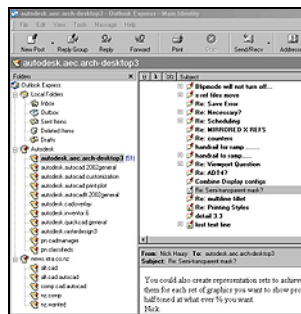
It probably took you only a few seconds to come up with words to describe each one of them. Perhaps, like me, you might have thought about words such as “vibrant” and “crowded” for place 1 and “empty” and “desolate” for place 2.

But how is this possible? Have you ever been to either one of these places? Do you even know where these places are located? Probably not. And yet, you were able to quickly form an impression of these spaces and maybe, even, a notion of how they might be different from each other.

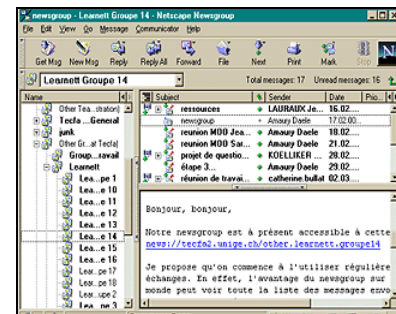
Now take a look at the public spaces below.



Place 1



Place 2



Place 3

What words would you use to describe these spaces? How are they different from one another? Is one of them vibrant and crowded whereas the other ones are empty and desolate?

It is much more challenging to think about words to describe these spaces because it is harder to perceive any differences among them. There is nothing that stands out about any of these three environments to differentiate one from the other. So how does a newcomer start to get a sense of what each place is like? How does a person form an initial impression of these spaces?

The problem of how to augment online impression formation is one of the main motivations in this thesis. The work presented here posits that visualization of online social archives can get users closer to the ease and speed with which people form impressions of real world public spaces – such as the ones showed on the preceding page.

This thesis presents vast collections of digital communication records in new ways to help users:

- easily get a sense of the scale and social dynamics of the environments they inhabit online
- form impressions of one another as they communicate online
- recall and reflect upon the ways in which their long-term online relationships evolve over time

To achieve these goals, this thesis is deeply informed by theories and experimental findings in the fields of sociology, social psychology, and communications studies. By understanding how people perform some of the above-mentioned activities in the real world, designers are better equipped to create tools that assist users with these activities online.

This chapter is divided into three main sections:

1. **Impression Formation Online: Theoretical Frameworks**

Summarizes two of the most influential theories from Communications Studies that attempt to explain how impression formation happens online and how “cues” play a role in this phenomenon.

2. **Impression Formation Online: Experimental Findings**

Reviews experimental findings about how users rely on online cues for impression formation. Explains how these findings are relevant to visualizations of online archives.

3. **Visualizing Time and Change**

Reviews some of the most important work in interactive visualizations of temporal data and digital history and the affordances of these interfaces.

The concepts introduced in this chapter serve as the intellectual foundation for much of the work produced in this thesis. One of the biggest challenges of building interactive visualizations is choosing the dimensions of the data that should be visualized. Invariably there are several more dimensions to the data than can be legibly visualized at once. The findings presented in the next sections guided much of the data selection for each of the visualization systems in this dissertation.

## **2.2 Impression Formation Online: Theoretical Frameworks**

Impression formation is a key element in interpersonal communication of any kind and it carries serious consequences to all parties involved in a communicative process. As with any kind of perception phenomenon, social impression is designed for action: we perceive others in order to act upon our impressions. Studies have determined that people’s perception of one another strongly influence various decision processes such as: the choice of political candidate to vote for (Efran & Patterson, 1974), the choice of employees to promote (Klassen et al, 1993), and teachers’ evaluations of pupils (Clifford and Walster, 1973) among others.

Therefore, it is important to understand the processes that govern impression formation. In face-to-face interaction (FtF), physical appearance, vocabulary, grammar, other linguistic markers (including tone and accent), and nonverbal cues ordinarily influence the ways in which people initially form impressions of one another. A large body of literature describes how strongly people rely on nonverbal cues in order to form impressions of others. Burgoon and Hoobler (2002) define seven classes of nonverbal codes present in interpersonal communication:

1. *Kinesis*: bodily movements, gestures, facial expressions, posture, gaze, and gait
2. *Vocalics or paralanguage*: pitch, loudness, tempo, pauses, and inflection

3. *Physical appearance*: clothing, hairstyle, cosmetics, fragrances, adornments
4. *Haptics*: use of touch, including frequency, intensity, and type of contact
5. *Proxemics*: use of interpersonal distance and spacing relationships
6. *Chronemics*: use of time as message system, punctuality, lead time, etc.
7. *Artifacts*: manipulable objects and environmental features that may convey messages

In Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), however, users are usually restricted to textual interactions where most of the cues mentioned above are absent. Thus, since the early beginnings of CMC, researchers have been interested in investigating whether people are capable of forming impressions of others online and, if so, what mechanisms they employ to achieve this task.

As a starting point from which to explore the unknown social world of CMC, communication researchers in the 80s utilized media richness theory (Daft and Lengel 1986) as a framing construct. One of the core concepts in media richness is equivocality; the more complex a message is – for instance, an emotionally arousing, personally involving message is considered highly complex – the more appropriate it is for richer media. Rich media boast multiplicity of cue systems (bandwidth), availability of immediate feedback, message personalization, and language variety (formal v. casual). In comparison, most CMC text-based media are considered relatively lean.

By sticking to the concept of media richness, early studies of CMC concluded that the paucity of cues in text-based applications severely limited its suitability for social interaction. The so-called “cues-filtered-out” approaches, assumed that all CMC should be less socially oriented and less personal than FtF communication. Perhaps even more tellingly, there were significant research results supporting the view that CMC is more task-oriented in nature (Rice and Love, 1987).

Nevertheless, as more experiments were conducted, evidence that CMC can be highly conducive to social interaction started to accumulate. It became clear over the years that theorists had to revise their predictions about CMC media and its fitness for socialization. In the early 90s, two influential theories emerged in the field of communication studies about how social impression formation happens in computer-mediated communication: Social Information Processing (SIP) theory, and Social Identification/Deindividuation theory (SIDE) theory. By looking beyond the cues-filtered-out lenses, these theories help us understand how and when CMC users adapt to the medium and create social presence in text-only environments. These theories also shed light in our understanding of the ways in which CMC users sometimes experience exaggerated levels of intimacy, affection, and interpersonal assessments of their partners that exceed what happens in parallel FTF situations.

### 2.2.1 Social Information Processing (SIP)

SIP is based on principles of social cognition and interpersonal relationship development. “The model assumes that communicators in CMC, like other communicators, are driven to develop social relationships. To do so, previously unfamiliar users become acquainted with others by forming simple impressions through textually conveyed information” (Walther, 1996). Walther conjectures that the key difference between the process in CMC as opposed to FtF has to do less with the *amount* of social information exchanged (as in media richness theory) than with the *rate* of social information exchange:

*This framework acknowledges that there is less social information per message in CMC because of the absence of nonverbal cues. It also recognizes the potential for users to adapt to the linguistic code as the sole channel for relational communication and refers to a number of verbal strategies in the impression formation and interpersonal interaction literature known to affect interpersonal attributions.*

– Walther 1996

It consequently follows that one-time-only, time-bound CMC groups, like those characteristically found in early CMC experiments are certain to appear more task-oriented than their FtF counterparts – meaning that this is not an intrinsic effect of the medium. Furthermore, he points to the importance, in longitudinal groups, of the anticipation of future interactions.

Finally, Walther addresses the occurrence of hyperbolic messages and excessively affectionate responses in CMC communication, what he terms *hyperpersonal CMC*. On the receiver’s end, there is idealized perception whereas on the sender’s end there is optimized self-presentation. Walther claims that the most useful theoretical and empirical approach to understanding what happens on the receiver’s end is the social identity-deindividuation (SIDE) theory that refers to the overattribution process that occurs when CMC users, in the absence of prior personal knowledge about one another, build stereotypical impressions of their partners. On the sender’s side, Walther refers back to Goffman’s work on presentation of self in social interaction (Goffman 1959). Seeing how senders have a lot of control over self-presentation, first impressions are highly malleable in CMC.

Combined, these two phenomena create an intensification loop where the feedback between sender and receiver actually reifies social impressions – a process known as behavioral confirmation. Walther notes that behavioral confirmation seems to be magnified in minimal-cue interactions. “Such a process as this may explain how such surprisingly intimate, sometimes intense, and hyperpersonal interactions take place in CMC.”

In summary, SIP theory assumes the following:

1. Communicators’ social motives induce them to develop impressions and relations despite hindrances that alternative media – such as CMC – may impose

2. Users adapt their efforts to present and acquire social information using whatever cue systems a medium provides. CMC users, for instance, employ language, content, and timing to achieve social goals
3. Relational processes take time, and CMC is relatively slower than face-to-face. Thus, if time is restricted, social development is retarded.

Time is of utmost importance in SIP because it predicts that CMC has a negative impression effect when users with zero-history interact online for a short period of time. When, on the other hand, users have more time to interact online, SIP predicts that participants will actively seek and present social and personal data about each other allowing knowledge to accrue and CMC partners to construct impressions of each other. In addition, anticipated future interaction with CMC partners has been shown to affect social information exchange rates; it promotes more personal questions and self-disclosures online than in FTF first encounters (Tidwell and Walther 2000). Given reduced communication cues and asynchronous communication media in CMC, Walther discusses the fact that senders have the opportunity of optimizing self-presentation and, therefore, manipulating others' impressions of them to a greater extent than what is possible in FTF interactions.

**Note:** If rate of information exchange is the essence of SIP theory, it should follow that having access to a lot of historical data (through visualizations, for instance) means that there is the potential to significantly affect people's impressions of one another online.

### 2.2.2 SIDE

SIDE theory posits that when people interact using visual anonymity, meaning they don't have the ability to see one another, they are deindividuated. Under these conditions, any piece of information conveyed by the context or content of messages being exchanged is subject to overattribution by receivers. In addition, if people experience a salient group identity rather than a strong individual identity, these attributions accentuate assumed similarities and group norms.

*Social Presence theory was one of the first theoretical frameworks to be applied to CMC. Originally a theory of teleconferencing, it states that social presence relates to the communicator's subjective sense of the salience of an interaction partner and that this measure derives from the number of cues that a medium transmits. The fewer the available cues (verbal, aural, visual, etc.) the less the degree of social presence one experiences when using that medium. Consequently, one might conclude from this assertion that more cues should always yield a better, richer sense of social presence. In fact, in CMC, such is not the case. A vast body of communication research literature that spans from field studies to theory formulation shows that, in mediated interactions, certain combinations of are more effective than others. Even though high-bandwidth multimedia certainly offer more communication cues than text-based CMC, research finds that a high degree of cue exchange is not necessarily more helpful to users than a moderate level.*

– Walther & O'Conaill, 1997

## 2.3 Impression Formation Online: Experimental Results

In addition to developing theories about how interpersonal impression formation happens in CMC, communication scholars also tested these theories in experimental settings. For the most part, experiments investigated the impacts that different cues and combinations of cues in communication tasks had on interpersonal impression formation. This section briefly reviews some of the most significant results from these experiments. Some of the relevant studies done in the HCI community are also discussed.

### 2.3.1 Time

Time is one of the very few nonverbal cues present in text-based CMC and, as such, it is of special interest to scholars. In communication research, studies of time and its impact in interpersonal communication processes have a long tradition and are referred to as *chronemics*: the study of the temporal dimension of communication, including the way people organize and react to time.

Time is an important component of the performance of social roles as it is an intrinsic part of our social interaction. Different cultures use and interpret social temporality in different ways – people's promptness, lead time, turn-taking rhythms, etc. Chronemics also affect people's perception of intimacy and affection. Because time is a valuable resource in our culture, the way an individual chooses to allocate time – whom he/she spends time with, for how long – says a lot about his/her priorities. Thus, depending on the social context, responsiveness and promptness can be interpreted as urgency, caring or dominance.

In the mid 90s, Walther and Tidwell (1995) tested the impact of time variables in online impression formation. Their experiment altered the time stamps in replicated email messages in order to assess two time variables: the time of day a message was sent and the time lag until the message was replied to. The results from this study revealed significant interactions among the two time variables and the task-orientation or socioemotional orientation of the email messages. Users' perception about communicators' intimacy/liking and dominance/submissiveness were affected by the manipulation of the variables. Specifically, social messages sent out at night were perceived to convey more intimacy and less dominance than the same messages sent out during the day. In addition, task-oriented messages sent out at night were perceived to convey less intimacy. Finally, fast replies conveyed less dominance as opposed to slow replies.

More recently, the HCI community has also looked at the importance of time variables and their impact on impression formation. A study investigated email responsiveness and how the timing of email responses conveys information (Tyler and Tang 2003). The results show that users explicitly control email reply timing in order to project a *responsive image*. The researchers also found that users utilize "time tools" such as calendars to establish a pacing between themselves and their communication partners in order to know when to expect reply messages and when breakdowns have occurred. Other work has looked at how cooperative work implicitly relies on temporal structures to sustain information management tasks (Reddy and Dourish 2002).

### **2.3.2 Additional Nonverbal Cues**

Archives of online communication – newsgroup discussions, chat room logs, etc. – contain, along with all the exchanged words in a conversation, a wealth of nonverbal behavioral information. Data such as the frequency with which participants contribute to discussions, which authors participate in which conversations, etc., can tell a lot about online communities. Researchers from different disciplines set out to investigate whether and how users make sense of all this information. Whereas HCI researchers built interfaces to show these data to users, communication researchers began to study the impact that different combinations of cues and tasks have on online communicators.

Studies have shown that, in FtF communication, frequency and durations of speech are both good predictors of a person's participation and impression development in group communication. People who participate more often (higher frequency) in group discussions are perceived as being more competent than people who participate less (Willard and Strodbeck 1972). Likewise, people whose responses are longer are also perceived as being more competent and confident than those with shorter duration responses (Koomen and Sagel 1977). When Liu and colleagues investigated whether the effects of frequency and duration of messaging in CMC were the same as those in FtF environments, they found a parallel (Liu et al 2001). Contrary to the FtF studies cited above, Liu's experiment was concerned with intensity instead of valence (positive v. negative) of impressions. The results show that high frequency resulted in higher impression scores as did longer duration of messages; in other words, people who either participated more frequently in discussions or whose participation had longer duration left stronger impressions in the rest of the group than those people who participated less. It would be interesting to test for the valence of these strong impressions in order to find out whether the relationship found in FtF situations – where more participation was correlated with more positive impressions – holds true in CMC also.

In the HCI community, Fiore et al (2001) evaluated behavioral descriptors generated from an analysis of a large collection of Usenet newsgroup messages. They found that many nonverbal behavioral metrics, particularly the longevity and frequency of participation, the number of newsgroups to which authors contribute messages, and the amount they contribute to each conversation thread, correlate highly with readers' subjective evaluations of the authors. The study revealed that authors who were rated by their peers as people with whom they would like to interact again in the future, could be described as “a poster who participates actively and regularly in a variety of in-depth conversations, in which he or she responds to other participants but does not overwhelm the discussion.” From this description, the following metrics appear to be important for positive impression formation: high frequency of participation, consistency over time, number of postings to any given conversation, and conversational concentration (quantity of messages per conversation thread).

On top of supporting Walther's Social Information Processing Model (Walther 1992), results like the ones mentioned above help inform visualization work in online communities. By revealing what kinds of nonverbal cues users pay attention to in online interactions, these experiments highlight the kinds of data that visualization projects should focus on when trying to make the social dynamics of online environments more legible to participants.



The projects in this thesis look back at the vast archives of social interactions available in online communities – newsgroup conversation archives, wiki editorial history – for the cues mentioned above. The frequency with which users have contributed to conversations, how consistent they have been in the past, which conversation they have participated in; all of these data can be extracted from community archives. The cues that have proven so crucial to users' assessments of one another are integrally preserved in the persistent traces left behind.

### **2.3.3 *The Case for Faces***

Whether or not people can see each other in CMC and how that ability impacts impression formation has always been a big question in communication studies.

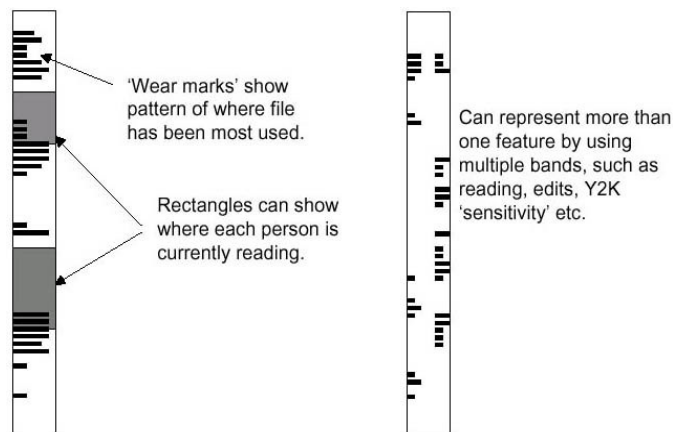
Jacobson (1999) looked at how expectations formed online about one's communication partners compared to the impression people had of one another once they met face to face. For the most part, offline experiences did not match online expectations for study participants. Traits such as talkativeness did not live up to people's expectations. Several participants remarked that people were chattier online than in real life. This is not surprising when we observe that online communities are built on conversation. The fact that pauses and silence are lost in these environments creates the illusion that people talk to each other non-stop.

Physical appearance was, by far the area in which most discrepancies occurred. People had imagined their partners to be bigger, smaller, thinner, taller, shorter, with longer hair, with shorter hair, and prettier than they were in real life.

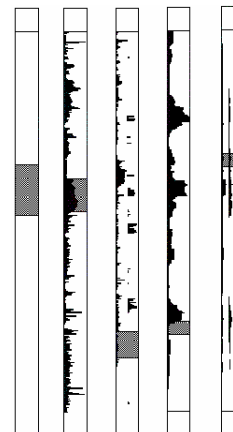
Jacobson concludes that people form impressions of others online based not only on cues provided, but also on the conceptual categories and cognitive models people use in interpreting those cues. He notes that when participants in interaction employ different conceptual frameworks, different meanings are attributed to the same message. For this reason, he concludes, it is important that we better understand which cognitive models people in these environments use.

Walther and colleagues (Walther et al, 2001) explored whether and when participants benefited from seeing each other's faces in computer-mediated communication in order to investigate how the presentation of realistic images compared to idealized virtual perceptions. The study evaluated the timing of physical image presentations for members of short-term and long-term online groups. Basically, the authors showed pictures of participants to their partners in groups where nobody knew one another and in groups with a long history of CMC (but not photos).

The study showed that for virtual partners in new groups, a picture would enhance relational outcomes relative to unfamiliar partners with no picture. In contrast, CMC partners who had gotten to know one another online over time experienced less affection and social attraction when a picture was introduced, compared with long-term CMC partners who never saw each other's photos. The study concludes that the greatest affinity occurs in long-term text-based CMC with no other cues. "The same photographs that help defeat impersonal conditions also dampen hyperpersonal ones."



**Figure 1:** *Explanation of Edit Wear and Read Wear's scroll-bar-based graphical interface.*



**Figure 2:** *Examples of attribute-mapped scroll bars.*

One of the problems with the concluding remarks in this study is the fact that the experiment does not explore what happens with long-term online groups that have access to members' photos throughout their entire interaction histories. By manipulating the *timing* of photograph presentation but not the *duration* of exposure to photographs, questions about impression formation development over time remain unanswered. This is ironic seeing how Walther's theory of online impression formation is strongly dependent on interaction over time. The other question that this study brings up is how the results might compare to introducing *visualizations* of members' past activity. Visualizations are nonverbal, visual cues that function in very different ways from photographs.

## 2.4 Visualizing time and change

### ***From information management and retrieval tools to artistic renderings of the past***

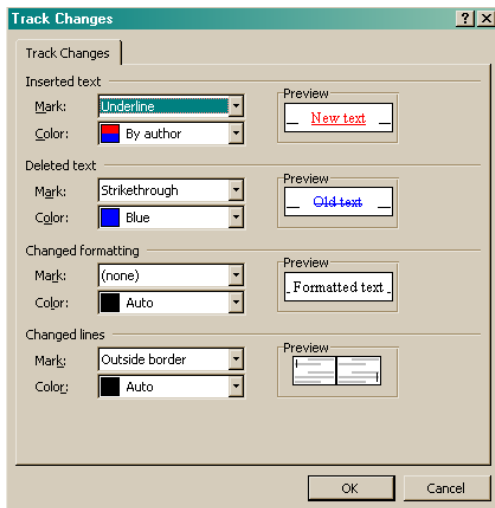
As seen in the previous sections of this chapter, time and temporal rhythms are arguably some of the most important cues for impression formation online. As an organizing principle in visualization systems, time has been extensively used in a wide variety of domains, ranging from electrical engineering to software debugging and distributed systems (Karam 1994).

Because all projects in this thesis deal with long-term archives of social interaction, the most obvious and, a lot of times, meaningful organizing principle for the data at hand is time. By emphasizing the chronological order of events in the archives, the projects inevitably provide users with a historical perspective on their communities and relationships. Whether dealing with time or explicitly catering to notions of history, all of the projects discussed in this section turn to the past in order to reveal new information and connections about the data they present.

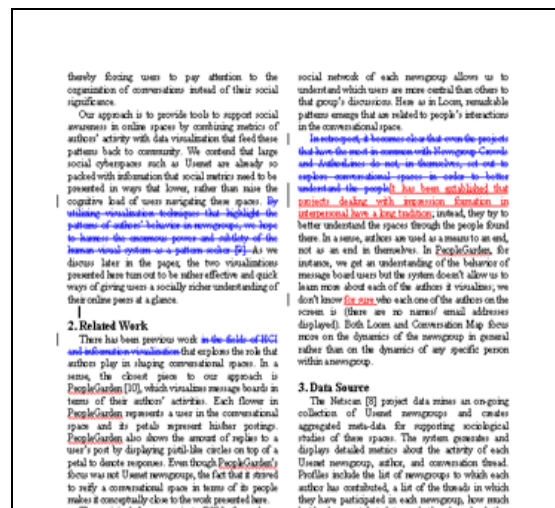
The first set of projects to deal with the idea that digital objects could be "richer" (i.e. more meaningful) if they were to convey their accrued interaction histories to users, was Edit Wear and Read Wear (Hill et al, 1992; Hill and Hollan, 1993). Hill and Hollan devised an ingenious way of graphically depicting *computation wear* in digital objects, they created *attribute-mapped scroll*

bars where wear marks appeared in positions relative to line positions in the document [Figure 1 & Figure 2]. The length of the marks depicted the magnitude of the wear. In Edit Wear, a document's authorship history is depicted by modifying the document's screen representation. Read Wear refers to the readership history of a document.

These two pioneering “*wear and tear*” applications have inspired an entire collection of history-related projects (including Schütte 1998; Wexelblat 1999; Wexelblat and Maes 1999; Derthick, and Roth 2000). Hill and Hollan’s history-enriched digital objects have also impacted areas of scholarly inquiry that are not primarily concerned with history. For instance, social navigation researchers have early on realized the importance of making interaction histories available to other users (Dourish 1999); thus, the idea of being able to graphically depict usage history means a significant gain in this field of study. Others have looked at how reconstructing digital history can save others time and effort (Wexelblat and Maes 1999; Derthick, and Roth 2000). Perhaps the most ubiquitous application of Hill and Hollan’s history-enriched objects is also the most powerful testament to the intellectual force of this idea: Microsoft Word, a commercial text-editor, allows users to graphically keep track of changes made to a text document [Figure 3 & Figure 4]. The feature allows multiple users working on the same document to easily see what has been deleted, where changes have been made in the document, what has been added, etc.

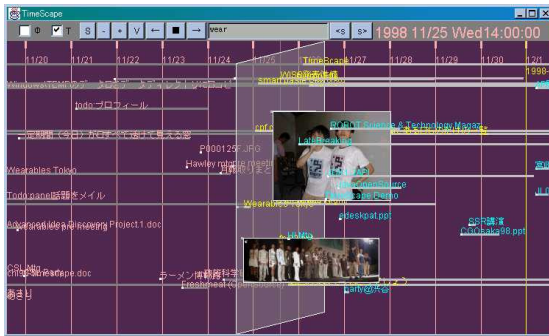


**Figure 3:** Microsoft Word dialog box with interface choices for keeping track of changes.



**Figure 4:** Screen shot of document being edited with change tracking in Microsoft Word.

Human action depends on time. The things we do, the events in our life all occur in a certain order and this order deeply impacts the way we structure our memories. Humans’ temporal framework for organizing memories has intrigued researchers in a wide variety of disciplines, from psychology to information retrieval, to HCI. It is not uncommon for people to use past events as “anchors” when trying to reconstruct memories. Episodic memory – the notion that memories are organized by episodes – is a well-studied area in psychology scholarship.



**Figure 5:** Screen shot of Time-Machine in the timeline view mode.



**Figure 6:** User's desktop with current time position highlighted on the left-hand side.

The projects discussed in this section rely on time and episodic memory as organizing principles for the datasets they present.

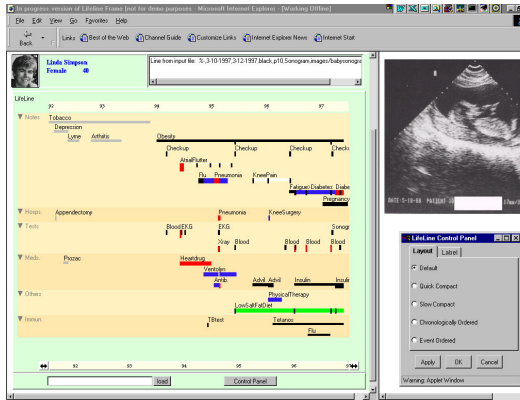
Rekimoto devised one of the first time-centric approaches to organizing computer files (Rekimoto, 1999). The Time-Machine system allowed users to visit past and future states of the desktop on their computers [Figure 5 & Figure 6]. The combination of spatial information management (images of the desktop itself) and time traveling in the system allows users to organize and archive information without having to limit themselves to folder hierarchies or file classification issues. One of the most innovative features of this application was the ability to “travel to the future.” Traveling to the future and creating a PostIt note, for instance, becomes a reminder. The “scheduled” object automatically appears on the desktop at the appointed time. By allowing interaction both with past and future points in time, this system turns a historical application into an active calendar.

Perhaps the most traditional interface for dealing with linear time is the timeline. Several visualization projects have employed some form of timeline as their main structural elements (Plaisant et al 1996; Kullberg 1996; Yiu et al 1997; Havre et al 2002; Ringel et al 2003; Karam 1994).

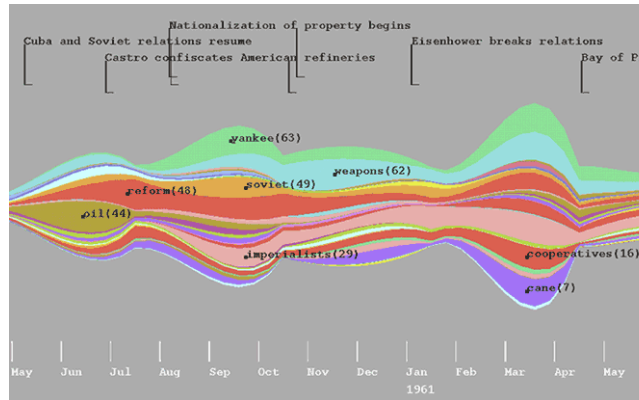
The Lifelines project was one of the first visualizations to show time as a common organizing principle for different kinds of files (Plaisant et al 1996). The interface provides a general visualization environment for people's personal records such as past medical and court history [Figure 7]. Conditions that last long periods of time are represented as continuous lines while icons indicate discrete events (such as physician consultations or legal reviews). The tool allows for multiple kinds of data to be shown about the person. Like with other kinds of “historical” visualizations, this one was devised for outsiders to analyze someone else's data instead of being designed for the patient him/herself to look at his/her historical data. The creators worked with the Maryland Department of Juvenile Justice to visualize juvenile justice youth records. User testing revealed the importance of the overview image of the dataset as well as the ease of access to details; that is, from the most zoomed-out to the most zoomed-in views of the dataset.

More recently, ThemeRiver has innovated the use of timelines by abandoning the static horizontal line and allowing a series of curvaceous contours to take its place (Havre et al, 2002). The visualization depicts thematic variations over time within a large collection of documents [Figure 8]. Colored currents flowing within the river represent individual themes. A current's height

at any given moment indicates decreases or increases in the strength of the individual theme. The focus on temporal thematic change within a context framework allows a user to discern patterns that suggest relationships or trends. For example, the sudden change of thematic strength following an external event may indicate a causal relationship. For instance, the unfortunate tsunami disaster in December of 2004 caused the world media to start mentioning tsunamis, earthquakes, Sri Lanka, and other related words to a much higher degree than usual; such changes would be clearly reflected in ThemeRiver. On top of being informative, this visual solution is also beautiful to look at. The metaphor of a flowing river imparts expressiveness to the visualization in the way it suggests the ever-changing course of events in nature and history.



**Figure 7:** Screen shot of Lifelines interface showing a patient's medical history.



**Figure 8:** ThemeRiver interface.

Media artists have also started to experiment with temporal arrangements of digital documents. Because artists are not restricted by HCI researchers' concerns with information retrieval and management, their explorations often result in refreshingly novel interfaces that are highly expressive of the power of time and history.

Jason Salavon created a time-based "portrait" of a movie (Salavon 2000). He digitized "Titanic" (one of the top grossing movies of all time), broke it up into its constituent frames, and averaged each one of them to a single colored pixel [Figure 9]. Thus, a dimly lit interior frame might average to a single dark "average" color, such as charcoal gray or dark brown. Or a wide exterior shot with a lot of sky might average to a single light blue-gray color. "Replacing each frame with its single color representation, the material is reformatted as a photograph mirroring the narrative sequence of the film. Reading from left-to-right and top-to-bottom the narrative's visual rhythm is laid out in pure color" (Salavon, 2000).

Salavon's wash of colored pixels is an unconventional take on more traditional time-based interfaces. By restricting each frame of the movie to a single pixel, the sequential disposition of colored dots becomes a timeline in itself. However, instead of operating as a simple time marker, a structural frame in which to hang past events, here the timeline *is* the story.

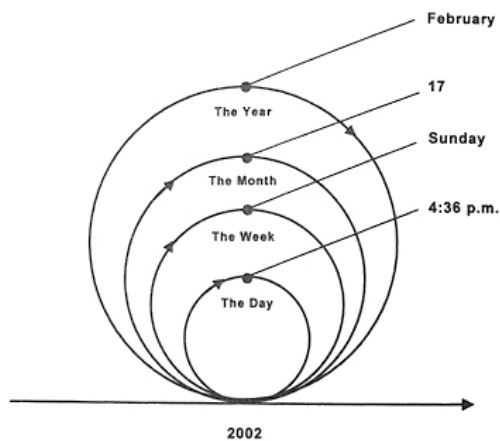
All visualizations discussed so far show time always moving "forward" as if it were a straight line. It makes sense that all of these are called timelines. But people do not always experience time in a uniquely linear manner. The longer we live the more our lives seem to be filled with cycles:





**Figure 9:** “The Top Grossing Film of All Time, 1 x 1,” by Jason Salavon.

days, months, years, summers, winters, birthdays, etc. In fact, there are entire cultures that perceive time as being much more cyclical than linear in nature (Zerubavel 2003).



**Figure 10:** Combined representation of the linear and circular models of time. From *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*, by Eviatar Zerubavel.

More recently, a couple of time-series visualization has explored the cyclical nature of time. Weber et al (2001) created a visualization of time-series data that is displayed on a spiral. Because of the recurring concentric circles in the spiral representation, the visualization solution is well suited for the identification of periodic structures in the data.

In a more artistic vein, Cooper and Ängeslevä (2004) have created the ‘Last’ Clock. Like a traditional analogue clock, it has a second hand, a minute hand and an hour hand. The hands are arranged in concentric circles, the outermost circle represents seconds, the middle circle depicts minutes, and the innermost circle hours. Each of the hands of Last is made from a slice of live video feed. As the hands rotate around the face of the clock

they leave a trace of what has been happening in front of the camera [Figure 11]. Once Last has been running for 12 hours, you end up with a readable mandala of archived time.



**Figure 11:** *The 'Last' Clock. The clock on the left had its camera pointed at the sky in London. The middle clock had a video feed of BBC 2 showing golf. The clock on the right shows another view of London.*

Finally, Arc Diagrams (Wattenberg 2002) is an attractive mix of linear and cyclical representations of event series. Even though the visualization was originally designed to show complex patterns of repetition in string data, it can very easily be applied to various kinds of temporal data as illustrated in the image below of a song and its repeating sections [Figure 12]. It is interesting to note how the designer has relied on circular shapes to represent cyclical events when he could just as easily have connected the recurring portions of the song with other geometric shapes. The choice, however, in addition to making the visualization aesthetically pleasing, seems like a testament to primitive notions of a cyclical, circular time dimension.



**Figure 12:** *Arc Diagram of "Clementine." The image shows the simplicity and repetitiveness of the folk song.*





### 3 COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

*The Usenet is a quintessential Internet social phenomenon: it is huge, global, anarchic and rapidly growing. It is also mostly invisible. Although it is the largest example of a conferencing or discussion group system, the tools generally available to access it only display leaves and branches - chains of messages and responses. None present the trees and forest. With hundreds of thousands of new messages every day, it is impossible to try to read them all to get a sense of the entire place. As a result, an overview of activity in the Usenet has been difficult to assemble and many basic questions about its size, shape, structure and dynamics have gone unanswered. How big is the Usenet? How many people post? Where are they from? When and where do they post? How do groups vary from one another and over time? How many different kinds of groups are there? How many groups successfully thrive and how many die? What do the survivors have that the others lack? How do different social cyberspaces connect and fit together and form a larger ecology?*

– Smith, 1999

Sociologist Marc Smith made this observation about Usenet newsgroups in 1999 but he could just as easily be speaking about most online social environments today, from blog sites to discussion forums. The social fabric of online environments continues to be, for the most part, hard to see.

Presently, however, the importance of making social characteristics of online environments legible to users has ceased to be a researcher's "curiosity" and has become, instead, an established fact. Evidence from experimental and ethnographic studies shows that users strongly rely on social cues to make better sense of mediated communication spaces (Jacobson 1999; Liu et al 2001; Reddy and Dourish 2002; Spears and Lea 1992; Tyler and Tang 2003; Walther 1992, 1996; Walther and Tidwell 1995; Walther et al 2001). For the most part, though, users have to rely on their memories of past interactions to piece together a "mental map" of cues that guides them in future interactions with other members of a group (Fiore et al 2001). This reliance on memory and few tangible cues can cause distorted views of social dynamics to emerge in online environments. An example of such *misreadings* are bloggers' perceptions of their audiences – based mostly on comments left by a few active readers and trackbacks, blog authors make imprecise assessments of readership that have serious implications for privacy (Viégas 2005).

In the very few online spaces where metrics of social behavior are available, it has been shown that users take advantage of these gauges to engage in a series of constructive social behaviors (Burkhalter and Smith 2004; Kelly et al 2002). So far, these social metrics have always taken the form of tables of numbers and statistics, which can be problematic when the volume of metrics is large.

In this chapter I present a series of projects that transform online social metrics into visual representations of community activity. The chapter is divided into two sections: (1) persistent archives and (2) add-on persistence.

*Persistent Archives* describes two projects that deal with different kinds of online spaces that keep permanent archives of interactions: Usenet newsgroups and wiki sites.

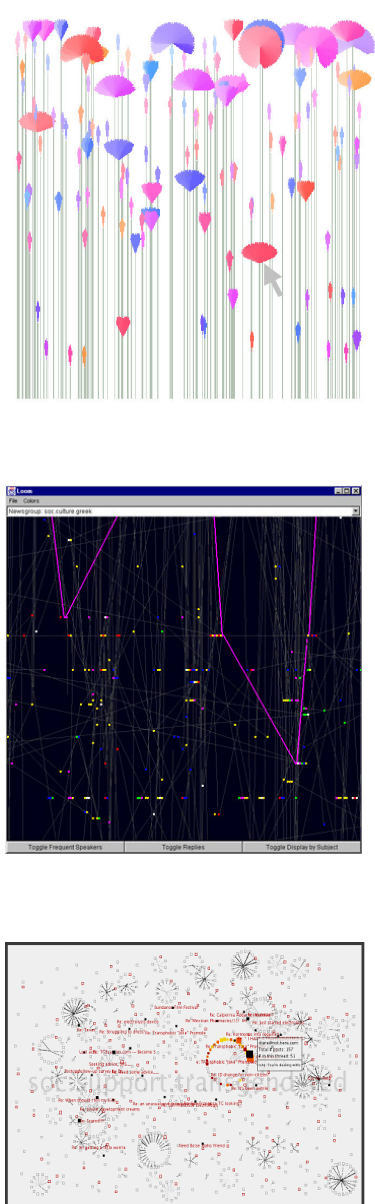
The first project visualizes authors' activities in Usenet newsgroups. Whereas regular Usenet news browsers focus on messages and thread structures, disregarding valuable information about the authors of messages, the visualizations presented here highlight the participants of the various discussions and their activity history. Newsgroup Crowds graphically represents the entire population of authors in a particular newsgroup. AuthorLines visualizes a particular author's posting activity across all newsgroups over a period of one year, revealing temporal patterns of thread initiation and reply that can broadly characterize the roles authors play in Usenet.

Whereas original online communities – such as Usenet newsgroups – revolved around conversation, newer Web-based communities have become more complex, spawning a range of possible communal activities and the creation of collective artifacts. In these communities, conversations represent but one aspect of social activity. Wiki sites for instance, where every visitor has the power to become an editor, focus on the construction of communal web sites. The second project presented in this chapter, *History Flow*, is a visualization of editing history of pages in wiki sites. By visualizing the editing evolution of these pages, History Flow, reveals several patterns of contribution and conflict management in these communities. Analysis of a particular wiki site, Wikipedia, exposed the relevance of authorship, the value of community surveillance in ameliorating antisocial behavior, and how authors with competing perspectives negotiate their differences.

Not all online social spaces retain persistent archives of their users' interactions; in fact, most synchronous environments have no history. This variety of spaces allows users to engage in different kinds of behavior in each one of these settings. For instance, a lot of conversations in chat rooms are meant to be ephemeral. A lot of times, knowing that interactions will not be permanently logged in a chat server allows users to engage in more carefree conversation or feel more comfortable to exchange sensitive information. At the same time, however, this does not mean that places where synchronous interactions take place cannot have any sort of persistence whatsoever. One of the main problems with online spaces that are history free is the fact that, whenever there are no users around, they look devoid of life.

The *Add-on Persistence* section introduces two projects where persistence was added to spaces that were originally trace free: a graphical chatroom and a museum gallery. These projects add visible traces of people's presence in the spaces without logging the contents of their interactions.





**Figure 15:** Projects from the Sociable Media Group. At the top, People Garden; a visualization of participants in a message board. In the center, the original Loom project showing a social newsgroup with a highlighted conversation thread. At the bottom, a screen shot of Loom 2, showing communication clusters within a Usenet newsgroup.

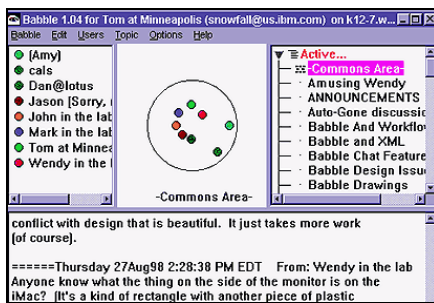
One of the earliest projects to extract social data from Usenet newsgroups' archives is called Netscan and it has been continuously running since 1998 (Smith 1999). Netscan does not employ visualization as its main method of data presentation – even though a few visualization components have been developed since its inception (Smith and Fiore, 2001), the focus continues to be on the tables of metrics [Figure 13]. In fact, its tabular interface gives it a very different tone from the other projects discussed in this section. Netscan's visual presentation makes users rely a lot more on their analytical skills – reading tables of figures – as opposed to giving users any sort of immediate gestalt about these communities. By keeping a statistical interface, Netscan makes it hard for users to see, at a glance, how different newsgroups vary from one another. A recent report of how users utilize the social metrics present on the Netscan site reveals a series of applications of the data: from “typification” of others (where users put others into “context” for more effective future interactions) and spotting of group “regulars,” to intra-group assessment and inter-group comparisons (Burkhalter and Smith 2004).

Conversation Map is a project that extracts social information from the conversational archives of large-scale online communities such as the ones found on Usenet newsgroups (Sack, 2000). The system computes a set of social networks detailing who has been talking to whom and who has been citing whom in the newsgroup. The other main feature in Conversation Map is its visualization of the centrality degree of users in the newsgroup where the social network of each newsgroup allows us to understand which users are more central than others to that group's discussions. Remarkable patterns emerge that are related to people's interactions in the conversational space, giving participants new ways of making sense of their community [Figure 14].

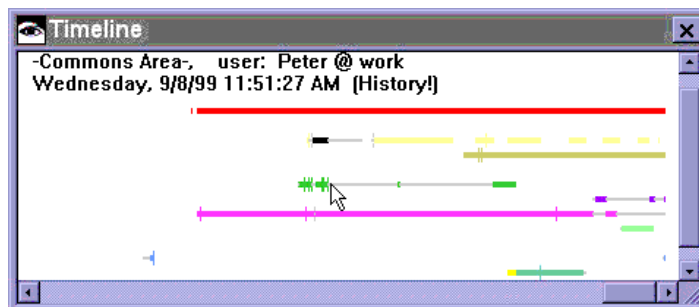
In the Sociable Media Group, some early work has also visualized archived conversations of online communities [Figure 15]. PeopleGarden visualizes message boards in terms of their authors' posting activity (Xiong and Donath, 1999). Each flower in PeopleGarden represents a user in the conversational space and its petals represent his/her postings. PeopleGarden also shows the amount of replies to a user's post by displaying pistil-

like circles on top of a petal to denote responses. Even though PeopleGarden's focus was not Usenet newsgroups, the fact that it strived to reify a conversational space in terms of its people makes it conceptually close to some of the work presented in this chapter.

The original Loom project focused on visualizing social patterns within Usenet newsgroups by mining conversational archives (Donath et al 1999). It highlighted salencies such as rowdy, vociferous users as well as the number of participants in different threads over time. It also visualized the difference between initiated posts and replies. Although its focus was not on the authors per se, Loom managed to uncover interesting author dynamics found in newsgroups – for instance the marked difference between the average number of participants per thread in technical versus social newsgroups.



**Figure 16:** *The Babble system from IBM. The top middle panel shows all logged in users, with more active ones being drawn to the center of the circle.*



**Figure 17:** *Screen shot of Babble's timeline.*

Combining both synchronous and asynchronous conversations, the Babble system developed at IBM is another project that attempts to provide perceptually-based social cues to its users (Erickson et al, 1999). The idea is to create and interface for interpersonal interaction that provides awareness and accountability; a system that allows users to carry out coherent discussions and to have meaningful social interactions [Figure 16 & Figure 17]. One of the motivations behind Babble's user interface design is to emphasize *translucency* instead of *transparency* to reflect the vital tension between privacy and visibility. Thus, users are able to see "who's around" and who is currently active while still being able to engage in private conversations if necessary. In Babble, the interface that shows the relative activity level of users is called a "social proxy," which indicates whether others are speaking or just listening to the conversation.

## Persistent Archives

### 3.2. Newsgroup Crowds and AuthorLines: Visualizing authors in Usenet newsgroups<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 18:** Screen shots of *Newsgroup Crowds*. On the left, a visualization of *alt.politics.bush*; authors are distributed all over the scatter plot attesting to the diversity of contributors and the conversational character of the newsgroup. On the right, *alt.binaries.sounds.mp3.complete\_cd* displays almost all authors are stacked on the left of the scatter plot indicating that this is not a conversational newsgroup.

On an average day in the year 2001 more than 80,000 unique authors contributed 700,000 messages to Usenet, the global, distributed database of conversation.<sup>2</sup> The implications of such an incredible amount of activity are two-fold: on the one hand, Usenet is a great resource for conversations on virtually every topic and a place where one can find answers to almost any question. On the other hand, such vociferous places easily become noisy and hard to navigate. As it turns out, one of the major problems in Usenet is that there are enough poor-quality messages to render the quest for valuable content too difficult and cumbersome to pursue.

Attempts to solve this signal-to-noise ratio problem include reputation systems where users rank other users. Such systems have been widely put to use on popular Web sites such as eBay ([www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com)) and Amazon ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)). One of the main problems faced by such systems is their extensive misuse. An interesting exception to this problem is the ranking/moderating model used at Slashdot ([slashdot.org](http://slashdot.org)), the technology discussion site, where registered users take turns ranking posts, assuring a better turnout of high-quality posts.

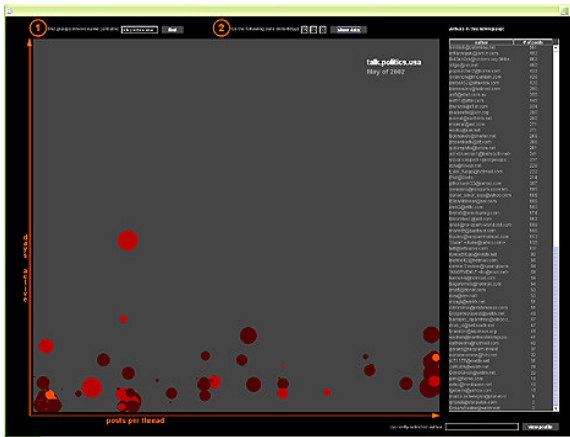
An alternative to the ranking approach is feeding collected user data and site activity information back to the community (Kelly et al 2002). This approach tends to situate online activity within a much richer social context that encourages awareness and accountability on the part of contributors without requiring extra work (such as explicit ranking) from the rest of the community.

<sup>1</sup> This section is based on a paper published at HICSS (Viégas and Smith 2004).

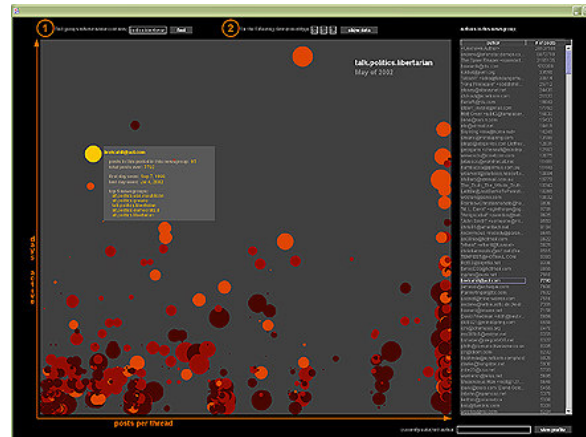
<sup>2</sup> Metrics generated by the Netscan Usenet analysis system: <http://nestcan.research.microsoft.com>.



It has also been suggested that metrics such as the longevity and frequency of participation, the number of newsgroups to which authors contribute messages, and the average size of the threads to which authors tend to contribute, strongly correlate to users' subjective assessment of the qualities and value of different authors in newsgroups (Fiore et al 2001). This indicates that newsgroup users already rely on their personal knowledge of others' behavior in online environments to guide their choices of who to interact with and who to ignore. It seems desirable, therefore, that we leverage the evaluation activities performed by users and design tools that make these metrics more explicit and accessible.



**Figure 19:** Visualization of *talk.politics.usa*, showing a lack of consistent contributors (all circles are at the bottom of the scatter plot) or recent contributions (there are no bright orange circles).



**Figure 20:** Author with highlighted “information box” next to her circle; circles stacked to the right of the interface reveal the highly conversationally concentrated behavior of several authors in this newsgroup: *talk.politics.libertarian*.

Most news browsing interfaces, however, display minimal, if any, information about the authors of messages. When reading a post, users get no sense of the author's history; how active they are in the particular newsgroup, how long they have contributed to the community, in what other conversations they have engaged in the past, etc. Instead, current systems for newsgroup browsing focus on the message unit and the message structure of conversational threads; thereby forcing users to pay attention to the organization of conversations instead of their social significance.

### 3.2.1 Data Source

The Netscan (Smith 1999) project data mines an on-going collection of Usenet newsgroups and creates aggregated meta-data for supporting sociological studies of these spaces. The system generates and displays detailed metrics about the activity of each Usenet newsgroup, author, and conversation thread. Profiles include the list of newsgroups to which each author has contributed, a list of the threads in which they have participated in each newsgroup, how much he/she has contributed to each thread, and whether he/she initiated any of the threads.

Newsgroup Crowds and AuthorLines build on the metrics created by the Netscan system.

One of the limitations in Netscan's user interface is that all of the data are displayed as endless tables of numbers. This format makes it hard for users to quickly grasp overall patterns and outlying values in the data. The visualizations presented here make these metrics more accessible to end users who, unlike researchers, might not be interested in painstakingly evaluating the tabular presentation of social metrics but who can profit extensively from expressive presentations of this information when browsing newsgroups.

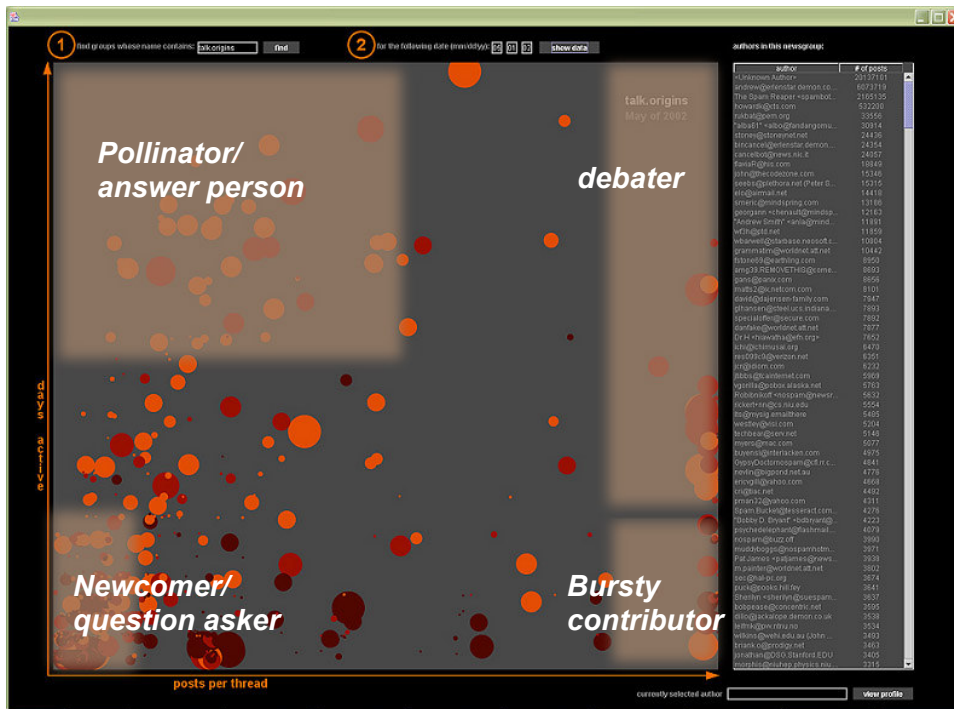
### **3.2.2 Newsgroup Crowds**

Newsgroup Crowds [Figure 18] is a graphical interface that shows the activity of participants in a given newsgroup over a specific period of time. The visualization is a scatter plot of all authors who were active (i.e. posted messages) in the chosen newsgroup during the month being visualized. Each author is represented by a circle whose placement is determined by two axes: number of days an author has been active during the chosen month – vertical axis – and the author's average number of posts per thread in the newsgroup – horizontal axis. The aim is to convey, at a glance, how densely inhabited, active and conversational a given newsgroup is. The visualization also makes other patterns explicit such as which authors are consistent contributors, and the color of circles represents how recently authors have been active in the newsgroup and their overall posting activity in Usenet as a whole. Newsgroup Crowds contains a table where the email addresses of all authors are displayed. The table displays, next to each address, the number of posts each author has contributed to Usenet newsgroups overall. Users can click on an address and the corresponding author circle is highlighted in the visualization panel. Users may also click directly on a circle in the visualization panel to see it highlighted. Whenever an author circle is highlighted, a small, semi-transparent information window is displayed next to the chosen circle containing more detailed information about the author [Figure 20 & Figure 22]:

- (a) author's email address
- (b) author's number of posts during the chosen month in the newsgroup being visualized,
- (c) author's total number of posts ever in all of Usenet
- (d) first day this author was seen in this newsgroup
- (e) last day this author was seen in this newsgroup
- (f) author's "top five" newsgroups (newsgroups to which the author posts the most)

This information window transforms the author's generic circle into an individualized marker. The "top five" newsgroups, for instance, help us understand what kinds of topics/subjects are of interest to this person. They also indicate how focused on a specific topic the author might be; for example, if author A's top five newsgroups all start with "microsoft.public.vb..." we might infer that author A is highly interested in Visual Basic. If, on the other hand, author B's top five newsgroups range from political to philosophical and religious topics, we get the sense that this person has a more varied range of interests than author A. Moreover, clicking on various authors in the same newsgroups allows users to get a sense of how tightly-knit the community is.





**Figure 21:** Areas showing different patterns of behaviors for authors.

### 3.2.3 Author Metrics as Visualization Dimensions

Fiore et al (2001) report that metrics such as longevity, frequency of participation and the amount of messages an author contributes to each thread correlate highly with readers' subjective evaluations of the author. In other words, users of newsgroups seem to employ these metrics informally and implicitly when interacting with others online in order to weigh and contextualize messages from different authors. Some of these metrics were chosen to function as dimensions in Newsgroup Crowds. By doing that, the visualizations presented here explicitly present the user with dimensions already utilized by him/her when interacting with others in newsgroups.

Posts per thread – how densely packed posts are in a collection of threads – turns out to be a reliable metric to determine the degree of “conversational concentration” of an author in a given newsgroup. The higher the posts per thread ratio of an author, the more conversationally concentrated he/she is. For instance, if an author posted 30 messages to the same conversation in the last week, she would be considered a highly concentrated author. If, however, this same author had posted 30 messages to 30 different threads, she would not be considered a conversationally concentrated person. “Posts per thread” is the horizontal dimension of the scatter plot. This means that the more to the right of the scatter plot an author is displayed, the more conversationally concentrated they are (and vice versa).

Frequency of participation is the vertical dimension in Newsgroup Crowds. The higher an author is placed in the visualization panel, the more frequently she has posted to this newsgroup during

the month being visualized. Authors displayed at the very top of the scatter plot have posted to the newsgroup every single day of the month.

These two dimensions cause certain areas of interest to emerge from the distribution of authors within newsgroups. Generally speaking, there are four areas that turn out to be good descriptors of different patterns of behaviors for authors [Figure 21]:

- **Answer person or “Pollinator”**: high number of days active, low posts per thread ratio
- **Debater**: moderate to high number of days active, very high posts per thread ratio
- **“Bursty” contributors**: low number of days active, moderate to high posts per thread ratio
- **Newcomers and question askers**: very low number of days active, low posts per thread ratio – in every newsgroup we analyzed this has always been the most densely populated area



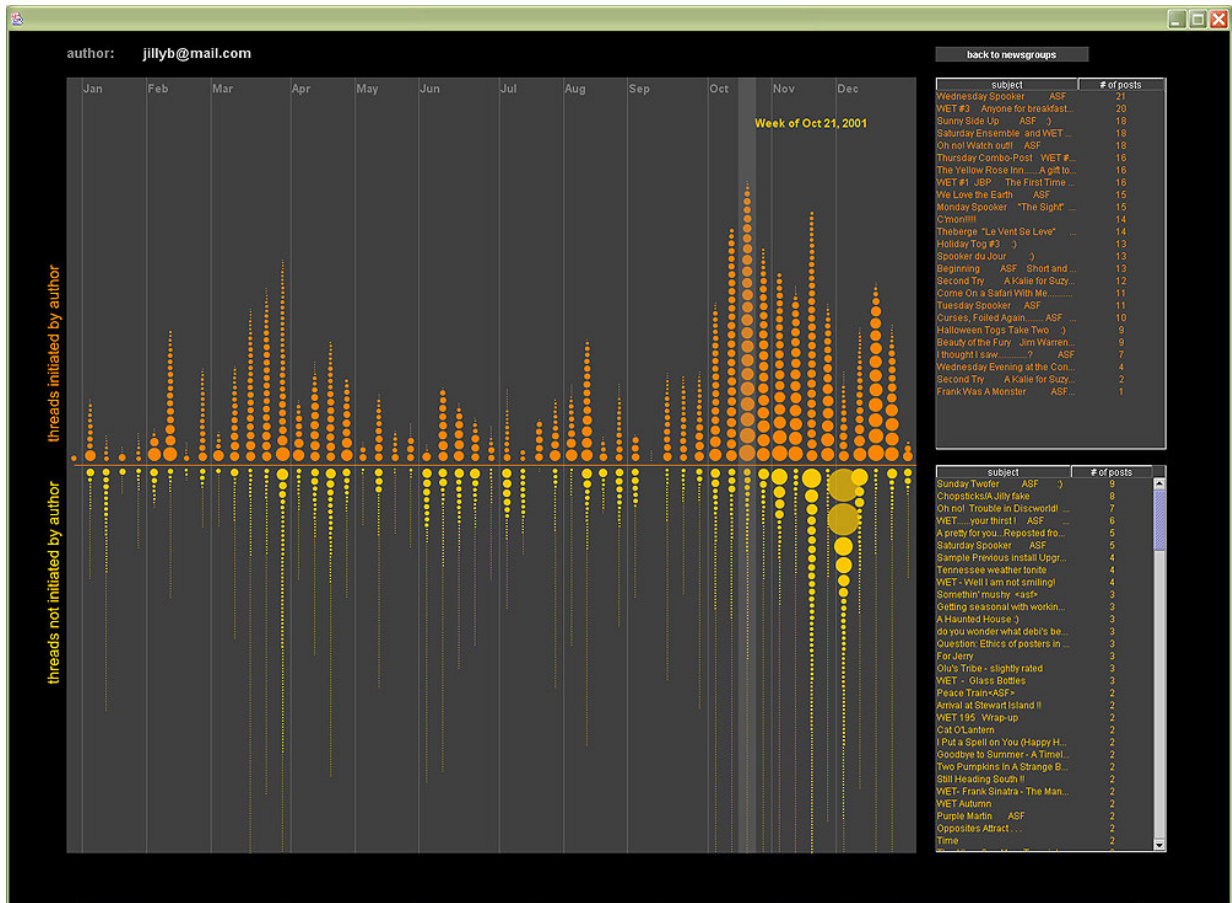
**Figure 22:** Detail of semi-transparent author information box with data points about this author.

The size of each author's circle is determined by the amount of posts this person has contributed to Usenet as a whole – irrespective of newsgroup. This means that authors who have been consistently active for several years in the Usenet space, are shown as big circles whereas newcomers are shown as small dots. This is an interesting piece of information in situations where “experts” drop in a newsgroup for the first time; it may be their first time in this community, but their circle size shows that they have obviously been around Usenet for a long time. It is also interesting to

note when an author has a small dot that shows up fairly consistently (i.e. high in the vertical axis) in a given newsgroup; this could mean that this newsgroup is a core community for the author.

The color of each author's circles reflects how recently this person has posted to this newsgroup: the brighter the circle, the more recent the posting activity. This metric makes highly active newsgroups [Figure 18] look starkly different from more stale ones [Figure 19].

Finally, there is a “View Profile” button and text field on the lower right corner of the Newsgroup Crowds visualization. This is where users choose to view a more highly detailed profile of a specific author.

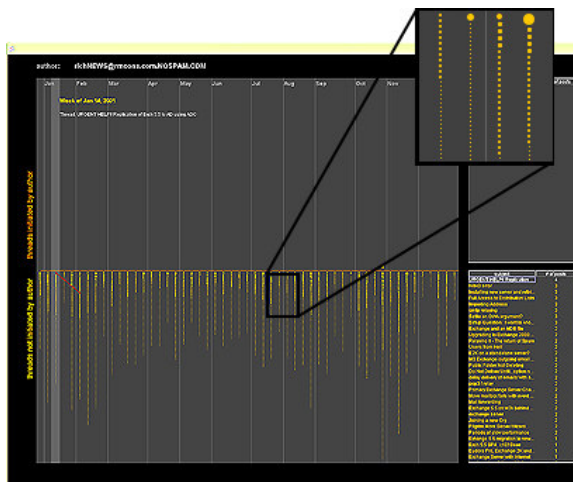


**Figure 23:** AuthorLines visualization of an author that starts about as many threads as the ones they respond to. This author has been active for practically every single week of the year with the most amount of activity happening towards the end of the year.

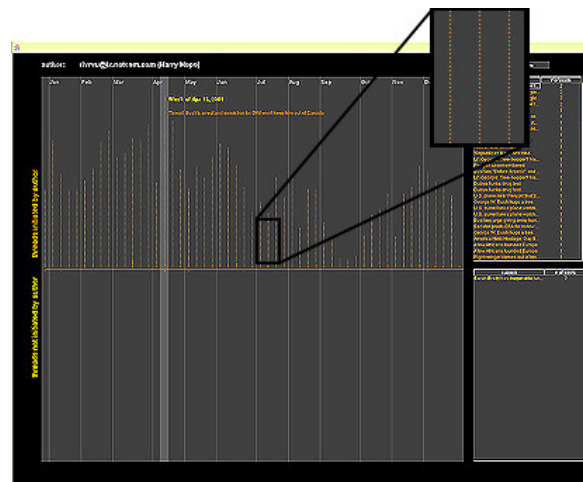
### 3.2.4 Authorlines

After displaying authors within the context of a specific newsgroup and providing users with some information about each one of them, I decided to focus on a single author and get a much deeper understanding of this person's posting activity over time.

AuthorLines functions very much like a histogram showing intensity of posting activity over time [Figure 23]. It is a visualization of an author's posting behavior across newsgroups over an entire year. It shows a horizontal timeline with vertical monthly dividers. Columns of circles represent weekly activity: each circle stands for a conversation thread to which the author has contributed during that week. In other words, a column of 20 circles means that the author has contributed to 20 different conversations during that week. The size of the circle represents the number of messages contributed by the author to that thread; the more messages the author posted, the bigger the circle is. Whenever a circle gets too big to fit in the space allocated for a week it becomes semi-transparent so as not to obscure other circles around it.



**Figure 24:** Overall view of “Question-answer” author and detail box showing close up of small yellow circles; small circles indicate that the author contributes minimally to each thread, rarely posting more than three or four messages in each conversation.



**Figure 25:** Overall view of spammer-like behavior and detail box showing close up of small orange circles; the author contributes just one (initial) message to each of the threads suggesting that he/she is either a spammer or, at the very least, not a highly conversational person.

AuthorLines differentiates between threads that were initiated by the author and those that were not. Orange circles placed above the timeline represent threads that were initiated by the author whereas yellow circles underneath the timeline are threads to which the author has contributed but which were not initiated by him/her. The disposition of circles is determined by their size: bigger circles are drawn closer to the timeline; this ensures that the conversations to which the author has devoted the most energy always show up around the center of the screen.

Because authors' activity is presented over time, it becomes easy to spot periods of intense posting as well as weeks and months when there was no posting activity at all. In figure 6, for instance, the week of Sept. 11th 2001 is the only one that has hardly any posts, reflecting a clear exception to that author's posting behavior. Moreover, the size of the circles makes patterns of posts per thread explicit, revealing whether the author tends to engage in deep debates on specific threads – big circles – or whether the author tends to touch threads lightly – small circles.

The visualization reveals posting patterns that illustrate different patterns of behaviors for authors:

- **Answer person or “Pollinator”:** High number of days active, mostly responds to threads started by other authors with one or just a small number of messages sent to each thread [Figure 24].
- **Debater :** High number of days active, mostly responds to threads started by other authors with large numbers of messages sent to each thread [Figure 26].
- **Spammer-like behavior:** Moderate to high number of days active, almost entirely initiates threads which then receive no follow- up messages from this author [Figure 25].
- **Balanced Conversationalist:** Initiates about as many threads as he/she replies to and shows about the same posts per thread ratio on both initiated and non-initiated threads [Figure 23].

Users can click anywhere on the visualization panel and this causes the correspondent week to be highlighted. The date of the week is displayed at the top of the selection rectangle. The week selection causes the two tables to the right of the visualization to display the subject lines of the threads that were touched by the author during that week. The top table refers to the circles on top of the timeline – threads initiated by the author. The bottom table refers to the circles below the timeline – threads initiated by others.

Users may also select an individual thread by clicking on one of the subject lines in the tables. This selection causes the corresponding circle in the selected week to become highlighted in red and the subject line of the thread to be displayed at the top of the visualization next to the week date. In case the author has contributed to this thread for more than a week, all other occurrences of this same thread are highlighted in red and all these red circles are connected by red lines [Figure 26].

This visualization of an author's posting activity across newsgroups and over time reveals rather detailed patterns about a person's behavior. The sheer shape described by the circles around the timeline and their overlapping sizes make it very easy for users to grasp moments of intense activity and patterns of debating depth in any given thread. Also, by exploring the visualization one gets a good sense of the kinds of subject matters to which the author contributes and how much he/she contributes to each one of them over time.

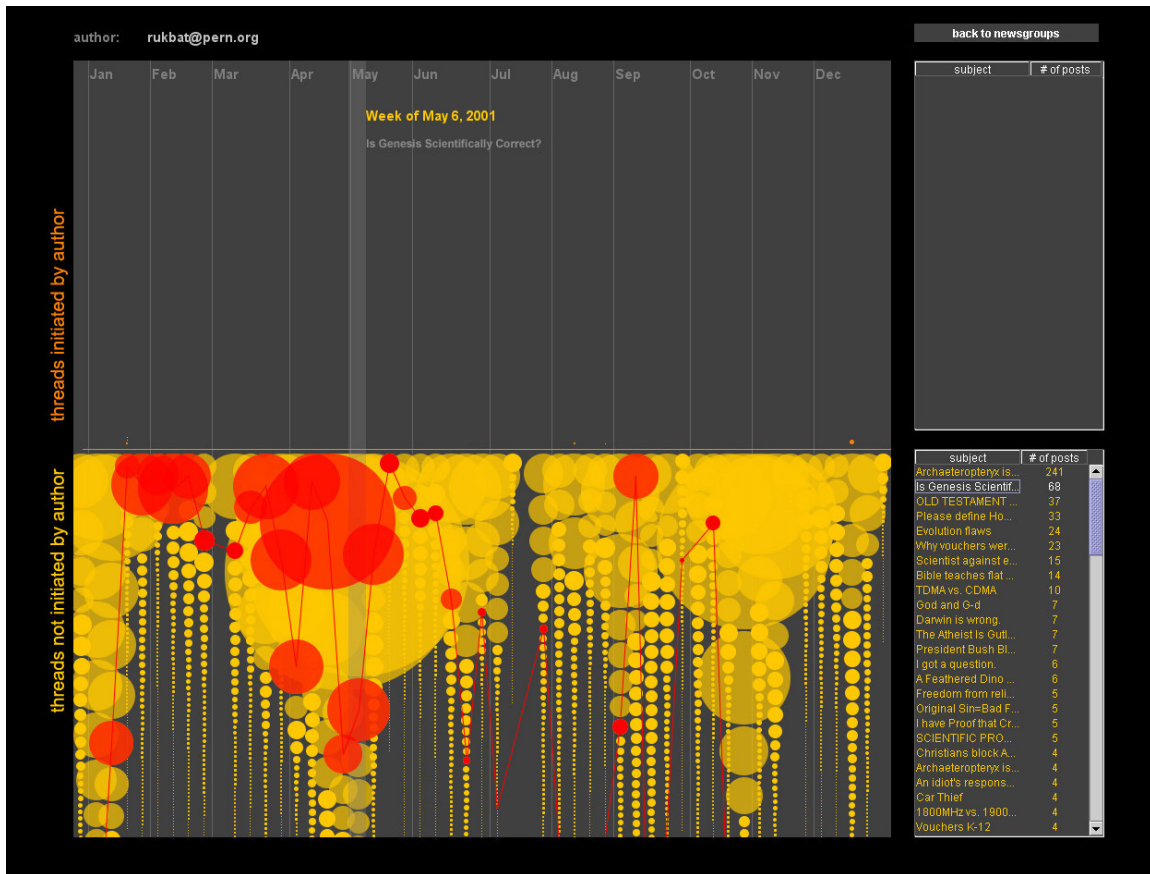
### **3.2.5 User Study**

Because these visualizations take such a different approach from regular news browsing systems, there was no point in constructing a study to compare and contrast these interfaces to those available in the market today. Therefore, I set up an exploratory evaluation rather than a comparative one. The goal was to investigate whether these visualizations could impress on users some of the different behavior patterns of authors and, whether these impressions supported users' understanding of contributors in these conversational spaces. However, in order to get to such high level inquiry, I had to test more basic user interface elements as well. For this reason, the user study included tasks that covered two main areas of interaction design:

1. **usability:** Are these visualizations easy to use? Do the dimensions (axes, colors, sizes) and interaction areas (buttons, tables, clickable panels) make sense to users?
2. **usefulness:** How do users interpret the data shown here? Do the visualizations give users an at-a-glance understanding of the authors in these spaces?

The results presented here stem both from my observation of how users interacted with the visualizations as well as from a survey that participants filled out at the end of the user-testing sessions. The selected quotes are representative of users' reactions; all quotes come from the written survey filled out by participants.





**Figure 26:** “Debater” behavior: the size of the circles indicates that the author contributes significant amounts of messages to a lot of threads. The highlighted thread (red connected circles) lasts for almost the entire year.

I administered a preliminary online survey within Microsoft asking about various aspects of people’s newsgroup experience. From the 165 respondents to this survey, 15 heavy newsgroup users were selected – a “heavy” user was defined as anyone who consistently read or posted to Usenet newsgroups at least once a week throughout the year. Participants were brought into the lab for study sessions of 1.5 hours. During each session I briefly explained the functionality of both visualizations and led participants through a few practice tasks. After this introduction, participants were given a list of tasks to perform. They were asked to think aloud as they performed the tasks. At the end of the test, participants were asked to fill out an online survey about their experience with the interfaces.

### 3.2.5.a Demographics

Of the 15 participants selected for the user study, eight were female and seven were male, with ages ranging from 24 to 53. Experience with Usenet newsgroups was as follows: 60% had over two years of experience; 25% had between one and two years of experience; and the other 15% had up to a year of experience. Reasons participants had for using newsgroups were: 86.7% for technical support, 66.7% for hobby, 40% for political discussions, 20% for emotional support and 33% used newsgroups for other reasons.

### **3.2.5.b Procedure**

**Newsgroup Crowds:** Participants were asked to examine five different newsgroups:

1. alt.politics.bush
2. talk.origins
3. microsoft.public.vb.general.discussion
4. talk.politics.usa
5. rec.sport.tennis.

These newsgroups were chosen because they spanned a range of subjects: from politics and philosophy to technology and sports. Even though two of the newsgroups focus on American politics - alt.politics.bush, talk.politics.usa – they were chosen because their social dynamics are fairly different. All of the newsgroups were visualized for the month of May 2002, which was the latest set of aggregate data available from the Netscan project.

For each one of these newsgroups, participants were asked to identify a couple of authors by their email addresses (which could be done using the table with all authors' email addresses). They were also asked to find authors based on how consistently they had returned to the specific newsgroup and how conversationally concentrated they were. For each one of these tasks, participants were asked to explain their choices – I wanted to determine whether users could understand the axes in the visualization or whether they had to make a big effort to comprehend the placement of authors in the scatter plot. Finally, participants were asked to report on the information displayed about each one of the authors they had highlighted during the study – the information contained in the author's "information box" that shows up next to the author's highlighted circle – they were asked to say what kind of contributors they thought these authors were based on the information they had about them.

Finally, in a subset of newsgroups, they were asked to find out whether there was a lot of overlap among the "five top newsgroups" lists of different authors within the same newsgroup. This task was performed for the following newsgroups: microsoft.public.vb. general.discussion, and alt.politics.bush. The former newsgroup has, in its core contributors, a high degree of overlap – most of the core authors contribute to a lot of the same Visual Basic newsgroups outside of this one. In the second newsgroup, however, overlap is not as evident; rather, authors seem to have a wider range of interests spanning such topics as philosophy, religion, vegetarianism, cars, and guns, etc.

**AuthorLines:** In this study, participants looked at the profiles of six different authors from the five newsgroups listed above. These authors were chosen to represent a wide variety of posting behaviors. AuthorLines displayed authors' data for 2001.

Tasks included: identifying periods of intense posting activity, identifying specific weeks in the year, identifying specific threads within given weeks; determining whether authors tended to participate in the same threads for over a week, recognizing threads initiated by the author and those that weren't. Moreover, users were asked to elaborate on what the distinct activity patterns displayed by the different authors might mean: some authors displayed spurts of activity followed by

months without posting anything, others posted every single week of the year, some posted a whole lot of messages to the same threads while others would lightly touch a lot of threads every week.

### **3.2.5.c Results**

Overall, users' response to both visualizations was positive. Most users found the visualizations highly useful and did not have any major difficulties interacting with them. In general, users were also impressed at how fast they could learn about previously unknown authors in the newsgroups presented to them. Most users were also quick in forming opinions about the kinds of authors they were looking at; most of the time, after looking at data about five different authors, users had become comfortable with the metaphors used in the visualizations (colors, placement, sizes, etc) and were able to determine patterns that they thought reflected "regular" posting activity and patterns that they deemed unusual – for instance, most participants were very surprised when presented with data from an author whose posting pattern looked like the one on figure 9, which showed intense reply activity over the entire year; sometimes hundreds of messages to the same thread in a single week.

#### **Newsgroup Crowds:**

**a) Usability:** For the most part, users found both axes in the scatter plot to be clear (81% found them clear, 10% moderately clear, 9% did not find them clear). Most users found it easy to find specific authors in the visualization (84% found it easy, 16% did not find it easy). In general, users also felt that they got a good sense of "interaction dynamics" by looking at the scatter plot (93% got a good sense, 7% did not get a good sense of the interaction dynamics of newsgroups).

**b) Usefulness:** For the most part, users found the visualization successful in portraying differences between newsgroups and most users said they would be interested in using this tool again for news browsing (50% were extremely interested, 21% were interested, 29% were moderately interested). Users' responses about favorite features in the visualization include: (a) being able to tell, at a glance, how dynamic a newsgroup is and who the top contributors are, (b) ability to tell whether a particular newsgroup was inhabited by consistent contributors or whether it was a place where people "come and go" (e.g. "It gave me a sense of the community, responsiveness and participation types in the group immediately. I found myself starting to draw boxes around groups of people and saying: these guys over here behave like this whereas these other people behave like that"), (c) being able to, very quickly, get a sense of the community and what kinds of things interest people in the same newsgroup. Users' responses about least favorite features include: (a) not being able to do side-by-side comparison of multiple newsgroups, (b) not being able to get to the content of the messages exchanged by the people in the newsgroups (e.g. "You can't tell the quality of the posts from the visualization, only the quantity"), (c) not being able to zoom into the more dense areas of the scatter plot so that one could more easily identify overlapping authors.

Finally, when asked whether having access to a visualization like Newsgroup Crowds might affect their choice of newsgroups in which to participate, 54% of users answered Yes, 23% answered Maybe and another 23% answered No.



## AuthorLines

**b) Usability:** It became clear that users had no problems getting a sense of the times of the year when authors had the most posting activity (78% found it extremely easy, 22% found it easy). For the most part, users found it easy to find specific weeks during the year (43% found it extremely easy, 29% easy, 28% found it moderately easy). Users also didn't have major problems finding a specific thread within a selected week (14% found it extremely easy, 43% easy, 36% moderately easy, 7% not easy). About 40% of respondents were frustrated to find out that they could not click on the circles of a highlighted week as a way of selecting a single thread in that week. These repeated attempts made it clear that we should enable all selection actions to take place on the visualization panel in addition to any selection actions that might be possible on the tables.

**b) Usefulness:** For the most part, users found AuthorLines successful in expressing basic differences in author behavior (52% found it extremely successful, 32% successful, 16% moderately successful). Most users said they would be interested in having this tool available to them for news browsing (51% said they would be extremely interested, 21% interested, 21% moderately interested, 7% were not interested).

Users' responses about favorite features include:

- (a) being able to get a sense of author's behaviors without actually having to read all of their postings
- (b) ability to, at a glance, grasp behavior over a long period of time, (c) being able to highlight threads and see how authors continue to contribute to the same threads over time
- (c) seeing the different patterns in threads initiated by the author and threads initiated by others

Users' responses to least favorite features include:

- (a) inability to do side-by-side comparison of authors
- (b) inability to play with the time dimension so that one could see posting patterns more clearly over a month or even over a week as opposed to simply looking at activity over a year
- (c) not being able to get to the content of posts and threads from the visualization
- (d) inability to tell how big a thread is (e.g. "If I see that someone posted to a thread 20 times, I want to know if the thread has 40 posts total, or 2000 posts, total -- this affects my impression of the author's behavior").

When asked whether having access to a visualization like this one might affect their choices of which messages and threads to read, 72% said Yes, 14% said Maybe and another 14% said No.

### 3.2.5.d Privacy

While some of the participants in this study marveled at the possibility of, as one of them put it "seeing a particular author as the kind of person who is a vegetarian, drives a Volvo and

sympathizes with environmentalist causes”, others felt this much insight into someone else’s life style could be a dangerous thing.

The goal of this project is not only to impress on users a vivid image of authors’ behaviors and activity patterns but also to give users some inkling at how much data is available out there about each one of us as we interact online.

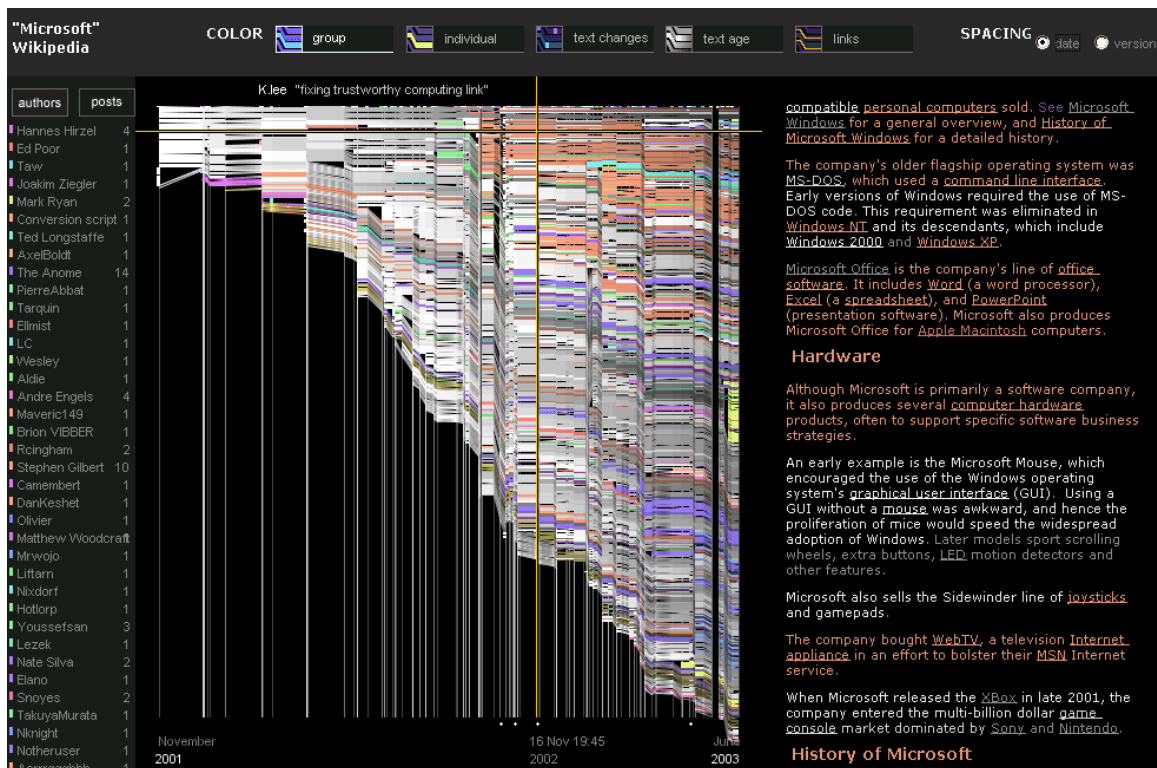
Users’ concerns about privacy demonstrated that the work presented here was effective in rapidly creating a “picture” of authors. I explained to participants that all data being visualized were public; nothing they were shown was, at any level, private. Having said that, it is a known fact that aggregating public data causes different privacy implications to emerge: people act a certain way in public spaces when they know their behavior is not being recorded. People act a different way in public spaces when they realize their actions are being recorded. The projects presented here subscribe to the view that, because computer-mediated conversational spaces such as Usenet are intrinsically recordable, user interfaces that bring up this persistent quality to the forefront of the user experience actually do users a favor. They remind users at all times that this is a mediated space, one where people can collect your data and profile your behavior. Because the interfaces here do not hide this mediated reality from users, they act as constant reminders and give users a better chance of adjusting their behavior and interactions accordingly.

### **3.2.6 Conclusions**

These two visualizations feed collected author behavioral data back into communities of Usenet newsgroups in ways that make overall activity patterns easy to understand. Previous work in this area shows that quantitative behavioral metrics, in particular those that capture aspects of an author’s tenure in a newsgroup and level of interactivity with other authors, serve as reliable predictors of subjective evaluations of the author’s social and informational value to people in the community. By extension, the work presented here shows that, because users can become quickly acquainted with authors’ patterns of posting activity and behavioral histories, they will become better equipped to decide which authors and messages might be of interest to them – a huge gain from current news browsing interfaces. The study showed that, when viewing authors’ data in these systems, users were able to quickly differentiate between the varied behavior patterns of authors. Moreover, the information users extracted from the visualizations was viewed by them as an important guide to further exploration of the conversational spaces as well as an effective means of navigating such voluminous spaces such as Usenet newsgroups.

Finally, some users in the study raised privacy concerns when looking at the data of fellows Usenet members. This reaction points to the positive impact that history visualizations can have on users’ perceptions of the virtual environments they inhabit. By serving as “mirrors” to users, these systems make an important contribution to the online social world.

Visual feedback mechanisms such as the ones discussed here might prove to be an important initial step towards designing social spaces that foster a higher level of social legibility and, possibly, accountability.

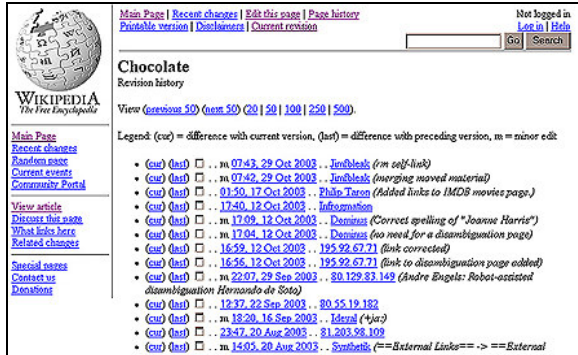
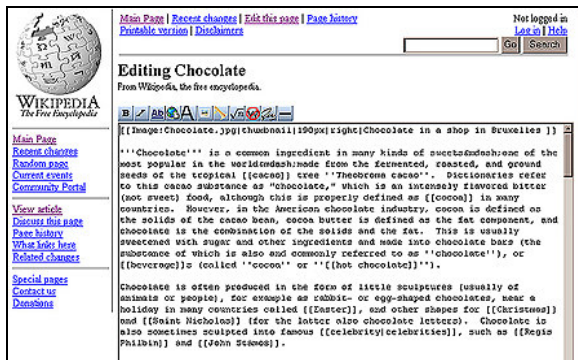
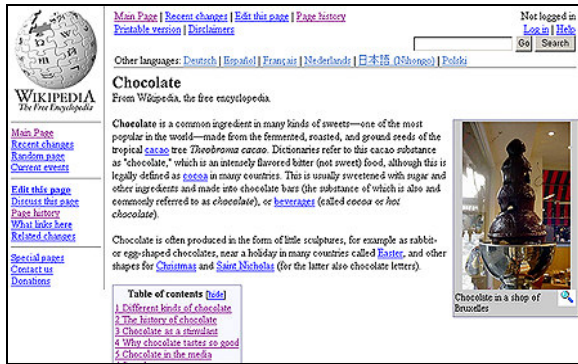


**Figure 27:** History Flow user interface showing the Microsoft page on Wikipedia; on the right we see the contents of the page, on the left we see all the authors who have contributed to this page; the center panel shows the visualization.

### 3.3 History Flow: Visualizing the evolution of Wiki pages<sup>3</sup>

Online communities have long allowed people with conflicting perspectives and values to meet and talk—but usually without any need to resolve their differences. Indeed, given the endless arguments often found in traditional online forums, asking that a large group reach consensus online may seem impossible. In recent years, however, new online technologies have arisen that, by their nature, favor consensus building by community members. One example of such a technology is a special kind of web site known as a “wiki.” Invented in 1995 by Ward Cunningham (c2.com/cgi/wiki?WikiWikiWeb; Leuf and Cunningham 2001), a defining feature is that any reader of the site may also be an author. Each page has an “edit this page” link at the bottom, allowing users to change the content of the page. This interface supports a higher level of consensus building because a user who disagrees with a statement can very easily delete it. In this sense, the text on wiki pages is content that has survived the critical eye of the community. Since Cunningham’s original implementation, wikis have become popular for many purposes both public and private, ranging from knowledge management to education (Aronsson 2002; Guzdial et al 1995).

<sup>3</sup> This work was done with Martin Wattenberg at IBM Research. This section is based on a paper published at CHI (Viégas et al 2004d).



**Figure 28**

*Top: Wikipedia article page on “Chocolate.”*

*Middle: Editor window showing the contents of the “Chocolate” page.*

*Bottom: Detail of the revision history page for “Chocolate” on Wikipedia. Each line represents an edit made to the page.*

History Flow examines the largest public wiki, wikipedia.org (or simply “Wikipedia”), which is a thriving site despite a seemingly unlikely model for success. The founders of Wikipedia wished to create a free online encyclopedia. Rejecting the traditional method of having each article written by an expert and subjected to review, fact-checking and editing, they took the opposite tack: on Wikipedia, content can be added or changed at any time by anyone on the Internet. To many, this approach—so vulnerable to mistakes, ignorance and malice—seems a flatly ridiculous way of producing a serious reference tool. The mystery of Wikipedia is that despite the obvious potential drawbacks of its openness, it has enjoyed significant success. It currently contains articles on more than 100,000 subjects, and from July 2002 to July 2003, it averaged 150,000 page views and 3,300 edits per day (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Statistics). It has attracted many writers, but—more importantly—many readers, suggesting that the articles are worth reading.

## Wikipedia history

Wikipedia was launched on January 15, 2001. It began as an experimental project related to an earlier encyclopedia site called Nupedia (www.nupedia.com). Nupedia took the conventional approach to encyclopedic writing: articles were written by an expert and approved only after a long review process, fact-checking and

editing. Wikipedia instead leveraged the freeform style of interaction developed by Ward Cunningham. While Wikipedia's content grew rapidly, Nupedia's progress has been slow—in the period from October 2001 to April 2003, it released only two new articles ([www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nupedia](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nupedia)).

### **3.3.1 Wiki technology**

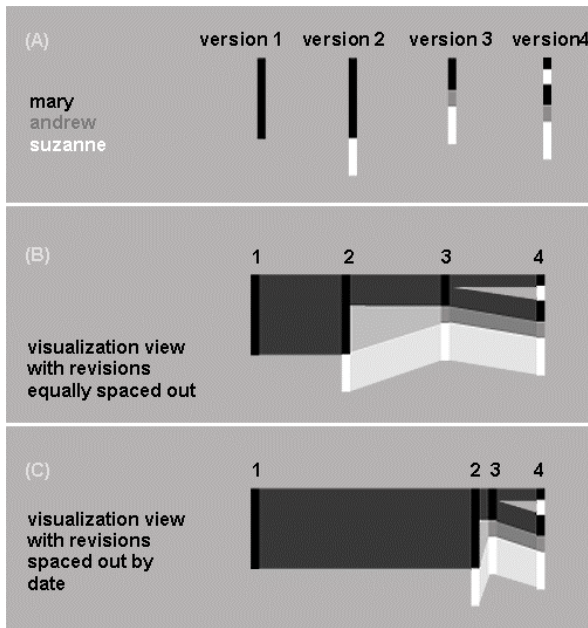
Wikis rely on server-side technology that allows visitors to make instant updates to a web page via a web interface. Every editable page on a wiki site has an “edit this page” link that visitors can use to alter the contents of the page. Clicking on this link navigates to an editing view with a text field containing the page's contents. The user can edit this text and submit a new version, which will immediately replace the previous one. Editing itself is quite lightweight, using simple markups that are translated into HTML. It is similarly easy to create new pages and new links. In many wikis, including Wikipedia, users have the option of either registering or remaining anonymous. Registered users retain their profile whenever they come back to the site and their changes are logged under their usernames. When anonymous users edit pages, their changes are logged with their IP address.

Most wikis (including Wikipedia) have archiving systems that record all previous edits of a page and make it simple to revert to an earlier version. If the ease of adding a contribution is a distinguishing feature of a wiki, so too, paradoxically, is the ease of removing contributions of others by reverting an edit. This archiving system ensures that no permanent harm can be caused by bad editing.

The archived versions of a page are available to users via a “page history” link. Figure 1 shows a sample page history from Wikipedia. Each row contains:

- a link to a saved version
- a link to the differences between the saved version and the one previous to it, showing what was deleted from and what was inserted to the page
- date and time when the change happened
- who made the change (in case of an anonymous contributor, the user sees an IP address)
- any comments the contributor might have left about the change they made.

Finally, wikis have a “recent changes” page that lists the latest edits that have taken place across the site. This is one important way in which users of a wiki track activity since their last visit.



**Figure 29:** Explanatory diagram of History Flow's visualization mechanism. In this scenario, three people are working together on the same document and each person is represented in a different color.

### 3.3.2 Wikipedia enhancements

Some critical features in Wikipedia are incidental or even absent in other wiki implementations. Wikipedia allows users to keep a “watch list” of pages they wish to monitor closely. When a page in someone's watch list is modified, the user is notified via email. This is an effective means for topic experts and serious Wikipedians to scrutinize changes made to specific pages and fix acts of vandalism such as mass deletions. Watch lists function as alerting mechanisms for wiki communities.

The Wikipedia community also sets up secondary pages that are devoted to the discussion of issues surrounding the topics on “real” pages; these are sometimes called “talk pages.” They represent an attempt to separate what is “real” information from discussions about what should and should not be on the real page.

### 3.3.3 The History Flow visualization technique

Wikipedia makes its entire database of version histories available for download, a boon to researchers. Making sense of the history for even a single entry, however, is not straightforward. The sheer number of versions can be daunting: as of August 2003, the entry for Microsoft had 198 versions comprising 6.2 MB of text; to get an idea of how much information this is, imagine a table like the one in figure 28 (bottom) but 22 times larger. Moreover, significant information is often not contained in individual versions, but in the differences in the text of an entry from one version to the next. Such differences highlight editing choices, emphasizing what does and does not survive over time.

Wikipedia provides a method of viewing differences, similar to that found in source control systems such Visual Source Safe ([msdn.microsoft.com/ssafe](http://msdn.microsoft.com/ssafe)). This interface suffers from two drawbacks: First, it only shows differences between two versions at once. Second, it records differences only on a paragraph level (a change in a comma might cause a two-page paragraph to be marked as deleted). Both problems made examination of version histories extremely cumbersome. Since no commercial tools were available that solved both problems, we created a new technique, a simple but effective visualization tool, dubbed History Flow.

The goal of History Flow is to make broad trends in revision histories immediately visible, while preserving details for closer examination. This method was invaluable in analyzing the Wikipedia data set, but it may be of independent interest and may be applicable in many other collaborative situations. One particularly promising avenue is investigating patterns in large-scale software development.

As an explanatory example, consider a hypothetical scenario where three people—Mary, Suzanne, and Andrew—collaborate in writing a document. Each version of the document is represented by a vertical “revision line” with length proportional to the length of its text. The contributors are each assigned a different color in the visualization, and sections of each revision line are colored according to who originally authored them [Figure 29A].

In this scenario Mary creates the page and thus the first revision line [Figure 29A, at left] is entirely black, Mary’s author color. Now imagine that Suzanne adds text to the end of what Mary wrote. In the revision line for the second version [second line from left, Figure 29A], this addition shows up in Suzanne’s author color as an appended line at the bottom of Mary’s original line. The overall length of the document grows in the second version. On “version 3” Andrew deletes a portion of Mary’s original text and introduces a small contribution between Mary’s and Suzanne’s texts. Finally, in “version 4” Suzanne inserts some text towards the top of the page, in the middle of what has survived of Mary’s original text [Figure 29A, right].

The sequence of revision lines shown in Figure 29A makes up the skeleton of the visualization, but these lines alone omit critical information. In particular, it is hard to see how the different versions relate. The key step in a History Flow diagram is to visually link sections of text that have been kept the same between consecutive versions. Colored connections are drawn between corresponding segments on adjacent revision lines [Figure 29B]. Pieces of text that do not have correspondence in the next (or previous) version are not connected and the user sees a resulting gap in the visualization, clearly highlighting deletions and insertions.

One helpful variation on the History Flow method is to use the spacing of revision lines to indicate the passage of time. Instead of the regular spacing shown in Figs. 29A and 29B, the space between successive revision lines becomes proportional to the time between the revision dates [Figure 29C]. This alternative view is called “space by date” and it de-emphasizes revisions that come in rapid succession and, as discussed later, can be quite revealing of the rhythms of collaboration among authors.

When applied to complex version histories, History Flow can produce striking results. Figure 27 for example, shows a view of the version history for the Wikipedia entry for Microsoft.

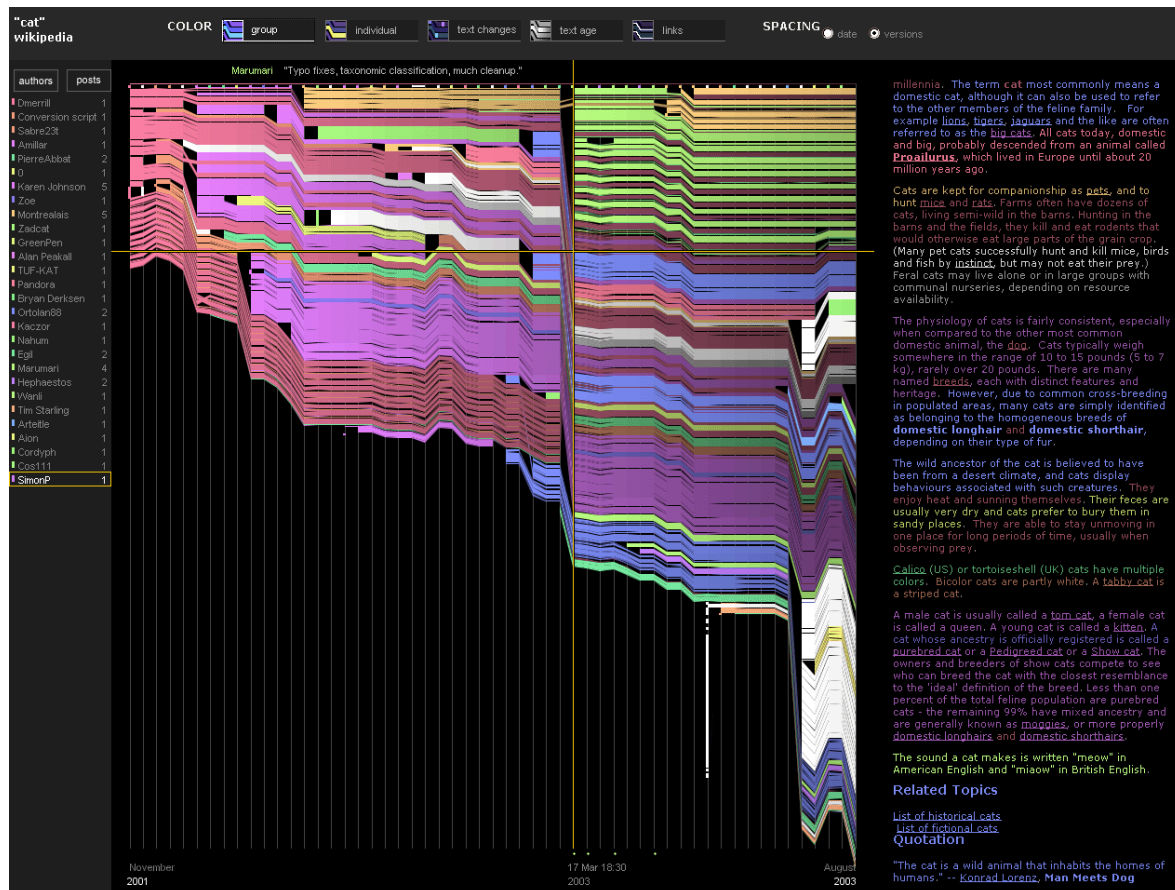
### 3.3.4 *User interface*

The interface of the visualization tool is relatively simple. The bulk of the screen is devoted to the History Flow visualization itself [Figure 27]. Above it are buttons that let the user change the color scheme in the visualization, for example, highlighting only contributions by a given author. To the side of it is a text panel closely linked with the visualization, so that if the user moves a set of crosshairs to a location on the visualization, the text view shows the text for the corresponding



version and position within that version. Conversely, scrolling the text view will move the marker on the visualization. This tight linking of overview and detail was critical for effective analysis.

When the user selects a revision line, additional annotations are provided to help understand its context. The author's comment is displayed at the top of the revision line, and the date of the selected version (down to the nearest minute) is displayed at the bottom. Additionally, all other versions by that author are highlighted.



**Figure 30:** History Flow diagram of the Wikipedia page on “cat.” Notice the vertical white line on the right of the visualization. This line represents a series of paragraphs added by a user about the Unix command “cat.”

### 3.3.5 Implementation notes and related work

Finding matching sections of two document revisions is a well-studied problem in computer science, with many possible solutions. History Flow uses a simple technique that works by matching up tokens (Heckel 1978)—in this system “sentences” are defined as pieces of text delimited by periods or html tags—which gives decent results with sufficient efficiency. One problem with this approach is that tiny changes, such as the addition of a single comma, will show up as a change to an entire sentence, but even this level of granularity is a large improvement over the paragraph-level view that is the Wikipedia default.



There are many existing methods for visualizing document revisions. Several popular source control interfaces can color-code changed regions in files and show a side-by-side comparison of two files, graphically connecting matching sections. Other methods use a thumbnail view of a program, with line-by-line coloring to indicate authorship or age (Baker and Eick 1995). Visually, History Flow diagrams have some similarity to Theme River (Havre et al 2002) and to parallel coordinates systems (Inselberg 1985), but our method depicts a completely different type of data and, our vertical axes function differently.

### **3.3.6 *Patterns of cooperation and conflict***

History Flow visualized in detail more than 70 different Wikipedia page histories. This examination revealed several common patterns of collaboration and negotiation. These patterns represent some of the techniques that this community has developed to deal with antisocial behavior, disputes, and the determination of what is off topic on a page.

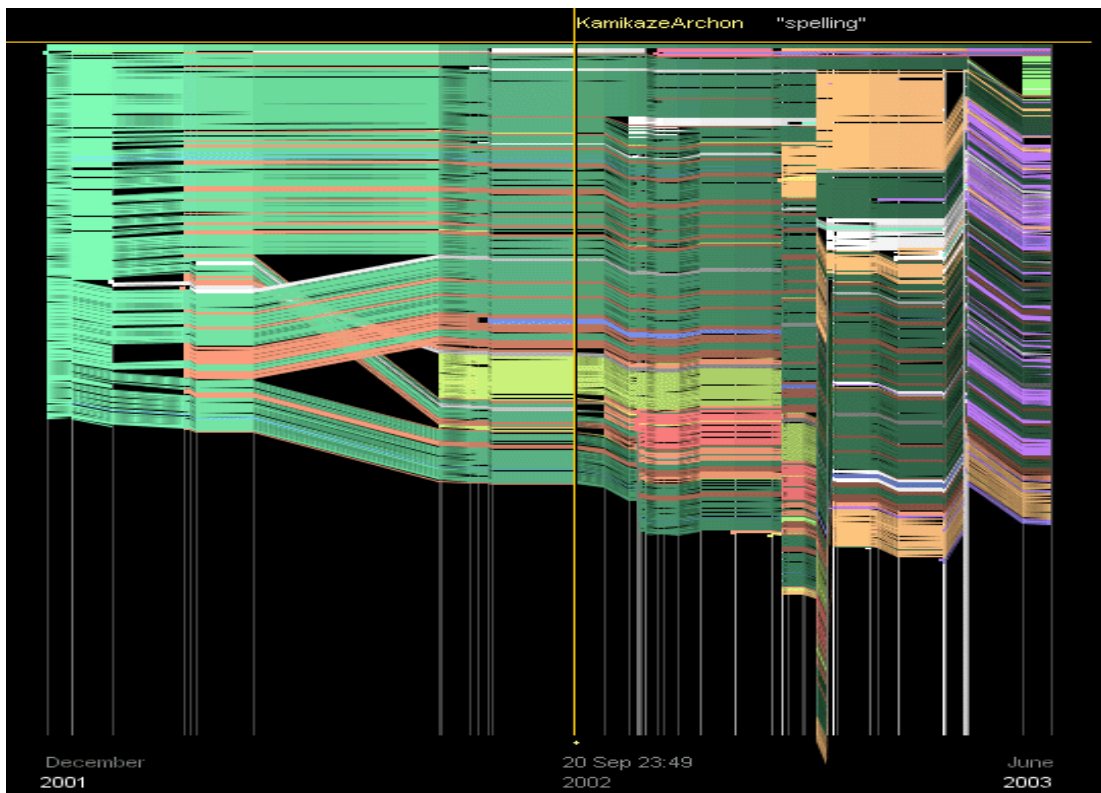
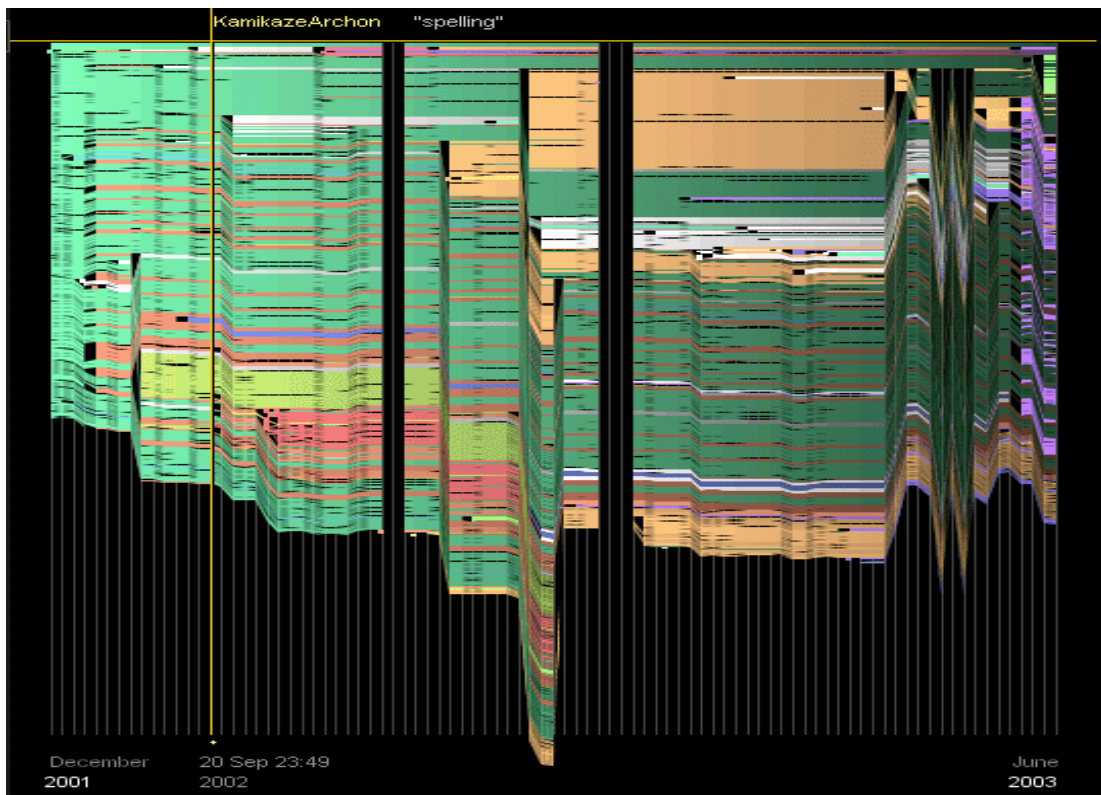
#### **3.3.6.a Case Studies**

To better illustrate a few of the patterns found in this study, this section describes three of the pages visualized by History Flow. The patterns seen on these pages were typical of the various pages visualized in this study.

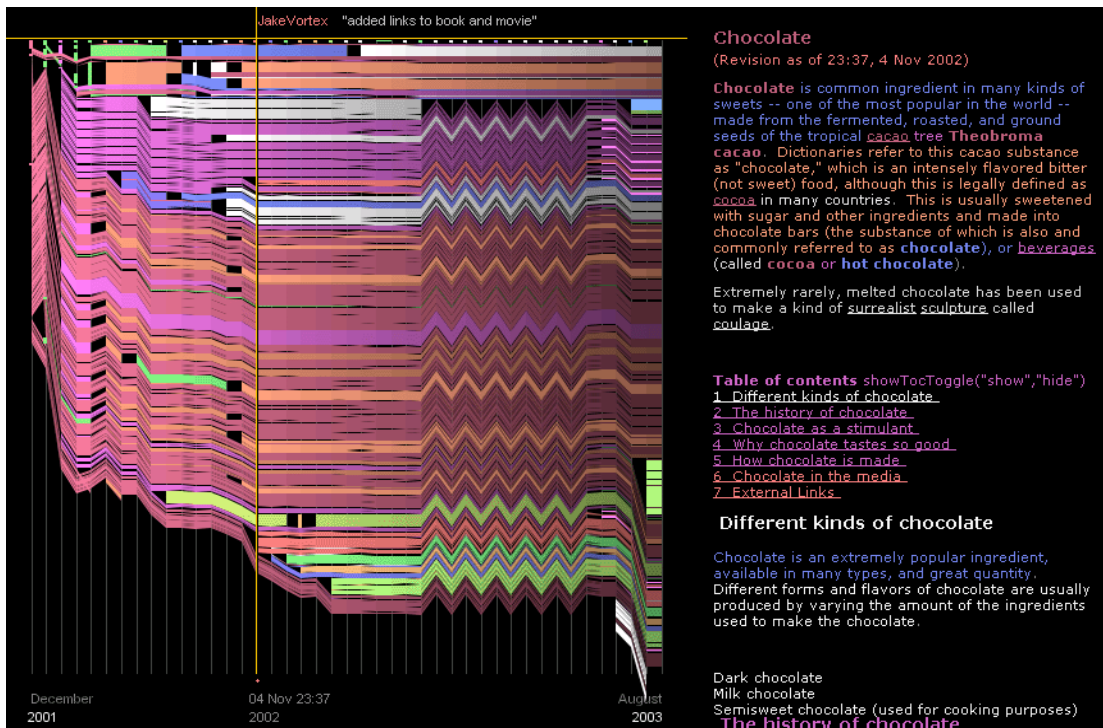
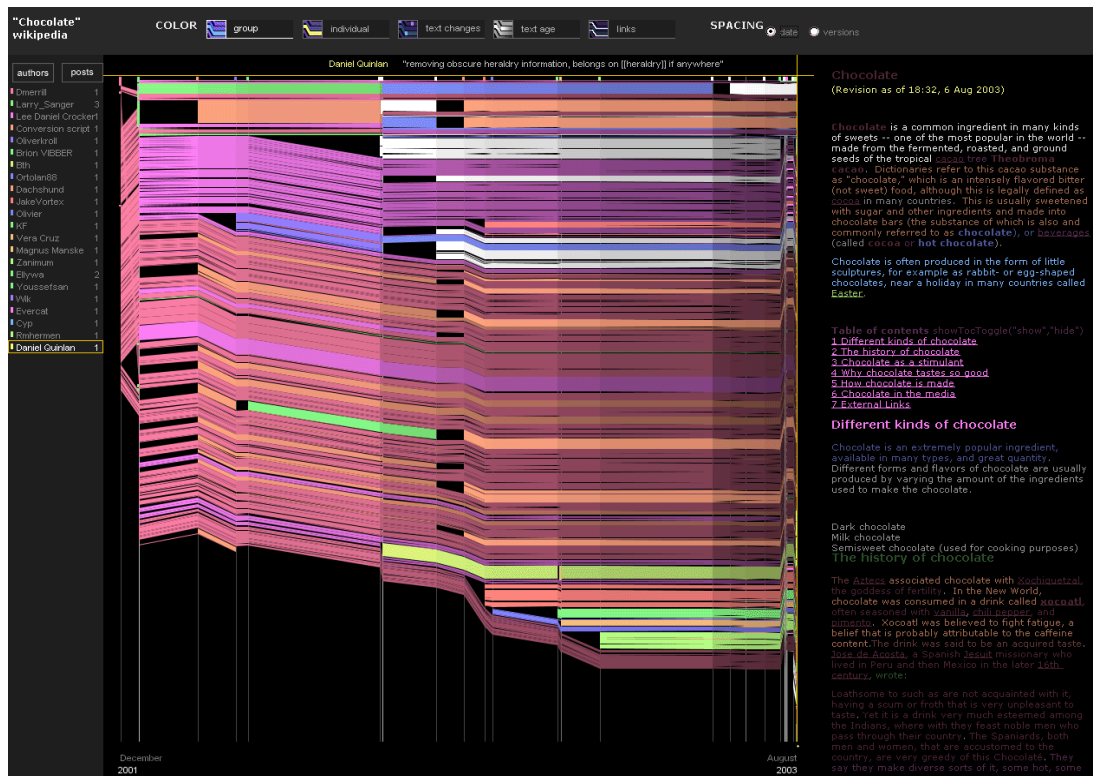
**1) Cat:** The Wikipedia page on “cat” revealed one of the most commonly used mechanisms for keeping the material on a page focused on the page’s subject: redirection of content. The “cat” page was created to describe the human feline pet but, at one point, an author introduced several paragraphs about the Unix command called “cat.” As seen on figure 30, this insertion of new material looks like a lonely white line. The line stands out in the visualization because it is not linked to any of the subsequent versions of the page. At first, it seems like this person’s contribution might have been completely deleted in the following version. However, at closer look, it becomes evident that, instead of being deleted, the paragraphs about the Unix command got redirected into a new page entitled “Cat (Unix).”

**2) Abortion:** The visualization of the Wikipedia page on “Abortion” shows clear marks of vandalism [Figure 31 top]. Figure 31 top is a view that equally spaces out revisions. When, however, one looks at the same data spaced by date [Figure 31 bottom], one notices that there are no interruptions. The instances of mass deletion were fixed so quickly that they cannot be seen when revisions are spaced by date. Each mass deletion took only a minute or so to be fixed!

**3) Chocolate:** The Wikipedia page on Chocolate shows another interesting conflict pattern. When the versions are spaced out by time [FIG XXXX], the visualization looks like any normal History Flow diagram. However, when the versions are equally spaced out [FIG XXXXX], a striking zigzag pattern is revealed. This pattern represents an edit war: two users are battling over whether a piece of text should be part of the page or not. In this specific case, the users fought over whether a kind of chocolate sculpture called “coulage” really existed and consequently, whether or not the paragraph about it should appear on the page. This discussion resulted in 12 consecutive versions of reverting back and forth between two versions. Eventually the paragraph was taken out for good.



**Figure 31:** Top view: editing history of “Abortion” equally spaced by version. Bottom view: “Abortion” spaced out by date.



**Figure 32:** Edit history for “Chocolate” on Wikipedia. Top: versions spaced out by time. Bottom: edits equally spaced out by number of versions. The zigzag pattern of an edit war becomes strikingly clear.

### **3.3.7 Statistical analysis: method and data**

The History Flow visualization revealed some fascinating patterns, but examining pages by hand has obvious limitations. A large-scale statistical analysis of the Wikipedia archives ([download.wikipedia.org](http://download.wikipedia.org)) was conducted to find additional evidence of the patterns spotted in the visualization. The statistics in the sections below were derived from data that represents the state of the encyclopedia's history as of May 2003. To derive statistics, the archives were loaded into a MySQL database and queries were made using standard SQL syntax. The database contains both "content pages" which represent entries in the encyclopedia as well as "talk pages", which represent discussion about the encyclopedia itself. Unless otherwise specified, the statistics cited below are from the set of content pages only. There were 130,596 such pages, with an average of 5.7 versions for each. 79,813 content pages had been revised at least once.

### **3.3.8 Vandalism and repair**

Wikis are vulnerable to malicious edits or "vandalism," which can take a surprising array of forms. The true scope of vandalism became clear to us upon viewing the History Flow visualizations.

Mass deletions —edits that remove most of the contents of a page—constitute one common form of vandalism in Wikipedia, and are easily spotted in History Flow visualizations because they appear as breaks in the continuous horizontal flow of changes as mentioned in the "Abortion" case study. This pattern appeared in almost every instance of a vandalized page that we examined by hand. Many of the examined pages that had long revision histories (more than 50 versions) had suffered at least one act of vandalism.

In some cases the Wikipedia community itself cannot agree on whether an edit constitutes vandalism or not. In fact there is a vandalism-tracking page where users discuss and coordinate responses to specific instances of vandalism.

Because of their short-lived nature in the Wikipedia site, damaging acts often appear in History Flow visualizations as single-version perturbations of the bigger, general flow of a page's evolutionary history: either one-version deletions or one-version insertions of content.

The variety of vandalism found in Wikipedia can be astounding; five common types are listed below:

- 1. Mass deletion:** deletion of all contents on a page.
- 2. Offensive copy:** insertion of vulgarities or slurs.
- 3. Phony copy:** insertion of text unrelated to the page topic. E.g. on the Chemistry page, a user inserted the full text from the "Windows 98 readme" file.
- 4. Phony redirection:** Often pages contain only a redirect link to a more precise term (e.g. "IBM" redirects to "International Business Machines."), but redirects can also be malicious., linking to an unrelated or offensive term. "Israel" was at one point redirected to "feces." Note that a phony redirect implies familiarity with Wikipedia's editing mechanisms.

**5. Idiosyncratic copy:** adding text that is related to the topic of the page but which is clearly one-sided, not of general interest, or inflammatory; these may be long pieces of text. Examples range from “Islam” where a visitor pasted long prayer passages from the Koran, to “Cat” where a reader posted a lengthy diatribe on the Unix cat command.

### 3.3.8.a Statistical corroboration

It was important to seek statistical corroboration for the impression that vandalism is frequent and that it is fixed very rapidly. It is essentially impossible to find a crisp definition of vandalism—as mentioned above, the Wikipedia community argues about it frequently—but there are certain computable markers that indicate vandalism.

For the purposes of this study, mass deletion (“Mass delete,” or MD, in Table 1) is defined to be a version that was at least 90% smaller than the previous maximum size for the page, did not redirect the user to a different page, and wasn’t created by a Wikipedia administrator. While this category included many malicious edits, it also included many edits that, on close inspection, seemed well intentioned. To pinpoint a group of purely ill-intentioned edits, we looked at mass deletions where the remaining text included the word “fuck,” labeled “MD obscene” in Table 1. This group included 47 edits, all of which seemed (to the authors of this paper) unmistakably malicious.

Survival time, that is, the total time that these edits remained on the site, was also taken into consideration. Time on site is strongly skewed positive, so both mean and median times were computed. The results provide corroboration for the conclusions drawn from the visualizations. It is especially dramatic that half of mass deletions are modified within 3 minutes, and half of vulgar mass deletions are modified within 2 minutes.

Revision Type	Number	Mean time	Median time
All content	618,502	22.3 days	90.4 minutes
Mass delete (MD)	3,574	7.7 days	2.8 minutes
MD obscene	47	1.8 days	1.7 minutes

**Table 1:** *Survival time for different kinds of revisions.*

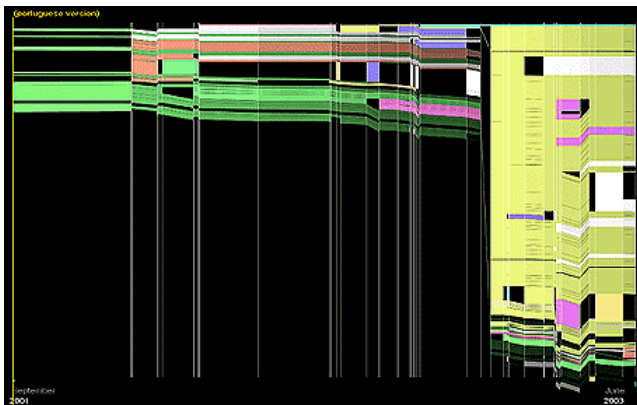
### 3.3.8 Negotiation

As mentioned in the case study about the Wikipedia page on “Chocolate,” a second pattern revealed by History Flow is a zigzag arrangement that lasts for a few versions before dying out [Figure 32]. Closer inspection revealed that these patterns indicated what the Wikipedia community calls “edit wars,” interactions where two people or groups alternate between versions of the page. Some edit wars last as long as 20 consecutive versions. Surprisingly, edit wars are not confined to controversial topics, as illustrated by the chocolate page.

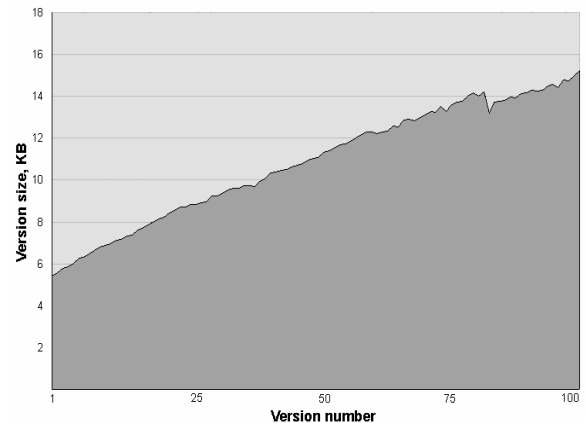
The investigation shows that conflict can take several forms and can occur in different forums. One forum where people preemptively try to resolve disagreements is via their comments on why

they edited something on a page. History Flow revealed that comments on consecutive revisions often read as a conversation between authors, rather than a mere summary of edits. Frequently authors preemptively address possible objections or direct questions to each other.

The talk pages that accompany each Wikipedia entry are explicitly designed for resolving disputes, and are frequently used for that purpose. The talk pages function as extensions of edit comments, but afford more room for people to argue their positions. When people cannot convince others of why their edits are valid via the comments they leave, the discussion escalates into the talk pages. Talk pages comprise a significant amount of the content on Wikipedia; the May 2003 database snapshot contains more than 11,000 “meta” pages, accounting for 17% of all versions in the May 2003 database.



**Figure 33:** “Brazil” page showing abrupt growth and few anonymous contributions.



**Figure 34:** Graph of version number versus average version size (in kilobytes) shows steady growth for pages with at least 100 edits.

### 3.3.9 Authorship

Explicit authorship of contributions on wiki pages is an issue of some contention among wiki users; whereas some feel that authorship is an important part of social collaboration in the sense that it adds context to interactions, others feel that authorship data is irrelevant and sometimes even detrimental to the creation of truly communal repositories of knowledge (c2.com/cgi/wiki?ThreadModeConsideredHarmful).

An explicit goal of Wikipedia is to create encyclopedic entries that are “neutral” instead of expressing personal biases. This “neutral point of view” (“NPOV,” in Wikipedia shorthand) is a touchstone of the Wikipedia community, frequently referred to in comments and talk pages. One reflection of the NPOV policy is that contributions to article pages are not signed within the page itself. However, on the discussion-oriented talk pages that accompany articles, most authors sign their comments. This kind of conversation page makes for a different social space from the regular Wikipedia article page. It is an important social environment where conflict can develop and settle more naturally.

A small sample of frequent Wikipedia users said that they rely on authorship information when browsing the RecentChanges page or the history page of a specific Wikipedia article. These page “watchers” become familiar with the names of regular contributors to the pages they watch and are constantly on the lookout for any unfamiliar names and unfamiliar IP addresses (the “signature” left by anonymous contributors). First-time contributors represent a potential threat of vandalism and therefore their edits are closely scrutinized. On the other hand, there is also the possibility that a newcomer is someone who may be unfamiliar with Wikipedia standards. In either case the article merits a second look.

Another pattern related to authorship and easily identifiable in History Flow is the variation in the level of anonymous contributions across different pages. There is huge inconsistency between individual pages in the proportion of anonymous contributions over time. Roughly 31% of the versions in the May 2003 database were contributed by anonymous authors. Some pages have been largely written by anonymous contributors (in our visualization, these show up as diagrams mostly in shades of gray). Examples of such pages include: Microsoft, Sex, Music, Libertarianism, Creation, and Computer. Other pages have few anonymous contributions ever in their history, for example: Mythology, Evolution, Design, and Brazil [Figure 33]. There does not seem to exist a clear preference either on the side of the anonymous users or otherwise for specific topics or clusters of topics. More in-depth analysis is needed to help determine what can account for this distinction.

There is also no clear connection between anonymity and vandalism. Instances of vandalism were observed by users with (sometimes tauntingly offensive) registered usernames. Conversely, there are users that contribute quite a lot to the site but who choose to remain anonymous. One particular case where an anonymous contributor to the page on Capitalism edited the page 55 times between Nov. 22, 2002 and Jun. 26, 2003. This person’s contributions were quite substantial and were kept by subsequent contributors.

### ***3.3.10 Temporal patterns and content stability***

A History Flow visualization is, in effect, a fancy graph of how the length of a page varies over time—and it turns out that even this simple measure holds some surprises. One might guess that pages would tend to stabilize over time. The visualization tells another story. Most pages examined in this study showed continual change in size and turnover in text. As examples, Figure 27 (Microsoft) shows an instance of near-constant growth; Figure 31 (Abortion) shows an example of growth and shrinkage. Note that shrinkage can occur either when copy is deleted or when a large section of the page is redirected to a new site (for instance, the most dramatic shrinkage in the Abortion page in figure 31 is due to material being shifted to an entry on abortion in Ireland.)

History Flow visualizations suggested several other patterns which deserve mention. One pattern we call first-mover advantage. The initial text of a page tends to survive longer and tends to suffer fewer modifications than later contributions to the same page. This seems to suggest that the first person to create a page generally sets the tone of the article on that page and, therefore, their text usually has the highest survival rate.

A second pattern is that people tend to delete and insert text more frequently than moving text in an article. In other words, there are many more “gaps” in the visualization than the type of



crossing lines in figure 31 (bottom). One explanation may be that the editing window of Wikipedia pages is by default 25 lines long, making it hard for one to see long articles in their entirety. Consequently, the task of moving things around becomes a lot more cumbersome than if one could access the entire text at once. If correct, this explanation could help guide wiki developers in building more user-friendly editors for wiki pages.

### **3.3.11 Statistical corroboration**

It seemed important to directly measure the level of instability of Wikipedia pages, but obtaining meaningful numbers for stability is difficult for two reasons. First, it would take a prohibitive amount of time to run a fine-grained differencing algorithm on hundreds of thousands of versions, especially one able to distinguish accurately between a change of an entire sentence and an addition of a single comma. Second, and more seriously, Wikipedia has existed for a short time, during which the number of readers (hence editors) has grown tremendously, thus making time-based measures hard to interpret.

Therefore, this study focused on size change as a simple measure of change in content. Using several measures, little evidence for stability was found. For instance, there are 273 pages on Wikipedia that had more than 100 versions as of May 2003. A graph plotting average version size in this subset versus version number [Figure 34] shows steady growth. Thus, as suggested by the History Flow visualization, heavily edited pages seem not to converge in size. To take another example, 21% of edits reduced the size of a page, with 6% decreasing it by more than 50 characters. Such cuts can be beneficial (tightening prose, eliminating irrelevant information) but at the same time they make citing Wikipedia as a source problematic, since the information cited may be removed from the page. Rapid turnover also means that news events may be assimilated with a speed that is impossible in a print encyclopedia. Within a week of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, for example, a page devoted entirely to that topic had been written, and the entry on Iraq itself tripled in size in the weeks after the invasion began.

### **3.3.12 Discussion**

The patterns described above show that Wikipedia has enjoyed significant success as a community in which people with disparate perspectives can collaborate to create a single document. A key question for designers of online communities is: How did they do it? In other words, what design decisions allow Wikipedia to create the social structures that make it a successful system? A full answer to this question is beyond the scope of this study but is an important line of investigation. Here three hypotheses are proposed that may explain Wikipedia's success, and that may be useful as a starting point for future research. The common thread in these hypotheses is that Wikipedia encourages community introspection: that is, it is strongly designed so that members watch each other, talk about each other's contributions, and directly address the fact that they must reach consensus.

First, the watchlists provide a mechanism for community surveillance, and may be responsible for the extremely rapid response to vandalism noted above. Second, the talk pages and other non-content spaces help in removing "meta-level" discussions from the main encyclopedia. Indeed, the May 2003 database snapshot contains more than 11,000 talk pages, a large amount of



discussion. Yet it is extremely rare to find discussion about an article embedded in the article itself. Finally, the group consensus that a “neutral point of view” is to be desired provides both common ground and rough guidelines for resolving disputes.

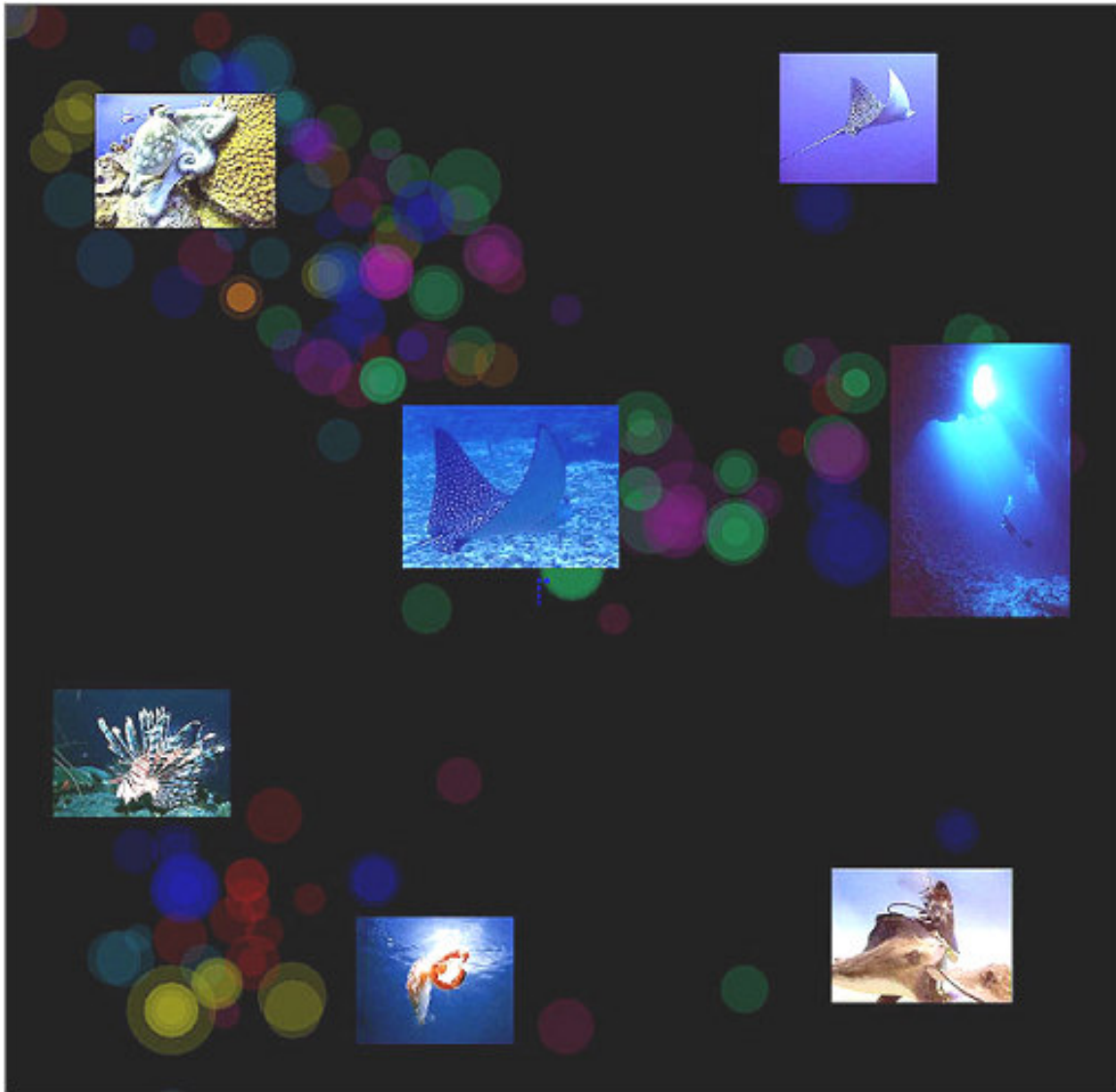
### **3.3.13 Conclusion**

When visiting a wiki, one is greeted with what looks like a conventional static Web site. Yet this serene façade conceals a more agitated reality of constant communal editing. Hundreds, sometimes thousands of busy hands insert words, create new pages, delete paragraphs, manicure the contents of the site.

History Flow was devised to better understand the ebb and flow of this editing frenzy. The visualization technique reveals some of the patterns that have emerged within Wikipedia: its surprisingly effective self-healing capabilities, the variety of negotiation processes used in reaching consensus; the diversity of authorship, the bursty rhythms of page editing, and the constant change in page contents. In turn, these facts point to some of the key social mechanisms of the community: the importance of having forums for resolving conflicts and the value of fast, efficient notification of changes to aid surveillance.

Without the aid of History Flow, it would have been a daunting task to piece together the collaboration patterns described here. The efficacy of History Flow in highlighting patterns of behavior suggests that visualization is a technique well-suited to records of social behavior. One speculation is that social interaction is often characterized by mostly normal behavior punctuated by outlying abnormal episodes, and information visualization can be an excellent way to simultaneously show broad trends and outlying data points.

The results described here are of general interest for several reasons. First, Wikipedia is just one of many wiki sites that make no distinction between readers and writers. The findings presented here have relevance for the design of other wiki sites, especially as they scale up in size. Second, the History Flow visualization method can be utilized in other situations that involve heavily revised documents by multiple authors such as software version control systems for instance. Finally, the ability to better understand the mechanisms for reaching consensus described here may apply in other contexts and the “self-healing” qualities that Wikipedia promotes may turn out to be a general principle of long-lived online communities.



## Add-on Persistence

So far in this chapter, all projects have dealt with online spaces that keep persistent, public archives of users interactions. Both Usenet newsgroups and Wiki sites such as Wikipedia depend on these archives for their identities as online communities. In newsgroups, these records allow users to look back at what was said before. On Wikipedia, these archives provide the community with ways to quickly and effectively deal with vandalism. But not all public spaces keep logs of users' activities. In fact, unlike asynchronous environments – such as newsgroups and wikis – most online synchronous spaces are history free. Because such spaces are devoid of lasting marks of wear and tear, no matter how often people visit, they always looks pristine.

The existence of trace-free environments is actually a good thing because they provide users with the assurance that the content of their interactions will not be forever available to others on the Web. This assurance is of major importance for online privacy. On the other hand, the absence of

any traces whatsoever makes synchronous environments hard to read sometimes. How does one know if an online place is a popular gathering spot or a dead-end destination? How is a synchronous space used on a daily basis?

I became interested in the possibility of adding presence traces to synchronous spaces because it seemed that usage history could be beneficial to these environments. The questions I was interested in exploring were: What if synchronous places could tell the history of how they are used? What if they could give users a sense of how many people inhabit them on any given day? What if these places could flaunt their social usage?

This section introduces projects that visualize people's past presence in two public, synchronous spaces: an online chat room and an offline museum gallery. Even though these are very different kinds of public spaces, both were originally trace-free. Chat rooms are the epitome of online ephemerality and museums, like any other real-world space, are trace-free environments.<sup>4</sup>

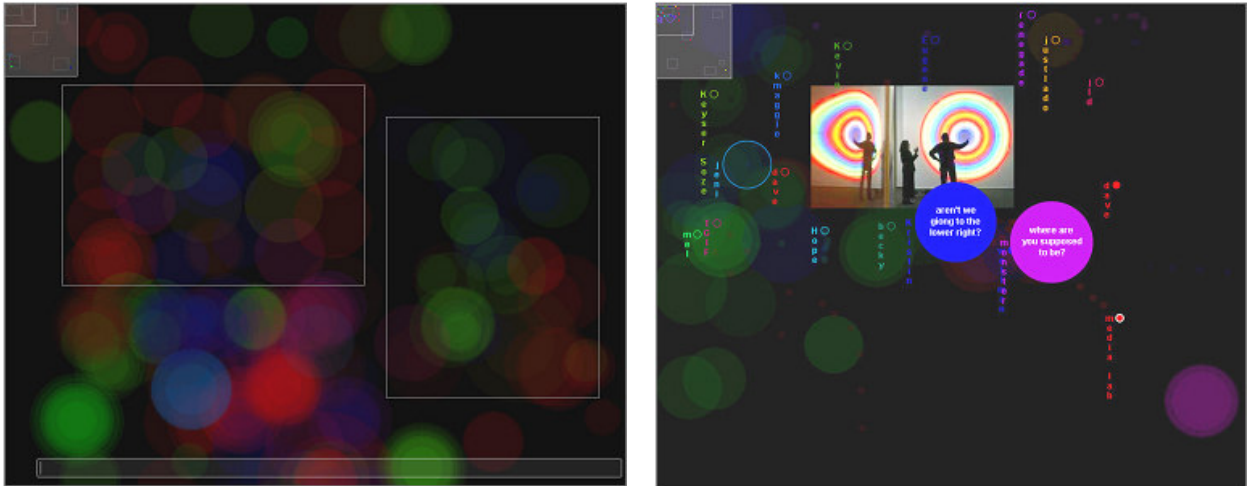
In these two instances, traces were added to give visitors a better sense of how the spaces in question were used. Adding persistence to originally trace-free spaces has the obvious effect of raising a range of privacy questions. For this reason, the traces in these projects were kept purposefully "anonymous." In order to keep with the concept of *social translucence* – the existing tension between visibility and privacy in public spaces (Erickson et al 1999) – the added traces showed social wear and tear without revealing the content of people's past interactions. In this way, visitors were able to get a sense of how much these spaces had been used without knowing what exactly people were talking about or doing there.

The addition of persistent traces in these different spaces and the ensuing visualizations impacted visitors' behavior. This section introduces each project separately and describes visitors' reactions. In the chat room, traces changed the way people moved through the space and how they positioned themselves relative to other users. The traces also facilitated expressive use of participants' avatars, creating an additional communication channel.

Artifacts of the Presence Era, a museum visualization, captured video and audio from a gallery and constructed an impressionistic visualization of the evolving history in the space. Instead of creating a visualization tool for data analysis, the piece functioned as a souvenir of a particular time and place.

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<sup>4</sup> It is true that surveillance cameras have become regular fixtures in several public spaces, including museums. Nevertheless, surveillance cameras' footage is not normally displayed for visitors to see. Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, surveillance footage does not qualify as persistent archives that can be visualized.



*Traces left by users in the public Chat Circles site.*

### 3.4 Adding activity traces to Chat Circles<sup>5</sup>

Chat rooms – synchronous, text-based, multi-user environments – were one of the earliest popular computer mediated social spaces. The first systems were text only and these are still popular in venues such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels. Graphical chat systems, in which users were represented by avatars but continued to communicate via text input, emerged later. Both 2D and 3D systems were developed, yet few used spatiality in a meaningful way: where an avatar was placed had no affect on the interaction amongst participants. By contrast, in the real world position and movement have tremendous social and practical impact on a conversation. Studies of graphical chat rooms found that, even though spatial features had not been intentionally designed in these systems, users themselves infused the placement of their avatars with social meaning: users kept their avatars a certain distances from one another, maintained a sense of “personal space”, and perceived social attraction in proportion to distance between avatars (Krikorian et al 2000; Smith et al 2000).

Chat Circles (Viégas and Donath 1999) was one of the first chat rooms to take advantage of the spatial dimension inherent in graphical systems. Our interest in exploring the social significance of spatiality dates from the creation of the Chat Circles system in which we implemented “hearing range”, a feature that allowed only users who were near to each other to communicate with one another.<sup>6</sup> More recently, we have become interested in the potential of visual traces to enhance users’ perceptions of how the social space of the chat room had been used in the past as well as to augment the meaning of users’ movements in the space.

<sup>5</sup> The user study of activity traces in Chat Circles was conducted with Andrew T. Fiore.

<sup>6</sup> In Chat Circles, each participant is represented by a colored circle on the screen in which her words appear. The participant can move her circle freely through a large, two-dimensional chat space (approximately 2000 by 2000 pixels) with photographs in the background. We have been running Chat Circles as a public chat room for the past three years and, because of its minimalist design, it has proven to be a convenient platform for experimenting with different interface possibilities (Donath and Viégas 2002).

I wanted to explore the possibility of having users' presence and behavior deliberately or incidentally modify the space of an online chat room. Therefore, I have implemented visual traces that function as indicators of users' recent behavior in the space. Traces are set in the same color as the user's dot avatar. There are two kinds of visual traces:

1. Movement traces: a trail of small colored dots resembling a "comet's tail," which is left by the user every time she moves (Fig. 1). This trail fades away in a few seconds and gives a rapid indication of the direction and path of users' movements.
2. Speech traces: these are bigger, semitransparent static circles left by the user every time he speaks. If a user repeatedly posts in the same place in the chat room, these traces build up over time, allowing them to accumulate into visual remnants of a conversation. Speech traces gradually fade out over the course of ten hours (Fig. 1).

### ***3.4.1 Traces, Positioning, and Movement***

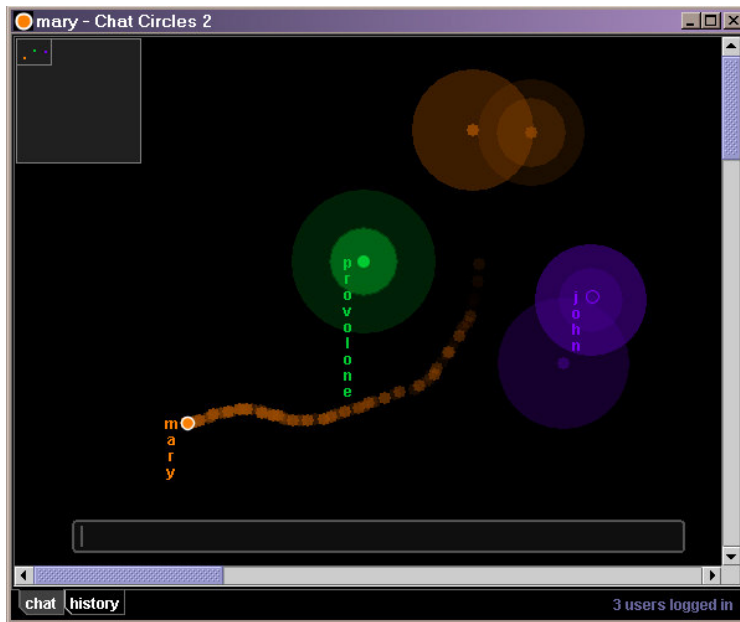
We undertook this study to examine the effect of visual traces on the positioning and movement of users in a graphical chat space. It was also important to determine whether traces had any effect in the movement and positioning of users when they interacted in dyadic versus larger groups.

Participants were brought into the lab in groups of four for a task-oriented yet social chatting session. We gave them related tasks to perform in groups of two and in the full group of four. There were two conditions in the study, one in which Chat Circles displayed traces and another in which it did not display traces. Afterwards, we analyzed the data from four distinct situations:

1. Groups of two interacting with traces enabled
2. Groups of four interacting with traces enabled
3. Groups of two interacting with traces disabled
4. Groups of four interacting with traces disabled

From this analysis, we identified three primary findings:

1. When their movements left visual traces, participants spent twice as much time moving.
2. When their movements left visual traces, participants made more extensive use of movement for expressive purposes.
3. Traces affected participants' positions relative to one another.



**Figure 35:** Action traces in Chat Circles. In this screen shot, as Mary moves away from the group, she leaves “movement traces” that quickly fade into the background. The bigger circles indicate that people have spoken in these places; the “speech traces” last for several hours.

### 3.4.2 Background

Two studies of chat systems have quantitatively examined how users place themselves in graphical chat rooms. Krikorian et al. (2000) found a parabolic relationship between distance among avatars and social attraction, such that positioning one’s avatar relatively close to or far from another was associated with interpersonal affinity, but moderate distances between avatars were associated with lower social attraction. This study captured the

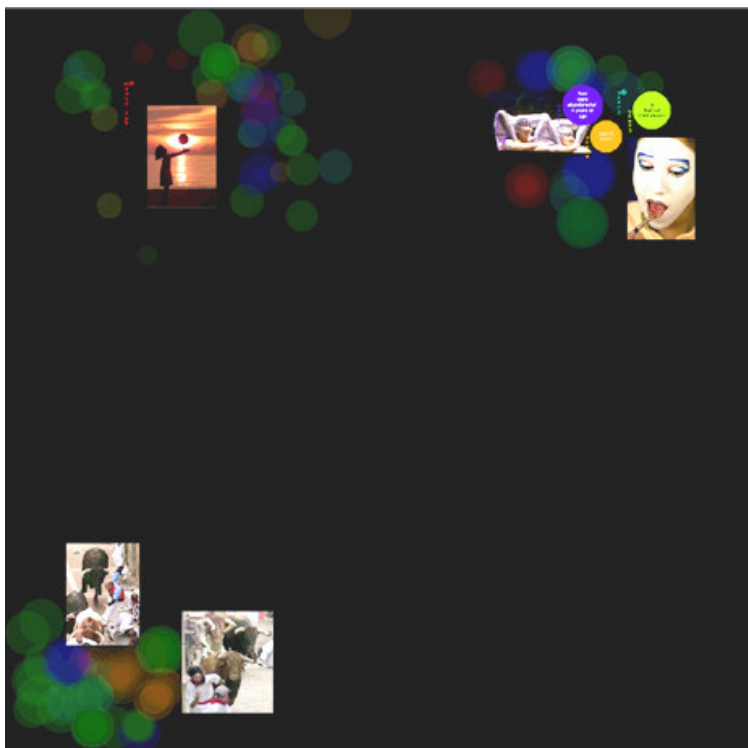
distance only at the beginning and end of an interaction, however, so it does not present a full picture of the positioning and movement of users at all times.

Smith et al (2000) looked at the social dynamics of three chat rooms in the Microsoft V-Chat graphical chat system over the course of 119 days. One of the goals in this study was to observe whether proxemics, the study of territoriality in animal and human interaction (Hall 1966), could be observed in graphical virtual environments as in physical spaces. The study found that people tended to stand closer to their target (i.e. someone they are talking to) than to a randomly selected other. Nonetheless, they also found that avatars kept some minimum distance even from targeted others, suggesting the maintenance of personal space.

Little has been done looking at the movement of users in graphical spaces and its meaning. In the past, work done on visualizing the history of people’s activities in online social spaces has tended to concentrate on how interaction records can be applied to the problem of social navigation (Wexelblat and Maes 1999). Not much attention has been paid, however, to how visual traces of people’s presence and activity might enrich the experience of users in graphical online environments, especially as they relate to spatial uses of participants’ avatars.

### 3.4.3 Method

To improve on previous studies, the movement and position of each user in the chat space is continuously throughout monitored the session, not just at certain important moments in the conversation.



**Figure 36:** *View of the entire Chat Circles space during a study session. In this image, User3 and User4 are sharing their story with User1 and User2, in the upper right hand corner of the room.*

### 3.4.3.a Participants

Twenty participants were recruited in the Boston area via announcements placed online on a local classifieds service ([www.craigslist.org](http://www.craigslist.org)). Half of the participants were female, ages ranging from 23 to 43. Participants were given a \$10 gift certificate to a local ice cream and coffee shop.

### 3.4.3.b Sessions

For this study, we needed exactly four participants per session so that they could chat both in pairs and in a group of four. With 20 participants, we were able to schedule five one-hour sessions. Three sessions (12 participants) were randomly assigned to the

traces condition; two sessions (eight participants) were assigned to the no-traces condition. Participants were not aware of these conditions.

### 3.4.3.c Procedure

Participants were told that the Chat Circles environment was being tested and that everything they did and said in the chat room would be logged. Participants were not told, however, that the study would specifically examine their movements and positioning in the room.

Because it was important that participants communicated solely via Chat Circles, each person was placed in a separate office as he or she arrived. Participants did not see each other either before or during the experiment and they did not know each other's name or gender.

After being introduced to the Chat Circles environment, each person was given a small "script" of the tasks they were supposed to perform during the experiment. In this script, they were told which user name to use (always of the form "User1," "User2," etc.) and when to start interacting with others in the room. Overall there were five users in the room: four participants and the "media lab" user, which we used to assist participants with questions and problems. For the purposes of the experiment, we divided the users into two teams of two: User1 with User2, and User3 with User4. Participants were randomly assigned to be Users 1, 2, 3, and 4. The experiment progressed as follows:

First five minutes:

1. users get to know the other users
2. each user pairs up with their pre-assigned partner in the chat space
3. with their partners, users move to their assigned region in the room. Each team saw two pictures in their region.
4. Next 10 minutes: with their partners, users came up with a story about how their pictures were related. We told them to be creative.
5. Next 15 minutes: the two teams were told to come together and share their stories and pictures with one another [Figure 37].
6. The final 20 minutes of each session were devoted to a Web-based post-study survey in which users were asked about their experience with Chat Circles.

#### **3.4.3.d Log Methods**

In order to analyze how users moved while interacting via Chat Circles, the Chat Circles server was modified to automatically log users' positions at one-second intervals during the sessions. Users' position was also logged whenever a participant posted a message to the chat room. These data were stored in a database for later analysis.

#### **3.4.3.e Results**

The analysis focused on the interaction of participants' positioning, and movement with the four situations we mentioned above: groups of two and four in sessions with and without traces. We were interested in finding out whether traces affected users' behavior in the chat room. Secondly, we also investigated whether there are any typical movement or placement dynamics in dyadic groups that differ from larger groups.

Participants maintained an average distance of 154.4 pixels (s.d.=77.8) between their circles and the circles of others in the chat space. This value falls into the Close-Range Zone of Krikorian et al.'s [3] Social Attraction Parabola.

To summarize their movements around the space, we divided the movement events into large (greater than half the window, or 400 pixels) and small. We found that on average large movements covered 716.0 pixels (s.d.=611.5) and small movements spanned 118.3 pixels (s.d.=95.0).

The way participants moved and positioned themselves varied with both the presence of traces and the number of participants in the immediate vicinity in the chat space (i.e., group size). Additionally, group size interacted with the length of participants' utterances.



### **3.4.3.e Traces**

**Movement:** In sessions with traces, people moved their circles more often, though not farther or faster, than in sessions without traces. In other words, the kinds of movements in both conditions were the same but the frequency of movements was higher in the traces condition. Users made an average of 1.05 moves per minute in sessions with traces (s.d.=0.42), but only 0.48 moves per minute in sessions without traces (s.d.=0.38;  $p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, those in the traces condition spent an average of 10.3 percent of their total time on the system moving (s.d.=3.1), while those in the no-traces condition spent only 4.4 percent of their time moving (s.d.=3.1;  $p < 0.001$ ).

Additionally, we asked users if they used movement to show affection, emphasize a point, intimidate another person, show disagreement, show agreement, tease, flirt, or annoy another person. Taken as a whole, our users indicated on a five-point scale from “Not at all” to “A lot” that they did not use movement very much for any of these purposes except emphasizing a point. However, the users in sessions with traces made much more extensive use of movement for several purposes. Specifically, they reported using movement significantly more often than users in the no-traces condition to show agreement (mean 2.5 vs. 1.9 on the five-point scale;  $p < 0.01$ ), to annoy another user (mean 2.3 vs. 1.8;  $p < 0.02$ ), and to intimidate another user (mean 2.0 vs. 1.6;  $p < 0.05$ ).

**Positioning:** Users positioned themselves closer to each other in sessions with traces (14.7 pixels closer on average,  $p < 0.0001$ ) than in sessions without traces. This effect was the same in groups of two and groups of four.

### **3.4.3.f Group Size**

In considering differences in behavior between participants in groups of four and groups of two, it is important to note that the two situations are not formal conditions in our study because participants were not randomly assigned to them. In fact, every participant interacted in groups of two and four in that order; thus, it is possible that these findings are due to the effect of learning rather than group size. We think a learning effect is unlikely in the case of these particular findings, which can be quite plausibly explained by group size effects, but until they are independently confirmed, they must be considered with caution.

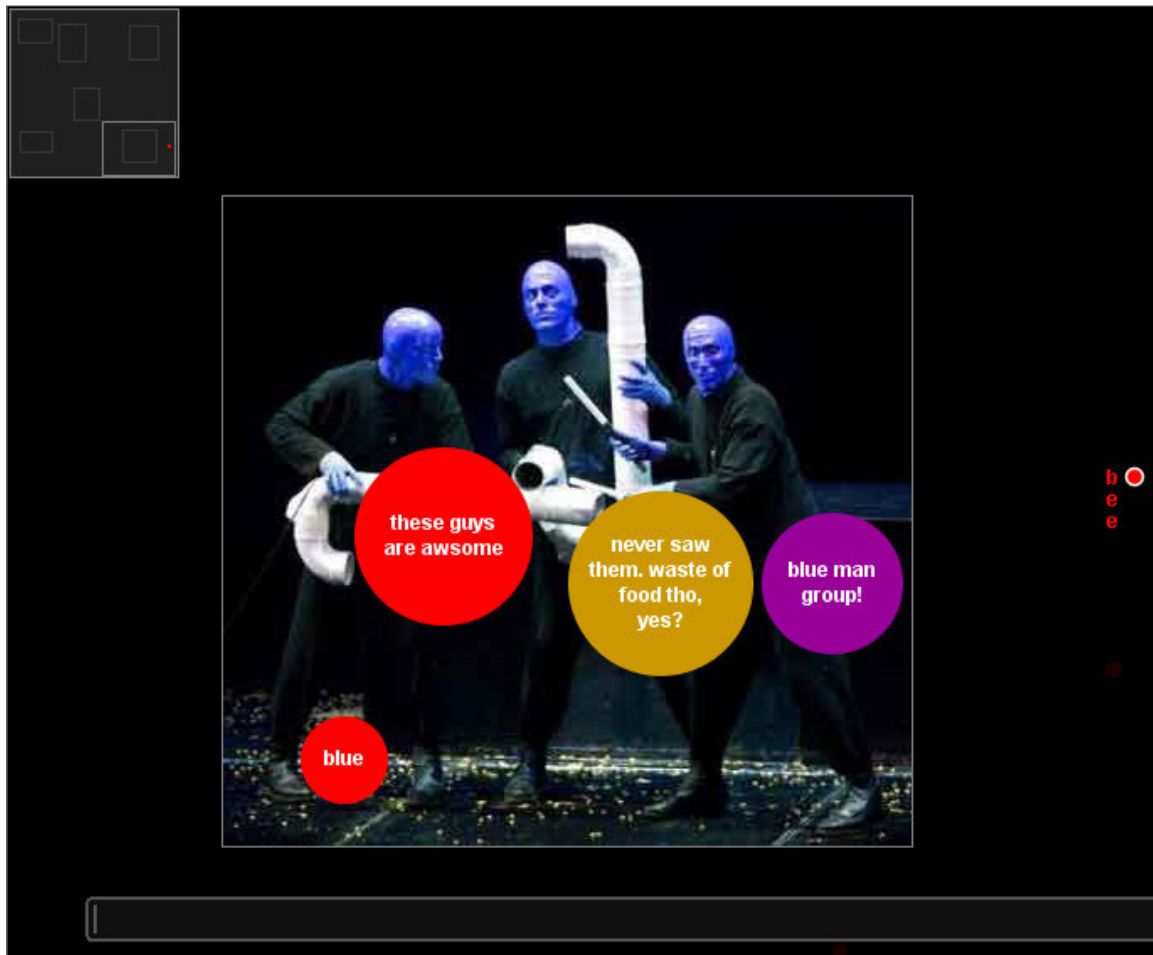
**Positioning:** In groups of both two and four, users positioned their circles an average of 154.4 pixels from those of others (sd=77.8). In groups of four, users stayed slightly but significantly closer to their partners than to others (9.5 pixels closer on average,  $p < 0.0001$ ).

### **3.4.3.g Users’ Reactions**

In the post-study questionnaire, we asked participants to list three things they liked and three things they disliked about Chat Circles. About a third of the participants mentioned the power of movement as a good quality of the system. Only two users had trouble with the movement mechanism.

Additionally, in answers to free-response questions, many users noted that they used their circles to gesture at others or to point at parts of the pictures in the chat space. In one case, a user decided to “paint” the expression ‘OK’ with her movement traces (the trailing small dots that fade

after a few seconds) instead of simply typing the text equivalent in her text box. In another instance, a participant pretended to be a mouse moving around the screen and using his movement traces as the mouse's tail. There were also instances of participants "dancing" in the chat room in order to populate the space with movement traces.



**Figure 37:** Three different users carrying out an asynchronous conversation about the contents of an image in the public Chat Circles room..

### 3.4.3.h Graffiti in Chat Circles

Encouraged by the findings in the user study, I decided to have additional visual traces of people's presence in the chatroom. What if, in addition to leaving traces whenever someone spoke, users could also purposefully leave messages in the room? To that end, a graffiti feature was created in Chat Circles that allows users to leave persistent postings in the room. The administrator of the site assigns certain photographic images to be "graffiti images." Whenever a visitor to Chat Circles posts a message on top of a graffiti image, his/her message becomes permanently imprinted. The graffiti retains the visitor's circle color and the position in the picture where the visitor posted the message.

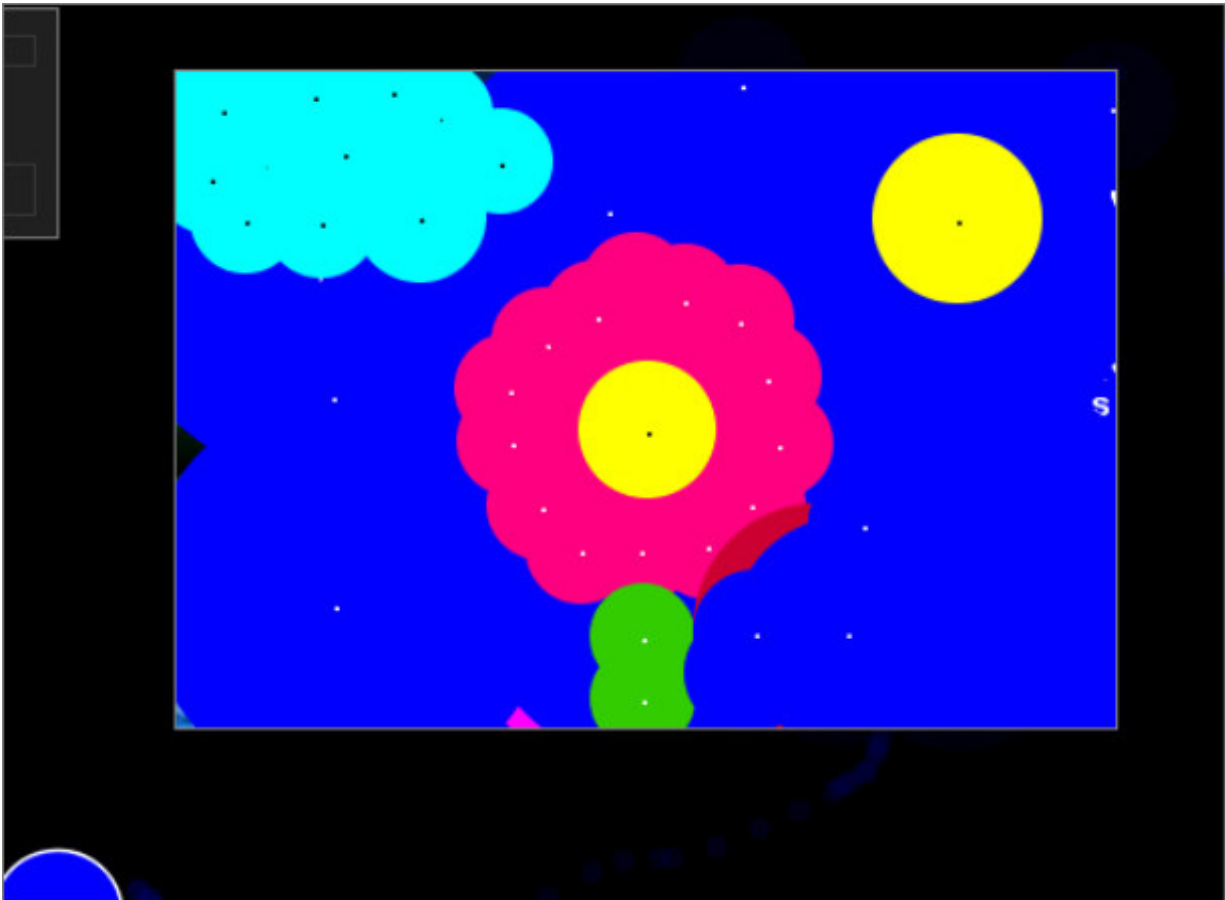


Figure 38: Graffiti left by visitors in Chat Circles. At the top of the page, visitors used their circles to write messages over different pictures. At the bottom, a user utilized her/his own circles as colored paint to draw a picture. This must have been either a group effort – where each user in a different color painted their portion of the image – or the work of a single user who logged her/himself onto the chatroom multiple times using different colors to achieve the desired effect.

The graffiti feature has been available in the Chat Circles public room for two years. Observation of how visitors employ this capability has revealed a few usage patterns:

- asynchronous conversation about the subject of the photograph
- painting the picture with one's colored circles
- attempts to cover entire pictures with a single circle
- helpful commentary about the images
- attempts to communicate with the administrator of the site
- trolling: use of foul language "spamming" all images in the room

### **3.4.3.j Conclusion**

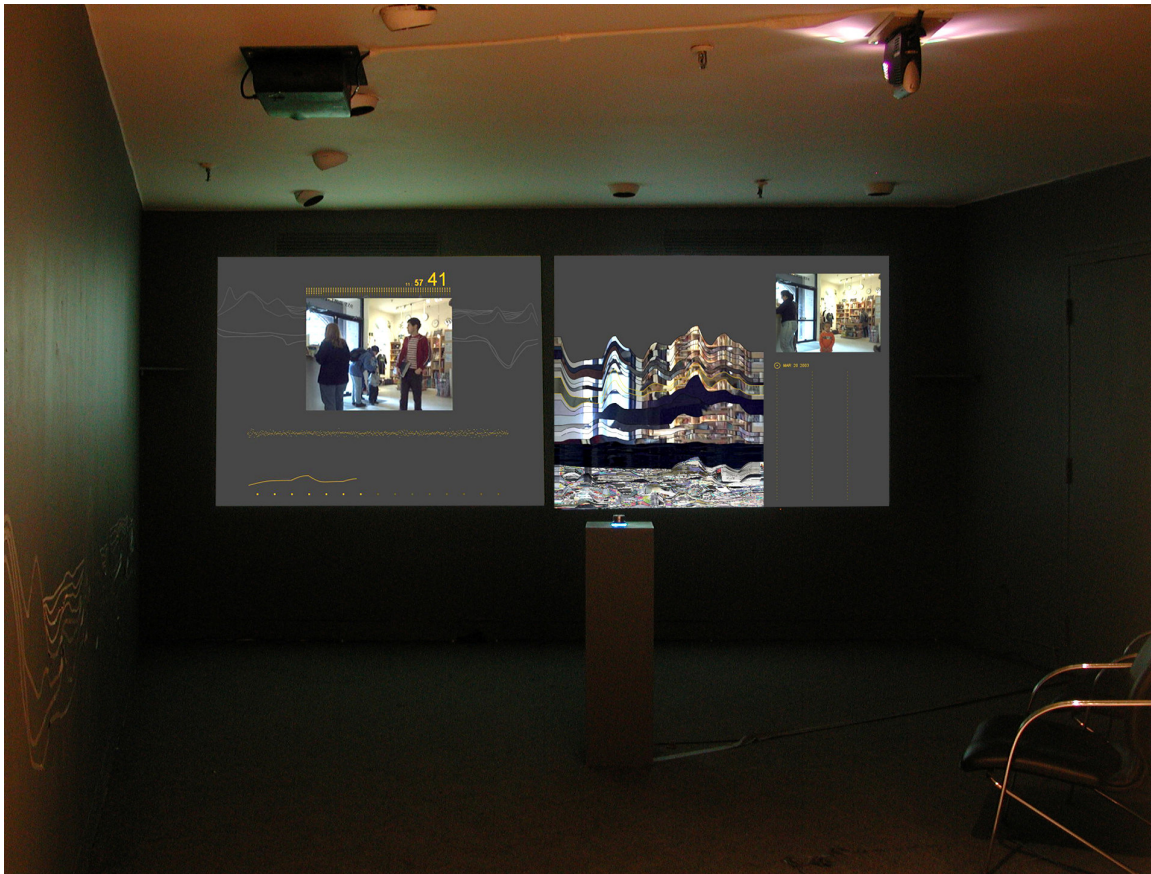
The results of this study show that adding visual traces to participants' actions in the chat room greatly affected their behavior. Not only did users move twice as frequently, they also moved their circles in more expressive ways: to show agreement, to intimidate, and to annoy other users. By allowing users to "paint" with their circles, traces gave them a new communicative channel. The markings that users made with these traces served not only an immediate purpose but, by their persistence, also reminded other participants that movement could be expressive in this space.

Traces proved to be a compelling addition to Chat Circles. Participants in the condition with traces used these ephemeral trails and remnants as extensions of their abstract avatars to express intention through movement. It seems, too, that traces encourage users to adopt a friendlier stance by standing closer together. If this is in fact more sociable behavior, perhaps it stems from an increased affinity that more expressive communication makes possible.

More generally, the ability to modify the chat space by moving or speaking gives users additional incentive to be active. And traces left previously by others serve as a subtle reminder of the potential for expression that the system provides, encouraging the present participant to wield her own circle in evocative ways.

The findings from this study suggest that presence and movement traces can be exploited by users in chat environments for communicative purposes. On top of giving users an expressive venue, these activity traces also provide visitors with a more legible view of how these social spaces have been utilized in the recent past.

These results might have relevance for the design of other graphical social spaces as well. The traces implemented in Chat Circles are but one example of how history presented visually can affect the behavior of users in graphical social spaces. Alternative expressions of the "wear and tear" of social environments are bound to provide users with different communicative possibilities. By understanding that, when given a chance, users make ample use of movement as social gestures, we can better design the graphical interactive spaces of the future.



### 3.5 Artifacts of the Presence Era:

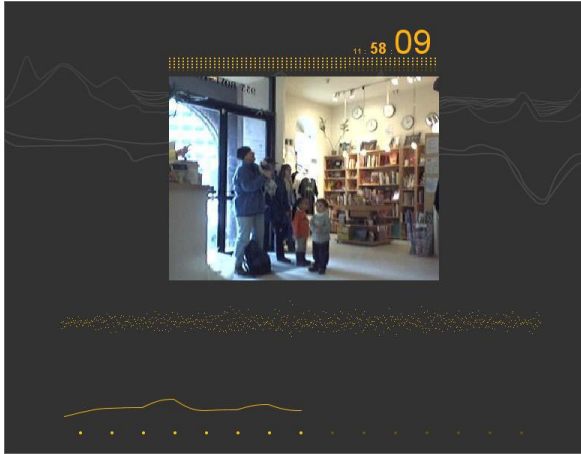
#### Using Information Visualization to Create an Evocative Souvenir<sup>7</sup>

Artifacts of the Presence Era is an art installation that uses a geological metaphor to create an impressionistic visualization of video footage and audio data captured in a museum's gallery. The visualization challenge addressed by the piece is to represent, in a highly compact manner, hundreds of hours of video footage to create a compact artifact that encapsulates and commemorates a particular time and place. The significance of this work is in its novel application of visualization.

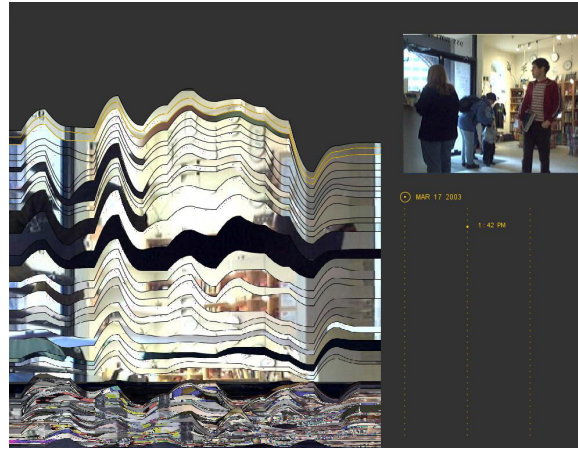
The motivation in Artifacts of the Presence Era was not to probe or analyze long hours of video but to design a commemorative, historical record of the passage of time inside a museum. The approach was to create a visualization that would convey the historical essence of the piece in an aesthetically compelling manner. Instead of being concerned with the analysis of specific pieces of data from the video footage captured in the museum, we focused on highlighting the long-term temporal patterns in the data. Moreover, this work is guided by the visual metaphor of geological layers. In choosing a strong visual metaphor, Artifacts of the Presence Era succeeded in creating a unique object that captured the essence of a time and a place through the use of visualization.

<sup>7</sup> This section is based on a paper published at the IEEE Symposium of Information Visualization (Viégas et al 2004c)





**Figure 39:** *Present Display showing the video being captured by the camera in real time. Below the video image, an audio wave is being formed. After five minutes, the wave is done and is sent, together with the chosen video frame, to the “history machine.”*



**Figure 40:** *History Display showing the growing stack of layers on the left. Within the stack, the currently selected layer is highlighted with yellow lines outlining it. To the right we see the image from the currently selected layer from the stack. Below the image we see indication of the day and time this image was captured.*

### 3.5.1 The ICA Boston

In September of 2002 the Sociable Media Group was contacted by one of the curators at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA). The Institute was going through a unique moment in its history with the plans for a brand new building under way. In order to celebrate the beginnings of this new site, the curator asked us to create an art piece that would sum up some interesting aspect of the ICA’s current building and something that could be exhibited in the new site as a memory piece about the Institute’s current space, a time capsule as it were.

We became immediately interested in the possibility of documenting how the current building was used by its patrons on an everyday basis. We set out to capture the public’s presence in the Institute’s building. Visitors and their movement through the galleries became the raw data feeding and shaping our visualization. These data came from two sources: a camera that captured the colors, shapes, and movements of people in the space and a microphone that captured the ambient noise in the museum.

Artifacts of the Presence Era ran for three consecutive months – January to April of 2003 – and was visited by over one thousand people. It was well received by the public and it was critically acclaimed in the local media.

### 3.5.2 Metaphor

In trying to convey a sense of historical buildup over time, it made sense to look at natural examples of accretion for inspiration. The geological layers in sedimentary rocks and their function as record keepers provided us with such an example. The accumulation of geological layers over time transforms temporal change into legible and appealing visual patterns that can,

with care and attention, be interpreted as history. The same possibility existed in the interaction with Artifacts of the Presence Era: like archaeologists, visitors could peek back into the past to learn more about what the layered landscaped concealed.

In allowing our work to be inspired by a natural phenomenon such as the formation of layers in sedimentary rocks, it became important to understand the affordances and constraints of this metaphor. The geological formation of sedimentary rocks, especially as it relates to time and its effects on layers, offers some key ingredients for creating a historical visualization:

1. the vertical arrangement of rock layers reveals the passage of time, with the difference in layer composition – thicker v. thinner, distinctly colored sediments – attesting to the different conditions under which each layer was formed
2. rock layers are highly compact representations of millions of years worth of changes in a physical environment; most of what happened during those millions of year is actually not embedded in the rocks but has, instead, eroded away
3. as time goes by, new layers continue to be formed on top of rocks, pressuring and compacting even more the ancient layers at the bottom of sedimentary rocks

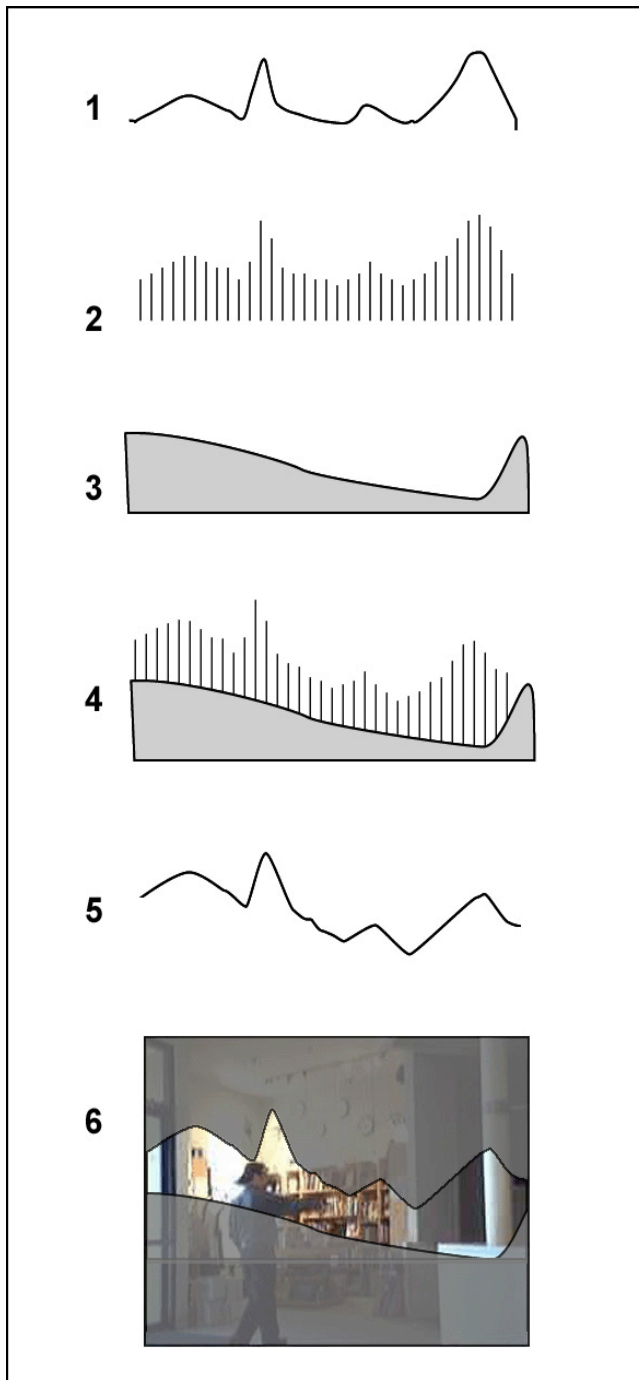
These elements guided the conception of the historical visualization in Artifacts of the Presence Era. In the next sections we describe the installation components and the design decisions that shaped the visualization work.

### ***3.5.3 Installation description***

In a small alcove near the front door of the museum – our source space – a camera and microphone unobtrusively recorded all sound and motion occurring in that space, day and night, for three months. As the recording took place, the raw data was processed to create the display visitors saw in a gallery in a separate area of the museum. Here, two projections ran. The first, the “Present Display” [Figure 39], was real time footage from camera. The second, the “History Display” [Figure 40], showed a growing landscape of layered images.

Artifacts of the Presence Era used three networked personal computers:

- o Capture machine: used a simple web camera to capture video from the source space. This machine had a custom Java application using the Java Media Framework that captured audio volume from the microphone of the web camera. Audio volume values were transmitted every second to the present machine. At the same time, the capture machine broadcasted a video stream to the present machine.
- o Present machine: received and displayed data from the video stream as well as the current audio volume in the space. In order to simplify the processing and bandwidth requirements of the piece, one frame of video was sampled – and displayed – every second from the stream of video data.



**Figure 41:** Explanatory diagram of how layers were shaped:  
 (1) original audio wave created over five minutes of activity  
 (2) sampled height of the audio wave  
 (3) shape of top layer in history stack; this is the landscape on top of which the newly-formed layer will be placed  
 (4) placement of sampled wave on top of previous layers  
 (5) resulting wave form; the shape has changed from #1  
 (6) schematic masque showing how the final layer shape was “cut” from the chosen video image.

- History machine: received an image and audio data from the present machine every five minutes. This machine then added a “layer” to the sedimentary structure, compressing and combining older layers as time progressed.

Connected to the History machine was a rotating knob controller that users utilize to move vertically through the layers and highlight each one in turn.

### 3.5.4 Visualizing History Based on People’s Presence

Because the history we wanted to tell was one of people as they visited the museum, we decided to favor images that showed people and ambient sound that captured people’s presence. In other words, footage that showed people and audio that represented what we understood to be people in the space had a much higher probability of surviving in our visualization than footage and audio of the empty space.

Each layer in Artifacts of the Presence Era represented five minutes of time gone by. During that time, we captured the ambient sounds in the galleries and generated an audio wave. The shape of this wave – with higher values at points where there was more noise in the museum – became the shape of the layer being created. The texture of the layer (its color and shade) came from the images being captured with the camera. Each layer encapsulated one still image from those five minutes of data. The choice of this image was, as with the audio, based on simple



heuristics of what we defined to represent “people’s presence in the space”:

**a) Shape** - ambient noise: we assumed that noise, as opposed to silence in a museum, suggested the presence of people in the space. Therefore, we decided to keep more data during the moments of more ambient noise in the museum, that is, “louder” layers showed up as thicker layers in the history stack. The present machine processed the audio data. The highest audio value from each 20-second segment of the five-minute layer-creation period was selected. These values were used to draw a curve that shaped the layer for that period [Figure 41]. We wanted to create curves that were reminiscent of archaeological sedimentary structures and, after experimenting with different possibilities, we found that a 15-point curve seemed to be the optimal resolution to achieve this aesthetic effect given the resolution of our projection screens. We chose the highest value during each period rather than the average value because a short increase in volume in the space was sufficient indication that some activity had occurred in the space.

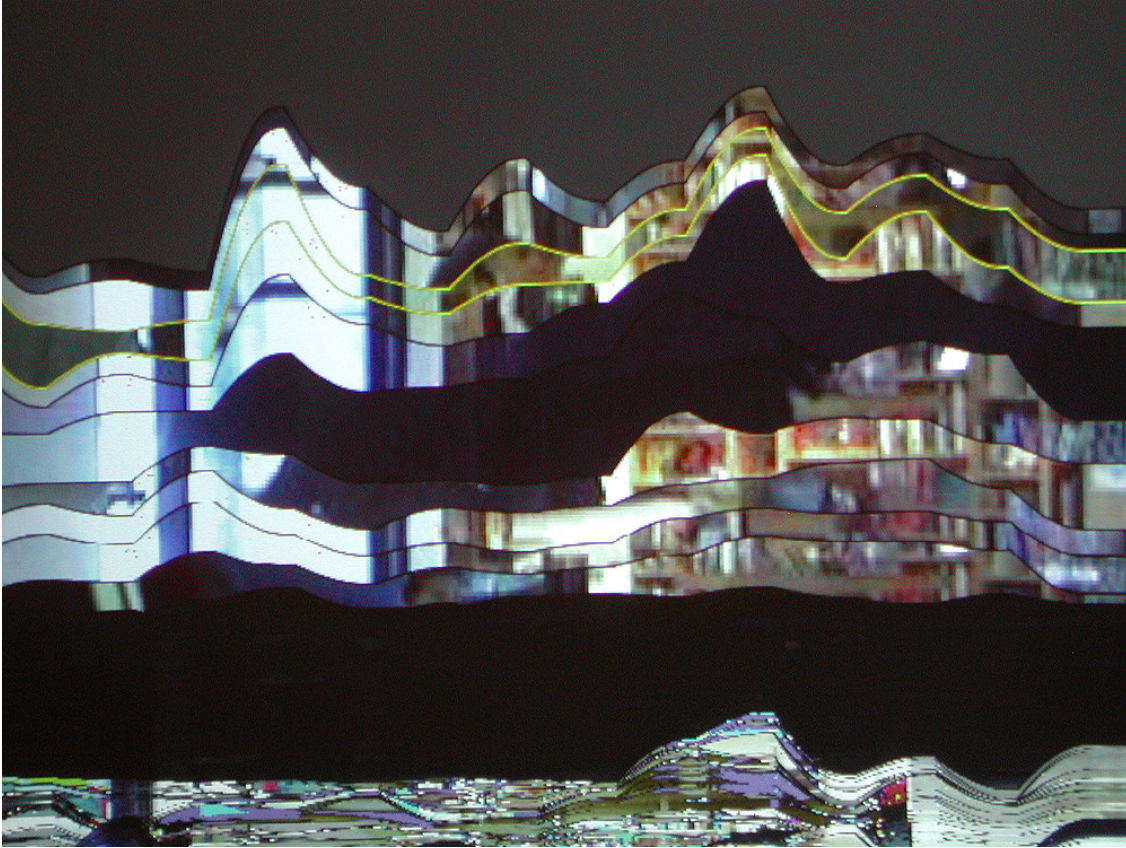
**b) Color** - video images: we used difference of luminance between video frames as a simple heuristic for defining the presence of people in the space. Our assumption was that whenever the camera captured abrupt changes of luminance in the museum, this indicated that people were in the scene. This was achieved in the present machine, which had a custom Java application that compared each frame of video it obtained to the previous image received. It compared the difference in luminance values to identify movement in the space. The image with the greatest change in luminance from each five-minute period was selected. This process was a simple and effective solution for our needs.

**c) Compression over time:** it was clear to us that, as time progressed and we captured more data about the space, the accumulating layers would have to evolve in some way to become more compact. The rationale here was that, as with real rocks, older layers – i.e. the bottom layers – would suffer more pressure from all the data accumulating on top of them and would become more compact. At extreme points of pressure, when layers became too compact, they would start to merge with each other in a morphing process.

#### **3.5.4.a History Display: how layers are formed and stacked**

The history display was the heart of the Artifacts of the Presence Era installation because it showed the continuously growing accumulation of layers captured in the gallery space [FIG XXXX]. As mentioned, each layer consists of a piece of an image selected from the five-minute video footage for that period. The chosen image is cut into a shape formed from the audio curve representing the audio volume in the space during that period. Each new layer is added to the top of the stack and the resulting shape of the layer depends on the shape of the “landscape” it rests on; see Figure 4 for an explanatory diagram of the layer shaping process.

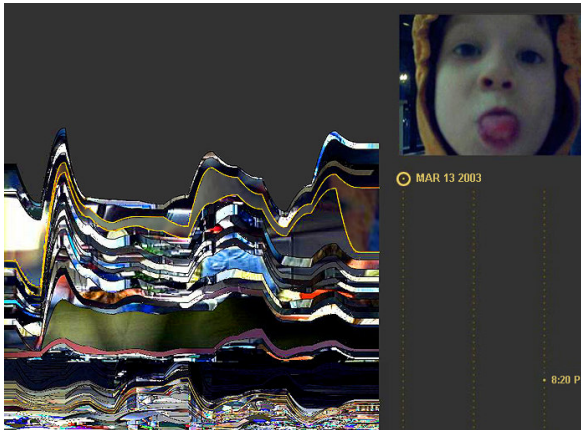
Because being able to navigate the layer stack while understanding the progress of time was key for making sense of the piece, every layer had a timestamp attached to it. To the right of the history stack was a grid of dots that represented the time when each layer was created. As an individual layer was highlighted, its time stamp appeared next to the corresponding dot to the right. Whenever a combined layer was highlighted, its corresponding combined image was shown.



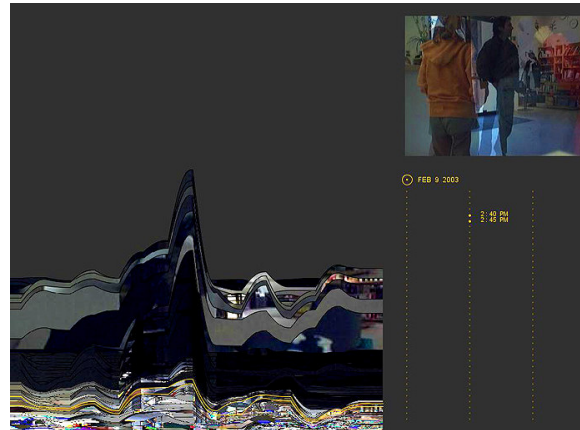
**Figure 42:** *Zoomed view of growing layer stack; there is a visible difference in the colors of layers as they transition from day to night; layers at the bottom of the stack are a lot more compact than layers at the top. The yellow outline around one of the top layers indicates that it is currently selected by a viewer.*

#### **3.5.4.b Shallow Layers: normalizing the landscape**

We captured video every day from 9 AM to 9 PM so that we could generate layers where the colors would reflect the differences between daylight in the museum and nighttime when the galleries were closed. As the stack of layers grew, visitors could see patterns of day and night reflected on the colors of consecutive layers [Figure 42]. The layer-shaping algorithm also had a mechanism to account for extremely quiet times in the museum – for example, when the galleries are closed at night. In these situations Artifacts of the Presence Era generated what we call “shallow layers”. These were layers that “filled in” valley regions of the history landscape. That is, these layers only showed up in “depressions” of the stack instead of wrapping around peak areas (as a normal layer would do). These layers were generated whenever the audio being captured in the gallery stayed below a minimum threshold throughout the layer formation period. When the entire audio wave lied below this threshold, the result was a shallow layer. These layers played an important role of “normalizing” the stack landscape, allowing the stack to become less bumpy and mountainous after a quiet night. They also added texture to the entire piece by clearly highlighting the different patterns of activity between busy open hours and quiet, afterhours time in the museum.



**Figure 43:** Layer showing a playful visitor who purposefully stood in front of the camera in the gallery in order to have his picture taken and added to the history stack.



**Figure 44:** Composite layer showing a “ghostly” image, which is the result of two originally separate layers having merged.

### 3.5.4 User Interaction

We designed the piece so that visitors could move through the history layers. In this way they were able to take part in the geological metaphor, behaving as archaeologists, “excavating” the traces left by the visualization to unearth items of interest. The simplicity of the browsing interface – the knob that was used to move vertically up and down chronologically – was critical in a public art environment in which users may have limited time and patience to learn a new user interface. Browsing through the layers also created a time-lapse effect with the images shown in the upper right hand corner of the display. As the viewer scrolled through the layers, these excerpts of events in the space animated, effectively creating another way for viewers to get a sense of what had occurred in the space.

Also important in terms of user interaction, was the fact that visitors could, and did, take advantage of the camera to add images of themselves to the historical record being created. As will be discussed in more detail later, several visitors, after realizing that the history stack was formed by images being recorded in the museum, would walk up to the camera and stand there until their image was captured and added to the collection of layers.

### 3.5.5 Public Reaction

Even though we did not conduct a formal study of how people reacted to the piece, we observed visitors interacting with the installation in the gallery over the course of the three months the piece was running. In general, *Artifacts of the Presence Era* got a very positive response from viewers. The exhibition was viewed by over a thousand people and was very well received by the local media (Silver, Jan 24, 2003; Temin, Jan 24, 2003). Some of the key questions we hoped to understand through our observations were: What drew people to the installation? How did they interact with the piece?

People seemed to be drawn to the piece because of the imagery in the history stack. Most visitors found the visualization very intriguing. When they knew that a gallery guide or one of the creators of the piece was in the room, they often asked detailed questions about how the image was generated, curious to know what data each visual element represented.

Maybe not surprisingly, seeing a recognizable face in the projections boosted people's interest in the visualization. Often if groups of people visited the gallery together, one person would walk in front of the camera, and be seen by the other members of the group who were near the projection screens. When learning that only one image would be saved in the history display every five minutes and that images with more motion were more likely to be captured, some people went so far as to stand in front of the camera for several minutes, sometimes waving their arms in the process, in the hope of being captured.

Most people seemed to have understood that the piece was evolving in real time, as they looked at the Present Display and realized that it was showing what was currently happening in the gallery. Several visitors were struck by the fact that the visualization kept changing and that the layered landscape was continuously growing. We observed visitors concluding that, if they were to visit the piece again in the future, the then "current" stack of layers would look different and most of the information that could be clearly seen on that specific day would be compressed and "merged" as composite layers by their next visit.

This sense of fluid, evolving time seemed to be one of the most attractive aspects of the installation to visitors. Being able to peek back at past moments in the gallery, seeing someone's glimpse, a person's movement, a kid's gesture provided visitors with moments of surprise and amusement while giving them a sense of how the museum space had been inhabited in the recent past. Visitors also enjoyed looking back at the night layers of the history stack because these displayed a peculiar view of the galleries, one that showed what the museum looked like after it was closed to the public. Visitors were excited to explore the unusually thick and dark layers of evening parties held in the museum (regular night layers were thin because they represented times when the galleries were silent). Sometimes viewers would also catch a glimpse of night layers that showed the cleaning staff in the museum, vacuuming and tidying up the galleries.

From our observations it seemed that the audio part was the one least understood by some of the visitors. We found out by listening to the comments of visitors that, a lot of times, it was not clear to them what the audio wave being formed at the bottom of the Present Display meant in the context of the piece. It seemed that several visitors never made the connection of the audio wave with the resulting shape of layers being formed. Visitors seemed to think that the thickness of the layers had to do with how many people were in the lobby area when the layer had been formed. This conclusion, while incorrect, points to the fact that even those visitors who did not grasp the technicalities of how the audio input was connected to the rest of the piece could still understand the fact that the shape of the layers reflected the presence of people in the museum.

Finally, one of our main concerns when designing this piece were the privacy and surveillance issues that arise when one sets up continuously running, unobtrusive cameras and a microphones in a public space. Based on previous work dealing with cameras in public spaces (Jancke et al 2001), we were worried that people might find the setup of the piece intrusive or even offensive. To our surprise, however, visitors were amused by the camera and a lot of times

would pose in front of it (sometimes for many minutes in a row) in order to get their picture taken and recorded in the history stack. We witnessed several kids dancing and some others making faces at the camera [Figure 43]. People's attitude towards the piece was decidedly playful and light hearted.

### **3.5.6 Discussion**

Data archiving is usually task oriented, designed for users who are searching for a particular piece of information. This visualization is designed to be an end in itself, a compact and easily perceived object that symbolizes an extensive time in a particular place.

Artifacts of the Presence Era discarded most of the video footage that was captured in the museum. Because of this design decision, the piece did not necessarily retain the most interesting data – and there were many great or poignant moments that it discarded. Its algorithms were meant to be more like the forces and rhythms that shape the geological record than the carefully calibrated heuristics of a semantically based compression tool. Yet the end result was very evocative of the time and place it represented.

Periods of extreme activity, such as evening receptions in the gallery, became dominant in the geological landscape of our piece with large layers in the stack, while periods of inactivity were represented with thin layers, reflecting the lack of notable events.

Because a decision was made to compress older layers together as time went on, the piece emphasized the most recent layers more prominently. While this phenomenon fit with the geological metaphor, it distorted some of the patterns by deemphasizing events as they faded into the past. Although designing the piece so that all layers retained the same scale would have provided a more accurate historical overview, it would have lost the sense of temporal perspective the metamorphic process created.

## **3.6 Collective Memories: Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented four projects that visualize history in public settings. In the *Persistent Archives* section, two projects visualized the existing interaction records of newsgroups and wiki sites. In the *Add-On Persistence* section, traces were inserted and visualized in environments that were originally history free.

Even though the archives being visualized were fairly different, both Newsgroup Crowds/Authorlines and History Flow revealed the social dynamics of asynchronous public spaces. The power of these visualizations rests on their ability to quickly allow users to form impressions of the spaces they are exploring and the individuals in these spaces. Newsgroup Crowds, for instance, is perfect for new users who might want to get a sense of how multiple newsgroups differ from one another. In Authorlines, users were able to rapidly form impressions of the authors being visualized without having to read through reams of postings. By allowing users to easily access years worth of posting behavior, a visualization such as Authorlines makes

history available at a glance. This ability to feed behavioral data back into online communities has been shown to increase social accountability (Kelly et al 2000). If used as part of newsgroups regular interaction interfaces, these visualization could have significant impact on the social fabric of a community by influencing trust among individuals.

In History Flow, the visualization of editing behavior over time revealed important mechanisms of collaboration and conflict handling in the Wikipedia community. The visualization also highlighted how quickly certain acts of vandalism are fixed by the community. Perhaps more importantly, by showing years worth of editing action in a single image, History Flow very quickly impresses on users what is “normal” behavior and what is “abnormal” or “weird” activity. I have personally experienced this phenomenon with every single audience to which I have presented History Flow. After a few seconds explaining how the visualization works, *I ask the audience* to tell me what looks abnormal or “strange” in a given History Flow diagram and people readily point out patterns such as the black dashes of mass deletions and zigzag signature of edit wars. It is true that audience members may not initially understand what these strange patterns stand for, but they are able to point them out all the same. This is where the tight coupling between visualization patterns and content comes in handy. After the audience points out outlying patterns to me, I show them how the content of the page being visualized changes over time and they promptly grasp the notion of mass deletions and edit wars. The implications of such rapid exploration are tremendous because they allow users to become familiar with the social workings of online environments that even technologically savvy users have trouble grasping, such as wiki sites. It is hard for most people to understand how such open spaces can be so successful.

In the *Add-On Persistence* section, I utilized history visualization in two spaces that are fairly different from each other. In Chat Circles, the activity traces were part of the communication interface and, because of that, allowed users to make expressive markings as they used the chatroom space. Users whose representations left traces in the room made more dramatic use of their avatars than did users whose actions left no marks in the room. The design of our user study as a short-term experiment prevented us from investigating the long-term effects of having presence markers in the chatroom.

The evocative metaphor of metamorphic rocks in Artifacts of the Presence Era points to an additional direction for history visualizations: that of posterity piece. The design lessons for this work carry implications to personally or collectively meaningful databases ranging from video footage in personal web cams to newsgroups’ conversations. As the contents of digital archives that permeate our daily lives become more emotionally charged – the accretion of all the computer-mediated conversations people have with their loved ones over email, the growing collection of digital pictures parents take of their kids – data analysis ceases to be the only motivation for visualizing collections of documents. Such archives need to be regarded not only as data repositories but also as the powerful catalysts for memory that they are.

This chapter has answered the question of what happens when we look at public spaces through a variety of historical lenses: individual behavior, editing activity, and presence markers. As seen, visualizations of collective past can yield some remarkable insights into the social dynamics of online communities. The next chapter looks at what can be gained by visualizing the emotionally charged, personal archives of people.



## 4 PERSONAL MEMORIES

*It is difficult to remember the quality and texture of past experiences... Without external props even our personal identity fades and goes out of focus"*

– Csikszentmihalyi 1993

So far this thesis has focused on public archives of social interactions and how visualizing these might help groups of people and communities in general. However, some of the most meaningful and important interactions we have online are the personal exchanges we carry out through private email and instant-messaging conversations. This is where mediated communication becomes really dear to several users. Sometimes email is the most affordable way to keep in touch with family overseas and to update friends on what is going on in someone's life. As they accrue over time, personal email archives become fairly rich repositories of a person's everyday experiences, from the dramatic to the mundane.

This chapter looks at a progressive series of email archive visualizations. Unlike most email visualizations done today, the projects presented here are meant to be used by the owner of the email collection being visualized, not by outsiders.

Because these are personal archives, the motivations for visualizing these documents is different from the motivations behind the visualizations presented so far in this thesis. The previous chapters have discussed visualizations of the voluminous archives that accrue in public environments online. It is safe to assume that, in such cases, most users are unfamiliar with the collection of documents being visualized. In these scenarios, visualizations serve the main purpose of exploratory discovery. By looking at a visualization of a newsgroup, for instance, a newcomer can start to identify the top contributors in the community, the main topics of conversation, social network patterns, etc. Conversely, when visualizing one's own email archive, one is familiar with most of the contents and the people that appear on screen. What good is a visualization tool then? This thesis posits that visualizations of personal archives should be seen not only as exploratory devices but mainly also as tools that support users' personal memory. In this claim, recognition and recall play a much more prominent role than "raw" discovery does.

In this chapter I describe the reactions of users to seeing their personal email data visualized and the very promising role that visualization plays in this scenario. Just like the conversational reminiscing provided by photographs of one's life, these visualizations generate situations where personal identities and social relationships can be articulated and shared. The projects presented here show a clear progression from a focus on displaying patterns of email traffic – frequency and number of email

exchanges between people – to a focus on content analysis. The different levels of insight afforded by these visualizations are discussed in relation to design decisions and user feedback.

## 4.1 Related Work

Email is the ultimate *killer application*. It is so pervasive that it has been described as the *habitat* of the information-age worker (Ducheneaut and Bellotti 2001). It is no surprise then, that research on email spans a wide variety of fields: from information management, retrieval and security, to spam detection, social network analysis, and user interface design. The growth of email archives, in particular, presents challenges to librarians, scholars, historians, forensics experts, and intelligence analysts. Recently, the information visualization community has also become interested in the idea of exploring email archives and the opportunities they provide for the visual discovery of patterns.

Here I present a brief overview of some of the work done on email archive visualizations. Roughly speaking, the projects fall into four main categories:

- social network visualizations
- thread-based visualizations
- temporal visualizations
- contact-based visualizations

Social Network Fragments (Viégas et al 2004a) was done in the Sociable Media Group and was one of the very first visualizations geared to the end user (the person whose email archive was being visualized). Its use together with PostHistory<sup>8</sup> revealed users' interest in utilizing visualizations as storytelling props [Figure 45 left]. Most other social network visualizations, however, focus on allowing third party observers – scientists and researchers, for instance – to look at someone else's email archives. Recently Enron, the corporate giant, had its entire company email archives made public in the wake of corruption allegations. This has been a boon for researchers who now have a large corpus of email messages to explore. A team of researchers in Berkeley has built an entire suite of social network visualizations for looking at the Enron archives [Figure 45 right].

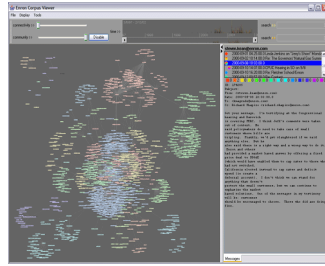
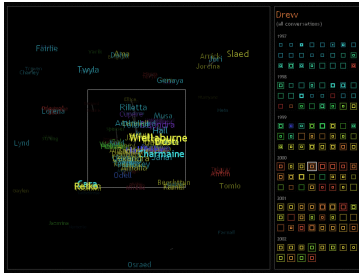
In addition to looking at the structure of email networks, researchers have also started to look at different aspects of email chronemics. MailView (Frau et al 2005), from the university of Kent, displays emails on time-dependent plots [Figure 47 left]. Researchers at the University of Maryland (Perer et al 2005), have also built a visualization toolkit that explores the temporal rhythms of a person's various email relationships [Figure 47 right].

Another kind of email visualization focuses on the thread structure of conversations. Researchers from Microsoft [Figure 46 left] and IBM [Figure 46 right] have devised different ways of visualizing email threads.

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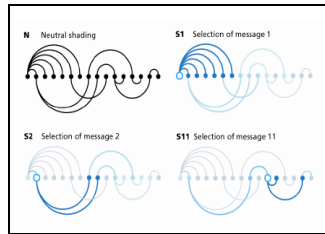
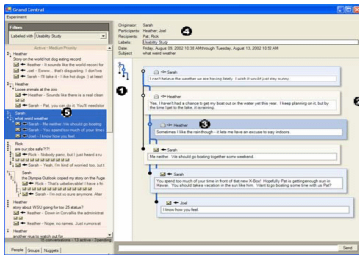
<sup>8</sup> PostHistory is explained in greater detail later in this chapter





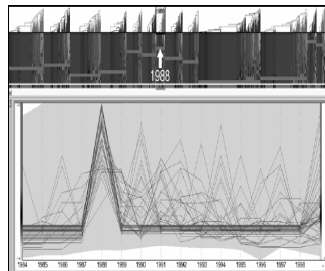
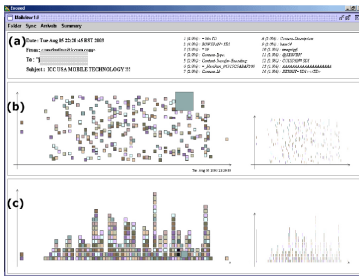
**Figure 45**  
**Social Networks**

*Left: Social Network Fragments (Sociable Media Group)*  
*Right: Enron email visualization (UC Berkeley, SIMS)*



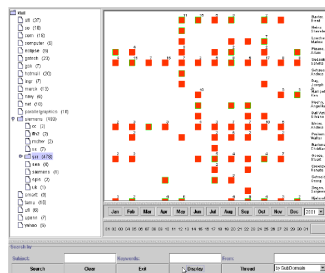
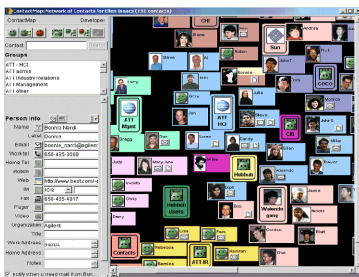
**Figure 46**  
**Threads**

*Left: Thread visualization by Venolia and Neustaedte (Microsoft Research)*  
*Right: Thread Arcs (IBM)*



**Figure 47**  
**Temporal Patterns**

*Left: MailView, dynamically coordinated email visualization (University of Kent)*  
*Right: Visualizations of relationship rhythms in email archives (Perer et al 2005)*



**Figure 48**  
**Email Contacts**

*Left: ContactMap (Nardi et al 2002)*  
*Right: Email visualization based on the hierarchical structure of domain names (Siemes Research)*

Finally, some systems have been developed to allow users to keep track of their various email contacts (the people with whom one communicates over email). Contact map (Nardi et al 2002), while not a data visualization in the traditional sense, gives users a visual depiction of their email contacts [Figure 48 left]. Other researchers have built systems that cluster contacts based on the hierarchical nature of domain names (Sudarsky and Hjelsvold 2002) [Figure 48 right].

As popular as email visualizations are becoming, most work in this area is done for outsiders to look at someone else's email. The work presented in this thesis differs from that approach in that it is geared to the owner of the email archive being visualized. An additional difference is that, instead of focusing on the social network aspect of email conversations, the projects here focus mostly on the dyadic dimension of email. PostHistory reveals temporal patterns of email

correspondence. Mountain displays the steady accumulation of email contacts over time, and Themail explores the content of email conversations.

## 4.2 PostHistory<sup>9</sup>

Patterns in email usage are often inaccessible to users because the available archives provide little descriptive detail. As such, PostHistory sets out to uncover two dimensions of email patterns:

- 1) dyadic exchange rhythms
- 2) the role of time in these patterns.

In presenting email data, the system follows a user-centric approach, focused on providing the user with lasting impressions about their social interactions in email. The visualization attempts to uncover the irregularities that users would recognize: vacation habits and project deadlines for instance.

In addressing these questions, PostHistory bases its analysis on header information: the FROM, TO, CC, SUBJECT, and DATE fields present in both messages sent to and received by the user. Email traffic is tracked as opposed to email content. As discussed later, this approach has both merits and serious limitations.

### 4.2.1 *The importance of dyads*

In sociology, one of the most fundamental and yet elusive concepts is that of the “group.” A special class of human grouping is the one termed “dyadic,” which refers to a group of two people. The reason this group is in its own category is that only dyadic relationships have no sense of collectivity. In all other groups, duties and responsibilities can be delegated whereas in the dyad, each participant is immediately and directly responsible for any communal action (Simmel 1908). This category of human relationship permeates personal spaces, including that of email where the majority of conversations are only a few messages long and usually include only two people (Hewett and Teplovs 1999). PostHistory focuses on this specific aspect of the user’s social world: the users’ direct interactions with each of the contacts in their email world.

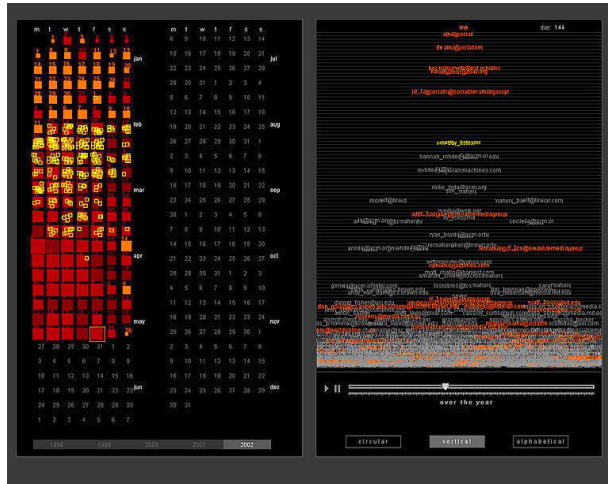
PostHistory focuses on two main data dimensions: (1) the *dyadic* relationships found in an email archive, and (2) how these relationships evolve over time. By visualizing email activity along these two axes, the system highlights interesting patterns that reflect the changes in interaction between ego and his/her contacts over time such as:

1. How does the frequency of email exchange differ from one dyadic relationship to the next?
2. What are the rhythms of email exchange in the different relationships?
3. What does the landscape of egocentric, dyadic ties looks like? How does it evolve over time?

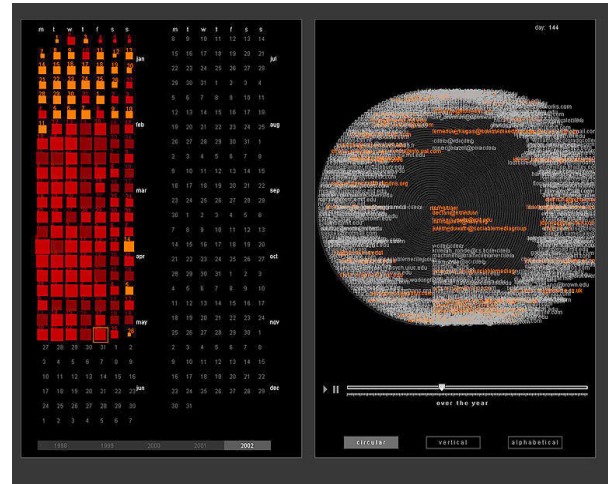
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<sup>9</sup> This section is based on portions of a paper published at HICSS (Viégas et al 2004a).

4. Is there a sense of periphery x centrality in the distribution of these dyadic ties? (i.e. What is the core of people with whom ego corresponds? How big/small is this core? Does the constitution of this core of people change over time?)



**Figure 49:** PostHistory interface with calendar panel on the left and contacts panel on the right. A contact name has been highlighted and the corresponding emails sent by this person have been highlighted in yellow on the calendar pane.



**Figure 50:** PostHistory interface with the circular mode of the contacts panel on the right.

## 4.2.2 Time and Change

Time is a major structural factor in our lives. We pace ourselves by the hour, sometimes by the minute. Not only does time structure our lives, it instills our daily activities with meaningful rhythms. As anthropologists have long recognized, human practices are defined by the fact that their temporal structure, direction, and rhythms are constitutive of their meaning (Bordieu 1977). The same is true of our computer-mediated interactions: they are temporally structured and, as such, defined by their tempo. Recent work on email rhythms (Begole et al 2002; Tyler and Tang 2003) has demonstrated that people are highly sensitive to the rhythms of email exchange, as they are quite sophisticated and diligent in the coordination between receiving and sending messages.

PostHistory grounds its entire visualization scheme in the notion of time, expressing long-term email exchange rhythms within an interface that is structured through a calendar. The system visualizes the amount of email exchanged over time with each person the user knows, revealing large concentrations of interaction during certain periods in contrast to times when almost no email was exchanged. The application also visualizes how changing rhythms of email exchange affect the social landscape of the user.

### **4.2.3 Implementation**

In order to reveal the temporal and social dimensions mentioned above, PostHistory pre-aggregates data on the following dimensions:

1. Daily email averages (i.e. how many messages a user sends and receives per day and on average?)
2. Daily "quality" of emails (i.e. on a given day, are most of the messages sent directly to the owner of the account, or are they sent to mailing lists to which the owner subscribes?)
3. Frequency of email exchanges with contacts (i.e. has "Mary" exchanged more/less email with me today than usual?)
4. Comparative frequency of email exchanges with contacts (i.e. how does my email exchange with "Mary" compare to the rest of my email activity with other contacts in my social network?)

### **4.2.4 Interface**

The PostHistory interface is divided into two main panels: the calendar panel on the left, which shows the intensity of email exchanges over time, and the "contacts" panel on the right, which shows the names of the people with whom ego has exchanged email [Figure 49].

The calendar panel displays email activity on a daily basis. Each square represents a single day and each row of squares represents a week's worth of email activity. Each week row starts on Monday and ends on Sunday so that both week and weekend activities can be seen as contrasting, adjacent visual units. Month names are shown on the right of week rows and each day's number is displayed above the day's colored square. PostHistory shows an entire calendar year at any given time, and the number of the year is shown at the bottom.

The size of each square represents the quantity of email received on that day. PostHistory determines the average number of emails a person receives on a given day and uses this average to determine the size of each daily square. Days with less than average numbers of message are portrayed as small squares, while heavy email traffic days are shown through large squares. Each square is centralized inside its grid cell and, as squares get bigger or smaller – in a pattern reminiscent of halftone – the overall density pattern they create is readily perceived as the gradation of intensity in email exchanges over time.

The second dimension used in the calendar visualization is color, which represents how "personal" or "directed" to the user the messages have been on that particular day. Messages where the only recipient is the user get tagged as "highly directed." Messages where the user is one of several recipients – i.e. their email address appears in conjunction with other email addresses – get tagged as "somewhat directed." Finally, messages where the user's email address does not appear – for instance, messages sent to mailing lists to which the user subscribes – get tagged as "not directed at all." PostHistory computes the "directedness" average

of a day based on the rating of all messages on that day. The brighter the color of a given day, the more directed that day has been.

The “contacts” panel on the right displays the names of the people who have sent messages to the user up to that point in time (i.e. the disposition of names is driven by the calendar panel). There are three visualization modes in the contacts panel: vertical [Figure 49], circular [Figure 50], and alphabetical.

The vertical mode of the contacts panel displays ego's name at the top of the panel; other people's names are placed below it, such that the most frequent contacts are visually closest to ego. The circular mode works is similar to the typical circular egocentric diagrams first devised by sociologists looking at social networks (Wellman 1997): ego's name is displayed in the center of the diagram and contacts' names surround it. The closer someone's name is to the center of the diagram, the more email messages this person has exchanged with ego. The alphabetical mode presents a table of contacts' names that can be sorted either by alphabetical order or by the number of emails people have sent to ego.

#### **4.2.5 Interaction**

Interaction with the PostHistory interface causes temporal patterns of email exchange to be highlighted. When the user clicks on a specific day on the calendar, the names of people who have sent email to ego on that day get highlighted on the contacts panel.

After the user clicks on the name of a person on the contacts panel, yellow squares are displayed on top of each day in the calendar panel that the person has sent a message to ego. Each yellow square represents a message sent to ego by that person. The accumulation of yellow squares on the calendar panel creates a visual pattern that highlights times when email exchange was intense and contrasts times when the exchange between the two people was at its lowest levels.

Finally, users can animate the passage of time in PostHistory to observe the changes in the landscape of names displayed in the contacts panel. Underneath the vertical and circular modes of the contacts panel, there are “play” and “pause” buttons that allows the user to animate the passage of time. In the time animation, each day gets momentarily highlighted, from the start of the chosen year to its end. Over the course of time, new names appear on the right panel indicating the beginning of email exchange with a new person. In the vertical mode of the contact panel, a contact's name can move upwards – closer to ego – to reflect periods of more intensive email exchanges. If ego starts to work on a project with “Maria,” her name might move up a couple of levels very quickly during the time of the project and then subside again when the project is over. This creates a series of rhythms on the contacts panel – names moving up, staying stationary, moving down – that reflect the ebb and flow of ego's evolving email relationships.

#### **4.2.6 Small Evaluation: case studies**

A small ethnographic evaluation was conducted while PostHistory was being developed with ten users, including some of the systems' developers. All ten people had their own email data visualized. Out of the test users, two became case studies because their email archives were significantly more extensive than the other participants – they spanned five years as opposed to three years, which was the average range of other participants' archives.

The evaluation users were 20-something students and young professionals. Seven of the ten were American and six of the ten were female. All users had over five years of experience with email, which they used daily.

As I was more interested in getting an ethnographic understanding of how these visualizations could be used as opposed to performing focused user tests, I opted not to have any set, directed tasks for users. Users were free to explore the visualizations for as long and in whatever ways they saw fit.

#### **4.2.7 Users' Reactions**

Because the visualization is completely driven by time, there is no single "optimal" view, so users would start exploring the calendar panel and watch how the names of people would move in the contacts' panel. Users would then identify bursts of email exchanges by the way these people's names moved upwards in the social landscape panel. Sudden movements in the contacts panel would immediately prompt users to consider the events that caused those bursts to happen.

Users readily utilized the visualization to revisit past experiences and to reflect on their relationships with others. Usually, users were excited that they could recognize almost all the names on the screen. Identifiable names, by themselves, evoked memories.

Seeing the shapes that described long-term interaction patterns on PostHistory was often surprising to users. Having never seen her five years of email activity laid out all at once in front of her before, one of our users was simply stunned by the fact that the pattern of email exchange had evolved into a clear and consistent rhythm over the years. As she looked at her archive on screen, she was surprised to see how different her email behavior was during weekdays as opposed to weekends. She was also taken aback by the number of emails she received everyday that were not directed specifically at her – i.e. emails to mailing lists (or spam).

The most unexpected result from this small study was finding that the users were frequently eager to share the stories prompted by the visualizations with the people involved. The stories that users conveyed to others and the depth of details communicated depended on their relationship with the person.

It was also surprising to find that users felt comfortable sharing not only the specific portions that concerned their friends, but also entire visualization overviews. There was a sense of sustained privacy even though hundreds of names were being displayed on the screen. "Most people I showed these to seemed to say 'Oh, that's pretty!' or 'Wow, pretty cool.' They could not, I felt, understand the stories behind the images; without my explanations it was almost useless."

Another user observed: “Sure, my closest friends could tell what those clusters [of names] were and why they were so significant to me. But very few people had access to all of the different social circles that I knew and maintained.” These testimonials seem to suggest that these visualization kept just enough of the context needed for memory prompting and storytelling without spelling out the details. In other words, the visualization seems to provide users with a comfortable balance between private and public boundaries.

Users saw the “rise and fall” of many relationships: “I loved to see the pattern of my relationships with various lovers: intense conversation, then stability, then slowed down conversation and then !bam! no conversation (a.k.a. breakup). I saw my vacation habits, the intense (procrastination) email during the stressful periods of the school year.” Some users would animate the time aspect of PostHistory many times over to see the way the names on the contacts panel moved as time progressed. After looking at his data on both systems, one of our case study users remarked on the transient nature of his relationships: “In the broadest way, the visualizations made me very aware of the ephemeral nature of relationships and community [...]. Observing how my relationships grew and died was fascinating.”

The visualization also highlighted the core group of relations and how this core evolved over time. “Seeing my social network in PostHistory makes me aware of how many people overall I know, and how few of them really count. It’s fascinating to see how some of the stronger names (higher up on the screen) stay around for a long time, bobbing up and down occasionally; how some of them faded away slowly while others crashed instantly.”

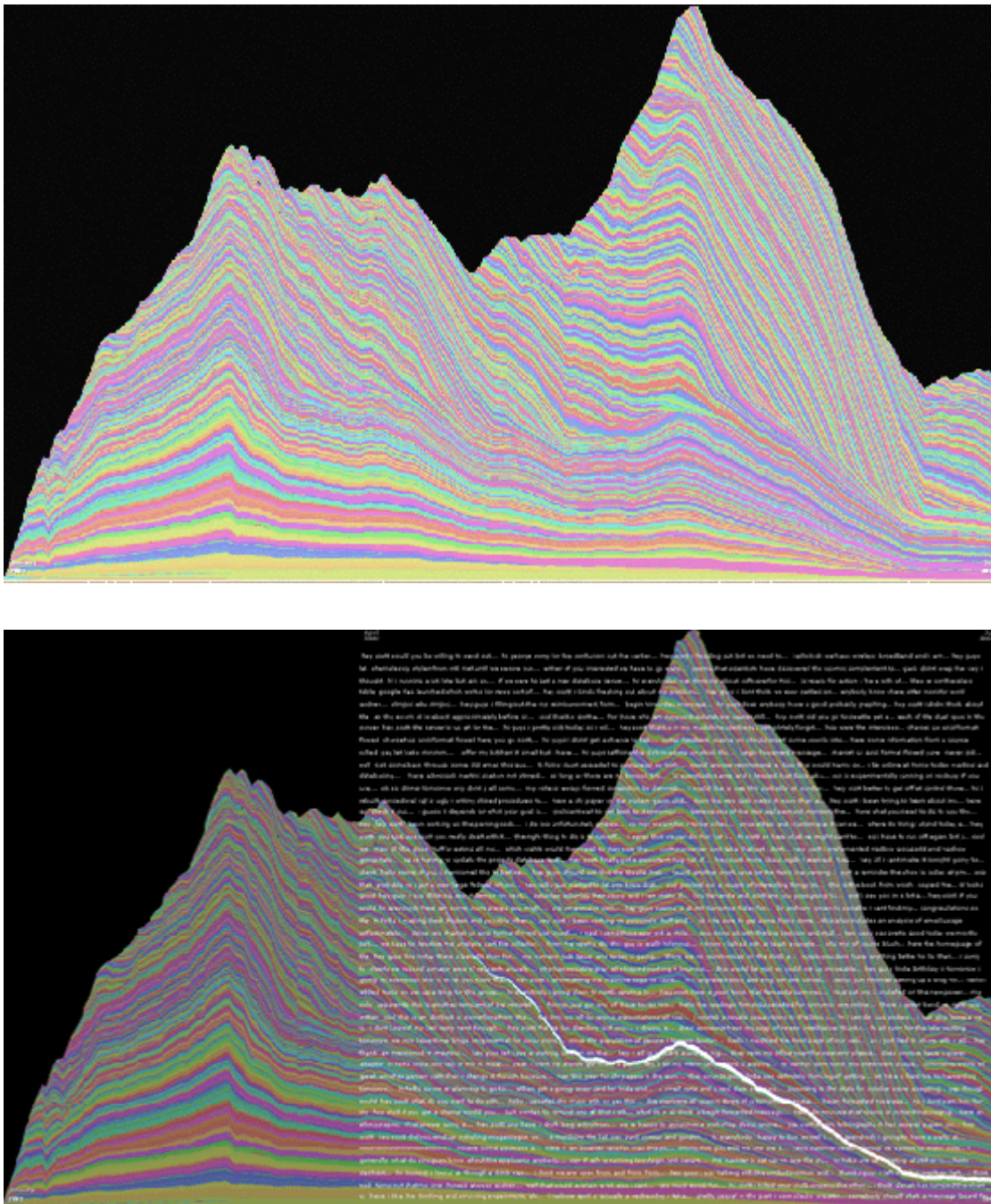
#### **4.2.8 Concerns**

After using PostHistory, some users complained about the inability to go back into the calendar panel and annotate important dates/events; they felt that after they had located meaningful periods of activity, they wanted to highlight those in some way for future reference. The vertical mode of the contacts panel was a lot more legible to users than the circular mode; users felt that comparisons in the vertical mode were a lot easier to track than in the circular display. Some users wanted to have PostHistory either linked to the actual email messages it represents or have it show the subject lines of the messages being visualized so that people could get an idea of the content of the exchanges shown on the screen. This reaction suggests that there might be multiple levels at which users are interested in interacting with these visualizations: the high-level patterns of social interaction that evolve over time could serve as a map for accessing “lower-level” contents of conversations. This possibility implies multiple levels of privacy and presentation for visualizations such as these.

#### **4.2.9 Photographs?**

In developing PostHistory I focused on creating a personally informative tool that provided high-level views of social interaction over time. The evaluation with users, however, revealed that the system had a much broader appeal. Not only did it allow users to reflect personally, but it also operated as an artifact for sharing and storytelling. Whereas unanticipated uses for novel applications are not that startling – people often find surprising social ways of using software





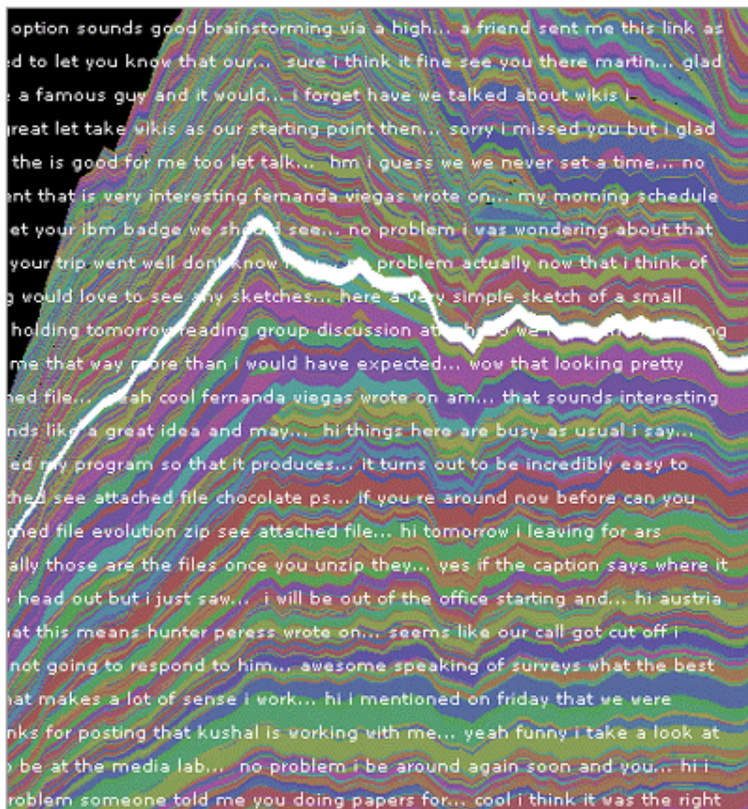
**Figure 51:** *In the mountain above, the owner of the email archive has graduated from one school and moved to a new university for his graduate studies. This is the reason why we see two distinct mountains; the mountain on the right represents the surge of new contacts this person has made in the new school.*

(Moninger and Farmer 1990) – it is important to discuss both the design intentions and the uses that emerged from users' interactions with this application into the discussion.

Some of the ways in which users interacted with the visualization are reminiscent of how people relate to photographs. People return to their photos to reflect on past experiences as well as to



share aspects of their lives with others. Photographs themselves convey limited slices of the events they represent, but their presence allows the owner to convey as much or as little as they want in sharing the event represented. Although our stories are as deeply embedded in our email as they are in our photos, we rarely have access to any sort of “snapshot” of our email so as to have these deep reflections and storytelling opportunities. The higher-level view of our digital experiences is buried deep within the actual data. When users began storytelling around the visualization, it became clear that it provided a missing link; it an accessible view for sharing and reflecting upon past digital experiences, without revealing too much.



### 4.3 Mountain

Email archives are ubiquitous, cumbersome and vastly voluminous. This visualization reflects the massive nature of these archives by depicting them as a growing mountain over time. In contrast to PostHistory, Mountain does not focus on the raw frequency of exchanged emails; instead, it displays an *impression* of rising and waning relationships based on the recency of message exchanges.

Mountain visualizes a person's email archive in terms of all the people with whom this person has been in touch over the years.

Each layer in the Mountain represents a different person. Layers are ordered by time, with the first people in the email archive at the bottom and the most recent people in the archive at the top right portion of the mountain. The thickness of each layer refers to how recently the person has been in contact with ego (the owner of the email archive). If, for instance, a person has not been in touch with ego in the last month, the thickness of the layer decreases. If, on the other hand, a person has not been in touch with ego for the past year, the layer slowly flattens out and disappears.

Users can highlight specific layers in the Mountain causing the first words of every email exchanged with this person to appear on the screen [Figure 51].

The piece is a commentary on the continuous accumulation of email contacts over time and the large amounts of people we are constantly in touch with over email.



#### 4.4 Themail: Visualizing content

Unlike PostHistory and Mountain, which visualize email traffic patterns, Themail focuses on the contents of a person's email archive over time. The project looks beyond “who is talking to whom” to explore what people are talking about. The application addresses two main research questions:

- 1) What kinds of things do I (the owner of the archive) talk about with my various email contacts?
- 2) How do my email conversations with one person differ from those with other people?

In essence, Themail displays a series of words arranged along a timeline. These words represent the most salient things that people talked about over time. And, just like painted portraits that have a series of visual and conceptual “layers” – background, middle ground, and foreground – Themail also counts on a set of typographic layers to build its historic portrait. The selection and visual treatment of words is different in each layer.

There are two main “layers” of words:

- **Year words** (gray words)

The background layer displays the most common words used in email conversations over an entire year. The selection of words is solely based on frequency of use – Themail uses a stop

list to disregard overly common words such as *the*, *of*, *my*, *your*, etc. These words show up in dark, faded gray in the background.

- **Month words** (yellow words)

The foreground layer displays the most unique and frequently used words in email conversations over a month. The selection and font size of words is based not only on frequency but also on how uniquely the word is to a specific relationship. For instance, if one uses the word “environment” a lot with a friend but not with anyone else, the word will appear fairly large when one visualizes her/his communication with that friend. If, on the other hand, the word “environment” is used a lot with other people, the word will not be as large in the visualization. The more frequent and unique a word is, the bigger it appears in the monthly columns.

To the right of the visualization panel, a table displays all addresses of contacts in the user’s email archive. When the user selects one of these contacts, Themail visualizes the conversation history with that person.



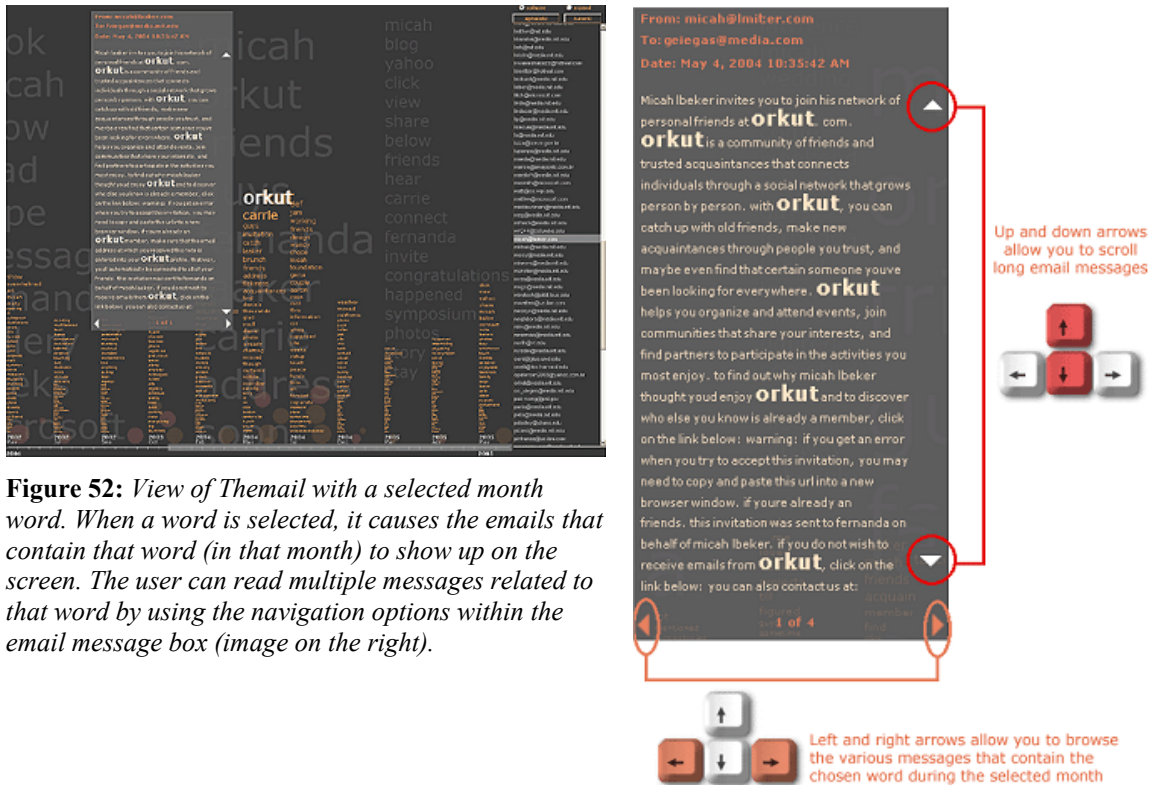
**Circles:**

Each circle displayed among the columns of words represents an email that has been exchanged with the selected person during that month. The size of the circle refers to the size of the exchanged email (the number of original – i.e. not quoted – words the email contains). The color of the circle represents the “direction” of the email:

- outgoing → muted red
- incoming → muted yellow
- incoming, impersonal (sent by the selected person to a list ego is a part of) → gray

#### 4.4.1 Viewing email messages

Whenever a user mouses over words in a month column, they are highlighted in white and in a big font size – which causes even words set in undersized fonts to be easily read. When a user clicks on a month word, the email messages that have the selected word appear in an information box [Figure 52], allowing users to recall the context in which the word was used in the past.



The box that shows emails packs a lot of functionality. It displays the headers of the displayed message and it highlights all instances of the word that has been highlighted in the visualization [Figure 52]. If an email is too long to be shown in the box, the white up and down arrows to the right of the message allow the user to scroll through the message.

The email box also informs how many emails contain the selected word during the chosen month (in Figure 52 on the right, it shows that there are 4 messages with the word "Orkut"). The user can navigate the various messages either by clicking on the side arrows in the box or by using the left and right arrows in the keyboard.

#### 4.4.2 Time Scale

Themail displays content over time and, as such, temporal rhythms are an important aspect of the visualization. A sporadic relationship, one where correspondents exchange a few messages every other month, should look different from one where users correspond every single week. Themail has two ways of displaying content over time: the *expanded* view and the *collapsed* view. In the expanded view, monthly columns are placed in their real position in time and months without exchange emails show up as blank spaces in the visualization [Figure 53].

The "collapsed" view displays only the months with email correspondence. In this view there are no blank spaces [Figure 52]. In this way, the collapsed view populates the screen with the largest amount of information, allowing users to quickly get a sense of the collection of words in their correspondence with an email contact.





**Figure 53:** Expanded view of communication with a friend. The arrangement of monthly columns over time quickly gives users a sense of the rhythm of the relationship; in this case, the email traffic is fairly sporadic with several months when no emails were exchanged.

#### 4.4.3 Themail Processor: handling email content

The Themail Processor application is the backend portion of Themail; it is the software that reads in and processes the email archives users would like to visualize [Figure 54]. The Processor treats people, messages and words as primary objects.

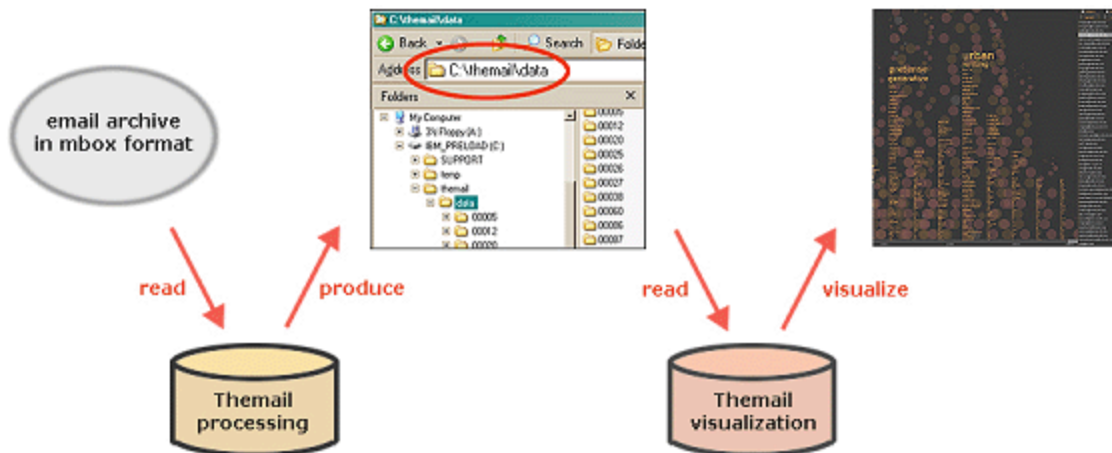
The Themail processor begins by reading MBOX mailbox files. This format is the internet-wide standard specified in RFC 2822, “Internet Message Format” ([www.faqs.org/rfcs/rfc2822.html](http://www.faqs.org/rfcs/rfc2822.html)). As it reads the files, it collects references to each email address, message, and word. After processing all the MBOX files, the Themail processor now has a complete structure of email addresses, messages and words. However, three problems regarding the list of email addresses remain. First, many people have multiple email addresses, and so are represented repeatedly and fragmentedly in the dataset. Secondly, spam plagues email users, and so many addresses in the list are likely those of spammers. Thirdly, users who subscribe to mailing lists will undoubtedly have many messages from people they do not know. Themail solves these problems with two steps, which are called “combine addresses” and “remove spammers.”

In combining addresses, the user is prompted to select groups of addresses that belong to the same person. For example, “foo@bar.com”, “foo@smo.com” and “bob@foofamily.com” might all be email addresses of Bob Foo. When a Themail user specifies such a group of addresses, the first address in that group is treated as the “primary” address into which all the others are merged.

Finally, only the 200 most prolific email addresses are retained. The 200 addresses that are associated with (i.e. have sent or received) the most messages are kept. All other addresses, as well as their associated messages, are removed from the system.

After the data is culled to only the most important people, words and people are directly associated with one another; that is, the message ceases to be an important unit of analysis.

For each person, a keyword scoring function is performed. This process is based on the well-known TFIDF algorithm (Salton 1989) that scores words based on their frequency as well as their uniqueness (<http://instruct.uwo.ca/gplis/601/week3/tfidf.html>):



**Figure 54:** Explanatory diagram showing the connection between the Themail processor application (backend) and the visualization (front end).

For each person, and for each month in which they sent or received a message, a “bucket” is created in which all the words in those email messages are scored. For example, a person who sent/received emails only from March to June 2004 would have five buckets: one each for March, April, May and June, and one cumulative bucket for all of 2004.

Each word in the bucket is scored based on TFIDF; its frequency in the messages in the timeslice in question (a month or year) is counted and is multiplied by a measure of its uniqueness, which is the inverse of its frequency in messages NOT for the person or timeslice in question. Thus given two words with similarly high frequencies, the one that is used more frequently in the entire email corpus will have a lower score because it is less unique.

#### 4.4.4 Themail User Study

##### 4.4.4.a Evaluation guides design decisions

The Themail user study departs significantly from the regular in-lab studies conducted up to this point in this thesis. The evaluation carried out with PostHistory made it clear that asking participants for their personal email archives and uploading their data onto servers in a laboratory was far from ideal. Most users were too worried about privacy issues to agree to participate in a study like that. For this reason, Themail was designed with the understanding that it would be distributed to users for evaluation. This affected several key design decisions and ultimately guided the way the software was implemented.

##### 4.4.4.b Sampling

Sampling can be one of the most challenging aspects of any user study. It is hard to get representative samples of populations whose main characteristics are known – for instance, the demographical characteristics of the U.S. population are fairly well known: the proportion of males to females, the different percentage of whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asian, native Americans, and

other ethnicities in the population, etc. It is much harder, however, to determine what a representative sample of an “unknown” population may be. For instance, the population with which this study is concerned consists of email users who keep large archives of messages.<sup>10</sup> Not much is known about the entire population of email users in the world, let alone about email users with vast archives. There are no data about what percentage of email users keep such archives and nothing is known about their demographics either; their ages, ethnicity makeup, occupations, etc. Therefore, attempting to get a representative set of users for this study would have been an impossible task.

Instead, the sampling strategy in this study relied on the author’s personal knowledge of where to find email users who were likely to have extensive archives of email messages. It is a known fact that not every person can keep large archives even if he/she would like to have such a collection or if he/she uses email everyday. Most “regular” email users – i.e. those that rely on free commercial email accounts like the ones available from services such as Hotmail.com, Yahoo.com, etc. – did not, up to recently, have the capability of keeping large archives because these accounts had very low storage limits. Both Hotmail and Yahoo used to offer less than 10 MB of free storage space until Gmail from Google was launched with a free mailbox of 1 GB.<sup>11</sup> The implication of having such low storage space is that most users did not have any good way of accumulating significant email archives. Therefore, people whose main email accounts are popular, free commercial ones were not considered for this experiment. This leaves two main sources of potential participants: people with academic email accounts and those with privately owned commercial email accounts (such as a company’s email, for example). Participants for the Themail user study were selected from these two venues: academia and industry.

#### **4.4.4.c Backend design guided by user study**

Most applications that process and visualize vast amounts of data rely on databases for data storage and queries. Because it was important for Themail to be distributed to users and to run locally on their machines the decision was made to rely on text files as opposed to databases. This choice meant that users would not have to deal with downloading, installing and populating a database prior to running the Themail visualization. In addition, Themail was designed to run on multiple platforms (Windows, Macs, and Unix) in order to maximize the number of participants in the study.

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<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this study, “large archives” are those that span at least three years or that are at least 100 MB.

<sup>11</sup> In 2004 Google launched Gmail, its email service, built on the idea that users should never have to delete email messages and should always be able to find the messages they want. As part of Google’s self-proclaimed mission to “organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful”, Gmail offered an unprecedented amount of free email storage to its users: it started at 1 GB and is now over 2 GB whereas its main competitors – Hotmail and Yahoo – originally offered less than 10 MB of free storage space. The impact of Gmail’s free storage space was so significant that Yahoo quickly upgraded the storage capability of its free email accounts to 1 GB.

#### 4.4.4.d Method

Unlike a laboratory user study where participant are brought into a controlled environment and use machines that have been specially set up for the tasks at hand, Themail's evaluation took place out in the "real world," running remotely on users' regular computers. Participants carried out every step of the process – from setting up and processing the email archives to visualizing the data – without supervision. This is a challenging arrangement because it means that when something goes wrong, the researcher is not there to help trouble shoot the problem and the likelihood that the user will finish the study decreases.

As a way to address this difficulty, the Themail user study was broken down into steps and a support system of Web pages was set up to guide users step by step. An email address was given to users for reporting any problems they might have throughout the process.

**1) Participant selection:** Prior to being selected as a participant in the Themail user study, users had to fill out an online recruiting form about their email archives. Answers to this questionnaire determined whether the Themail Processor application was compatible with the potential participant's email archives. Some of the questions asked included:

- What program(s) do you currently use to read your email?
- Where is your email archive currently located?
- What format is your email archived in?
- How large is/are your mailbox(es) in megabytes, total?

**2) Themail Processor: email archive processing:** After being selected for the user study, participants were sent the Themail Processor application for processing their data.

Themail Processor reads in an email archive and generates a series of files containing all of the data that will be used by the visualization program. Every time a user runs the Themail visualization, it reads the data in the directory and generates a visual representation of that data.

Once the Themail Processor application has successfully handled the participant's entire email archive, the user is sent the Themail visualization program.

**3) Interview:** A date and time was scheduled with each participant for a live interview.<sup>12</sup> Participants were told to use the visualization before the interview took place. During the interview, participants were asked questions about their experience with Themail.

### 4.4.5 User Study Results

#### 4.4.5.a Demographics

- 16 participants
- 4 female, 12 male
- Age range: from 18 to 50
- Age distribution:
  - o Between 18 and 30 years old      10 participants
  - o Between 31 and 40 years old      4 participants

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<sup>12</sup> In the case of users participating in the study remotely, the interview was conducted over email.



- Between 41 and 50 years old 2 participants
- Occupation
  - Student 7 participants
  - Professional 9 participants
- Native language distribution
  - English 11 participants
  - Portuguese 2 participants
  - German 1 participant
  - Japanese 1 participant
  - Spanish 1 participant

Participants for the Themail user study were selected both from industry and from academia, more specifically, participants came from:

- two major American universities
- an American technology company
- a British telecommunications company
- a French telecommunications company

#### 4.4.5.b Kinds of email archives

- total size of archives uploaded to Themail
  - less than 100 MB 2 participants
  - between 100 and 300 MB 2 participants
  - between 300 and 600 MB 3 participants
  - between 600 and 900 MB 3 participants
  - greater than 900 MB 5 participants
- kind of archive
  - IMAP 5 participants
  - Mac Mail 5 participants
  - Mbox 4 participants
  - Webmail 1 participant
  - Outlook 1 participant
- number of years spanned by each participant's archive
  - less than 1 year 1 participant
  - 2 years 3 participants
  - 3 years 1 participant
  - 4 years 2 participant
  - 5 years 3 participants
  - 6 years 3 participants
  - 7 years 1 participant
  - 8 years --
  - 9 years 2 participants
- Number of mailboxes uploaded by each participant to Themail
  - 1 – 10 mailboxes 11 participants
  - 11 – 20 mailboxes 2 participants
  - 21 – 30 mailboxes 2 participants
  - 50 or more mailboxes 5 participants

#### 4.4.5.c Results

Overall, participants were excited to use Themail to look back at their email archives. When prompted to explain what kind of information the tool displayed about their relationships with people, most participants would quickly engage in storytelling. Participants would often gesture and point to different parts of the visualization as they explained the information they saw onscreen. The expressive use of body language and the fluidity with which users engaged in these actions were impressive and suggest that, unlike current email interfaces, this visualization supports users in actively engaging personal memories for animated recall and storytelling.

When asked, on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the least and 5 being the most), how much they enjoyed looking at their email archives on Themail, participants responded, on average 3.9. When asked whether they would like to use the tool again if it were integrated in their email reader, 87% of participants responded yes.

In the following sections, I describe two case studies and discuss some of the main themes to have emerged from the user study.

#### 4.4.5.d Two Case Studies

Of the 16 participants in this user study, two became case studies because of their availability for longer interviews and the higher level of access they gave me to the visualization of their data. In this section I discuss their reactions to Themail. All names have been changed for privacy reasons.

##### **Ann**

Ann is a graduate student at MIT. She is 26 years old and has recently gotten married. Her extended family lives in the south of the United States and she lives with her husband in New England. For Ann, one of the most exiting aspects of Themail was being able to see all the correspondence that preceded her wedding:

*It was funny going back both with [my husband] and my parents, there were these few months before our wedding... it's ALL about the wedding! There are all these words like "invitations," "tables," "drinks," guests' names. It's got all these words that are totally related to the wedding plans. It was in October and November [user gestures a peak] and then the words completely changed after that. And the same happened with my friends that were bridesmaids. There are these few months where you can see that the words were related to our wedding theme but then, the month after the conversation it all switched back to normal. Yeah, it was like the before and after. You could definitely see the event.*

Ann thought it was important that Themail allowed her to look back at her relationships with loved ones, friends, and family. Even though she exchanges more emails with her coworkers on a daily basis, it was the personal facet of her email archive that she felt was the most exciting to explore.

*Epecially for my family, it was really fun to see all the words and the things that we talk about for no reason other than to just reminisce; it was like looking through a photo album or something. For instance, I would never go back and search for the*

*wedding planning emails, but it was fun to look at that! It's almost like this serves a different kind of purpose from regular email readers... It's more at a personal level... It's emotional, it's about reflecting and remembering.*

After looking at her correspondence with family members, Ann remarked that some “portraits” read very differently from others – just as she would expect based on the different nature of her relationship with each member of her family. With her brother, for instance, the themes ranged from talking about his kids to him asking Ann for help with his computer. With her grandmother, however, the words that came up on Themail referred to religious holidays and themes. After seeing those, Ann remarked that her grandmother is the only person in her family who, being more religious, keeps track of the Christian calendar and sends out messages about religious events. This difference was clearly visible in the visualization and it made Ann reflect on how special and unique her relationship with her grandmother was:

*Yeah, [grandmother] was interesting... I don't even remember, if you asked me, what kinds of emails I've exchanged with my grandmother; we don't write email all the time, and a lot of times it's through my Mom. But I felt like her visualization really characterized her. It was probably because she was a whole lot different than anyone else in my email archive, so it makes her kind of a perfect person to get portrayed in a system like this and I felt like it really did a great job. It definitely brought out the things that were different about her than everyone else I talk to.*

## **Jeff**

Jeff is a researcher in his twenties, working for a European telecommunications company. He has recently spent some time in the US, working with researchers at a major university. He is single and his entire extended family lives in Europe.

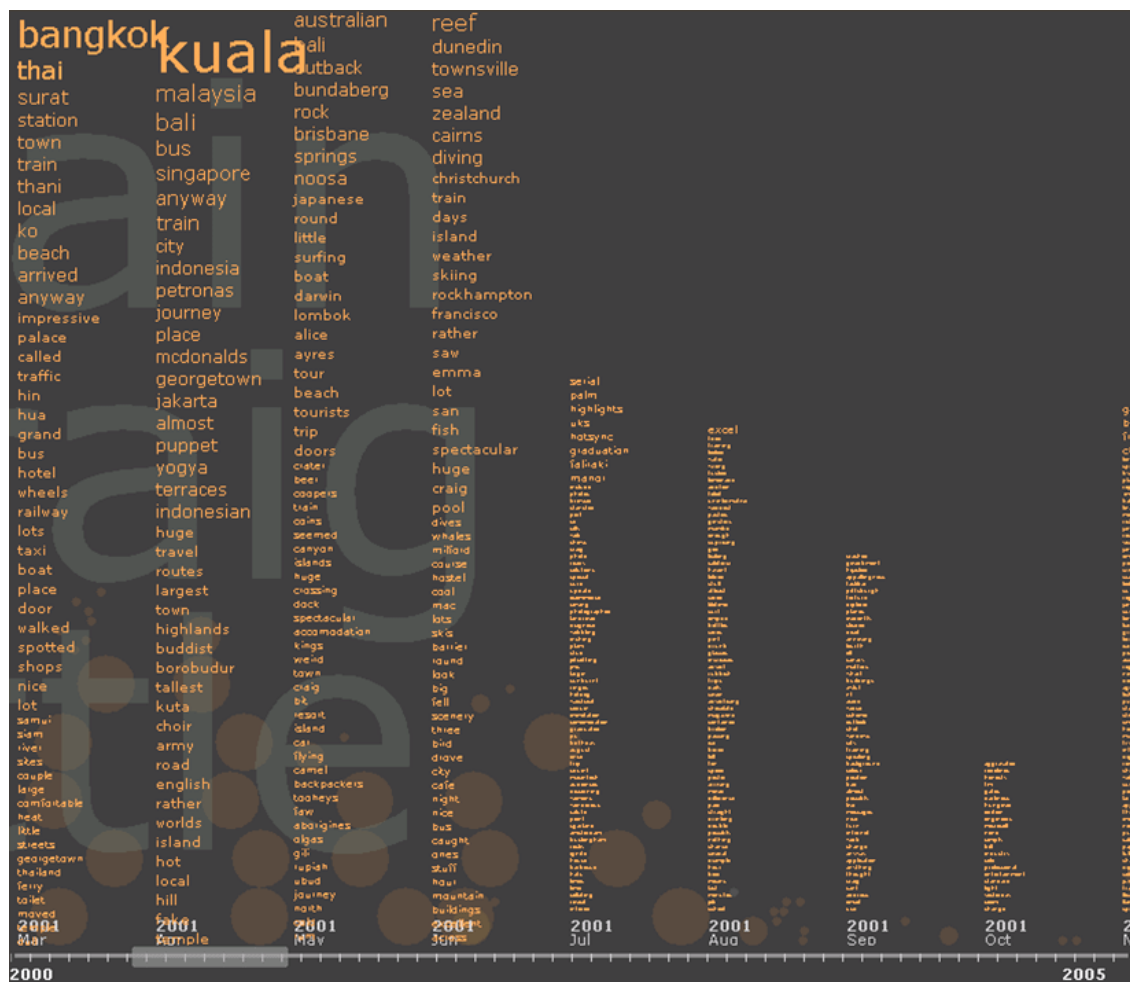
To Jeff, some of the most interesting information in Themail was related to his recent stay in the US and the realization of how much this change of environment was reflected in his emails

*During the time I've been [in the US], my friend Simon and I seem to have exchanged a lot of large emails - I suppose we were compensating for not just chatting ideas through face to face. It's also interesting to see how the content of the emails has changed and how long it took to go from very day to day issues, to more conceptual ideas. This seems to be reflected in the size and number of the messages displayed as circles.*

*My mother: this is nice; it shows that during my time in the US I've used email a lot more with my Mom – and there are some good words coming out here too all about New York and Boston, when they came over for a week.*

The contrast between the extraordinary events and the day-to-day routine was nicely illustrated for Jeff in his visualization of emails with a friend:

*This is a nice view of my friend Chris. He went on a round-the-world trip and you can see in the first four month columns all the places he went and the order too. We were sending lots of long emails then – when he gets back in July the talk switches to configuring Palm Pilots! [Figure 55]*



**Figure 55:** Notice how the first four columns in this screen shot are taller, with words set in bigger font sizes. These were the months when Jeff's friend was traveling around the world and the two were exchanging emails about his friend's trip. During those months, a series of travel-related words appear, such as: Bangkok, Thai, train, Malaysia, Indonesia, Jakarta, Australian outback, etc. In July his friend returns home and, from then on, the columns become a lot smaller and the words are set in small font sizes, indicating their communality vis-à-vis the rest of Jeff's email archive.



### 1) Event-driven interface

Users remarked on how the visualization made events “emerge” in the interface. For instance, it was easy to see the “before & after” effect that dramatic events had on their communication patterns with others – as was the case with Ann’s wedding correspondence. The integration of keywords to a time line lead users to quickly identify past events in their lives.

*For the most part, I'd say that all the words made sense. Especially for the months, it was usually around an event... Sometimes a word wouldn't make sense but then I'd click on it and realize “oh yeah, we did talk about that... at that time.*

### 2) The portrait

Most participants enjoyed having a representation that was indicative of the various relationships they had; they appreciated having their expectations confirmed by the visualization while still being able to drill deeper and discover patterns they were not aware of. For several people, the most enjoyable aspect of interacting with the system was looking at their families and friends in the visualization and comparing what they saw on screen with their impressions of these relationships; being reminded of important events in their lives; seeing the evolution of their relationships.

*The best “portrait” was for the mail with my mother... There have been all sorts of emotional things happening in the past few months (her mother / my grandmother passed away, she had surgery, etc.) and all of that comes through dramatically. I'd send you a screenshot but I sort of feel like it would violate her privacy.*

*I think this would probably just look like a jumbled mess to other people but, to me, I see lots of different things, it all jumps out at me, and it all makes a lot of sense.*

*If you look at the ten first words of each monthly column, for instance, it's like you are following someone's storyline.*

*The most unexpected thing for me was simply the amazing feeling of launching this visualization and seeing, for instance, the exchanges with [my wife]. There were words like “love,” “hope,” “marriage,” “change...” It was great! It managed to sum up in a few words a lot of what was being said at that time.*

*This is my advisor here- It's SO FUNNY! The words are: human, robot, task, memory, goal, action... It's like, my thesis proposal!!! It's exactly, what you would expect.*

### 3) Evolution of relationships

A constant theme in participants' accounts of their interaction with Themail was the fact that the words reminded them of how particular relationships had evolved over the years. Jeff, one of the

case studies presented here, remarked on this experience himself. Below is a list of evolution themes that emerged:

- from peer to boss
- from acquaintance to good friend
- from co-worker to social friend
- from classmates to lovers
- from lovers to spouses
- from spouse to former-spouse
- from child to adult (e.g. someone's daughter or son that grows up)
- from being co-located to moving away
- from long distance to living in the same city
- from being office-mates to living in separate cities/countries
- being in the same research group to being colleagues in a bigger lab

*I was really interested to see this one. During the past five years Ray has gone from being an acquaintance to a very good friend. Looking at it actually takes a while for the words to be dominated by things like bar names, beer and cinema! There are a couple of things that come out of the visualization, like a holiday when we all went to Sri Lanka and when Ray went to work in another town for a few months.*

*This person was on my master's thesis committee so we emailed a lot during my masters about research topics and then we lost touch. She had a baby and we had a short interchange then. We exchanged some email this past March because I was defending and here she was [user points at screen] having another baby. To see phases of a relationship is the best thing about this visualization.*

#### **4) The importance of temporality**

Several users were surprised at the results from the ranking of email addresses in Themail. When the visualization is launched, it displays a list of email addresses ordered by the number of emails exchanged between ego (the owner of the email archive) and each one of the contacts.

Participants were often surprised at the top people in the list because, a lot of times, these were people with whom they had exchanged a lot of emails in the past but who were not currently their top email correspondents.

*I would say that, [my archive] is not homogenous. There are people with whom I've exchanged much more emails in the past than in recent times. I think what I was really reflecting on was probably the past 6 months, one year, year and a half, hm... and not necessarily the whole archive dating back to 1997, in which case, [pointing to the screen] it is very reasonable for those people to be listed where they are.*

This raises an interesting question of what users might consider "current" versus "past" email relationships. We certainly know whether or not we are currently "in touch" with different people in our lives. But what time frame does this feeling of "being in touch" describes? Is it dependent on our activities in the past couple of weeks? Past couple of months? Maybe six months? Maybe

the past year? As illustrated in the quote above, even users don't really know what time interval best reflects our understanding of current email activity.

### **5) New perspectives on relationships**

The sheer collection of words exchanged with a person and presented in this visualization over time makes the texture of different relationships quickly obvious to users. By looking at these compilations of words, users were able to gain a new perspective on their relationships:

*This is the one I got a little chuckle out of... this is the [ethnic dance] mailing list; this is a group of us who help manage a dance club at [our university]. And the thing that sort of stood out to me here was the fact that, in just about every one of these columns has the word 'please' which is a reflection of everyone begging each other to do something! It's like, 'you guys, please do this, please do that...' and so, I thought it was really funny that this was sort of a predominant word that we're all just begging each other to do stuff! That's really what this is about.*

*This one reminded me of the fact that I was a slacker for the first couple of years and stuff like that... [Interviewer asks: how did the visualization remind you of that?] Well, because the name of our baseball team appears here! I'm talking more about baseball with [my advisor] than I am about work. I should probably have been working a little harder back then.*

Collapsing different contexts: realizing you know someone from fairly different contexts that you did not associate with that person before:

*I met Bob when I was interning at [companyX] in 2003 – he was my boss's boss and a very nice person. It was not until I saw the Themail visualization that I realized we had exchanged a few emails back in 2001 about a possible internship that never happened! Wow, I had no idea I had communicated with him before 2003... Since I had not met him in person before 2003, I never made that connection!*

### **6) The personal, cherished side of emails: family and friends**

As was the case with Ann, various users remarked on the importance of looking back at their most personal email exchanges, those with friends and family members. Some participants even confessed to me that the only reason they had signed up for the study was so that they could look at past conversations with their families.

*The most enjoyable aspect of this experience was clicking on a word and reading a message from a friend or family member. In some cases, I have not had much recent communication with several of the people in this corpus, so it was fun to go back and think about old friends.*



*I realized, as I played with this tool, that I was far more interested in looking at my exchanges with family members and friends than at my exchanges with colleagues at work. I think it makes sense because people usually put together photo albums of family and loved ones; nobody ever makes a photo album of, say, work projects.*

*This software helps me appreciate past email exchanges more. Regular email clients are too technical, too nitty-gritty, but this here gives me a better appreciation of the contents of my messages, the ebb-and-flow of my exchanges over time. The regular email reader I use is “cold,” it shows me that I have 1500 messages in my inbox and that every day I receive more messages but it gives me no indication of how things change over time. This helps me put my personal interactions into context.*

## **7) (Re)Discovery in words**

Themail lets users fetch the original email messages that caused the words that appear in the visualization. This feature is essential for getting users to trust the system because it allows them to access the ‘raw’ data – individual email messages – themselves and understand why certain words are displayed on screen. This capability, much more than any other feature in Themail, led to the discovery of events and interactions that users had previously forgotten about.

*I’m not sure where the word ‘femur’ came from; why would I be talking with my dad about ‘femur’? [The user clicks on the word and reads the messages that contain ‘femur’] Ah... my grandmother got hurt; that’s right. This is her name here [pointing at the visualization].*

*I saw the word “horse” in the collection of correspondence with a family member and assumed that the email would be about the horses my brother has on his small farm in Minnesota. As it turns out, the email was one from my daughter (using my email account) describing the horse riding lessons she had just begun. Nice turn of events, as her email was written in the voice of a small child (~ 10 years old).*

*[I clicked] on the word “decision” in an email from a friend of mine who worked with me on a local school technology planning committee. I was curious about what we might have had to “decide” about, and sure enough, it was an email about the MAC vs. Windows platform “decision” for the school. This brought back memories of many long, and quite heated discussions on the topic among parents, teachers and members of the committee.*

## **8) Sharing**

Given the results from PostHistory, where users were eager to share the visualization images with others, I asked participants whether they thought about sharing Themail images:

*To be honest, I shared stories that I discovered in the archive with family members and with a few colleagues. I was moved to talk about the content of some of the messages, much like someone would be moved to share a memory sparked by an old letter or photograph.*

I would like to use it again for friends and family, I often don't "need" to look very closely at past emails – but it's really nice if we use it as a conversation piece.

#### **4.4.6 Major Problems and frustrations:**

Users main complaints about Themail can be divided in two main categories: content parsing issues and usability problems

##### **1) Content parsing**

**a. Signatures:** Extracting signatures to make sure that the words in these passages don't show up as the biggest words in the visualization. Unfortunately, Themail did not always succeed in spotting signatures at the end of people's messages and ignoring them. In some cases, this caused unique signature words to show up in large font sizes.

**b. One-time-only messages (forwarded messages, jokes, code, etc) :** A lot of times a single message contained the most unique words in a month and, therefore, the words in a forwarded message ended up being at the top of a month column, set in big font size. Most often than not, a single forwarded message is not representative of people's email exchanges. This indicates that the algorithm should be changed, maybe counting only unique words that appear in more than one message.

##### **2) Usability**

**a. Small font:** Words set in small font – several users complained that there were months where all the words were illegible and they would have liked to be able to read at least a few of those (at least a few legible words in every column).

**b. Merging people's multiple email addresses:** At the same time that users appreciated the option of merging people's multiple email addresses, some found the implementation of the merging process very frustrating. Because merging could only be done during the data processing step (Themail Processor), several participants commented that they didn't fully understand the reason for going through the trouble of merging people's multiple addresses until they saw the visualization running and realized that it made a lot more sense to have the multiple addresses of one person show up together. Users would like to be able to continue to merge people's addresses at the visualization stage.

**c. Message format:** Even though the visualization allows users to look at the email messages that caused each word on the screen to appear, Themail does not keep the original layout of the message. Things such as paragraph breaks, html markers, and URLs are stripped from the original messages. Some participants complained that this made some of the original email messages hard to comprehend.

##### **3) Feature requests**

**a. Quantity and structure markers:** Some participants mentioned that they would have liked to see explicit indicators of quantity – for instance: frequency of emails, total numbers of email

messages exchanged with each person, etc. Others mentioned that they would have liked to see the actual threads of conversations instead of seeing disconnected email messages

**b. User input:** A few participants raised the possibility of having their input affect the way Themail deals with content. Because it is a known fact that content analysis is a problematic area of computer science – one with no perfect solution – it is expected that the output of the Themail Processor should have flaws. Given this situation, some users suggested that, as they interact with the visualization, they should be able to select keywords that the system should ignore (like the eventual word originating from a friend's email signature). This capability would render the visualization more interactive and representative.

#### **4.4.7 Discussion**

##### **What is the goal in visualizing archives with which the user is already familiar?**

Is it to reflect people's subjective impressions of their archives? In a sense, people already have those clearly established in their minds, so we wouldn't be adding much by creating a visualization that reflects exactly people's impressions. It seems desirable to create a visualization that allows users to gain a new perspective into the past. At the same time, however, it would be inadequate to create a visualization that presents someone's personal archives in a manner that is so dramatically different from that person's perception of their past that he/she cannot make any connection between the two. So there is an important balance that the designer must strive to achieve where the visualization offers some resemblance to the user's subjective impression of his/her archive (for instance, obvious patterns such as the people with whom the person exchanges lots of email messages should be readily recognizable in the visualization) while, at the same time, providing a perspective that is new and allows users to learn something about their collection of documents.

This becomes very important, for instance, with quantitative data. Humans are not very good at remembering precise amounts of things. For instance, our entire visual system relies not on absolute amounts of light but on the contrast of light and dark that we perceive around us – that's the key element for how we perceive colors in the world (Ware, 2000). Computers, on the other hand, are very good at keeping track of numbers. So, the fact that participants in the Themail user study were surprised to find out who they emailed the most with, is not that startling. What is more interesting in that result is to find out why users had a different list of people in their minds. What *model* were participants using to come up with a list of people with whom they felt they were exchanging the highest number of messages?

Several participants gave more weight to people with whom they are currently in touch. Participants would look at the top 4 people in the list of addresses and say something like "Oh, I see... these are people with whom I've exchanged many emails in the past... not anymore though." This poses an interesting problem: computationally speaking, what does a "current" relationship mean? How does that differ from a "past" relationship?

Sometimes a participant would be surprised by the placement of the top 4 people in the visualization because those were people with whom he/she did not have highly personal email interactions. In other words, these were people that were probably very active in mailings lists to

which the owner of the archive belonged. Systems such as Themail should allow more flexibility in what dimensions should count for ordering email contacts and for weighting words from different messages. It would have been interesting, for instance, to color words originating from personal messages (those exchanged personally between ego and the highlighted person) differently from words that originated from messages sent to mailing lists.

## **4.5 Personal Memories: Conclusion**

Users' reactions to the projects in this chapter indicate that visualizations have the potential of transforming email archives into social objects of display and storytelling. The projects allowed users to reflect on long-term patterns which were not obvious before.

While they may not be the kind of tools that people would use on a daily basis, PostHistory and Themail provide the same type of memory building artifact as photographs do. They allow individuals to recall their past and construct stories for sharing. Just as photographs allow individuals to begin relationships by having a mechanism for sharing information about one's pasts, these visualizations provide a tangible link to one's digital interactions.

While much meaning was derived from the patterns of email traffic visualized in PostHistory, the content analysis in Themail provided a much richer source of social context. In Themail, users were able to easily spot a variety of past events in their lives. The texture of everyday life became obvious, revealing words that went all the way from people's daily routine to the most dramatic events in one's life. The ability to fetch the original messages that caused each word to appear in the visualization was a key part of the experience for participants in the study. Having learned from my previous experience with PostHistory, several enhancements were made to Themail, all the way from setting up the user study in a more natural setting to focusing more on content than on email traffic.

The work in this chapter stemmed, in big part, from my notion that the current view of email archives as solely utilitarian repositories of data is outdated and needs to be re-evaluated. I posit that something like one's email history is a very individual and organic entity; being highly infused with personal meaning. Visualizations like the ones presented here provide users with accessible ways of looking back at communication patterns over time and, therefore, have the potential to enrich users' sense of self as they get ever more engrossed in digital interactions. By representing a person through the collection of their social interactions, PostHistory, Mountain, and Themail present personal portraits of an individual through the context of their email interactions.

## 5 CONCLUSION

I started this thesis by asking the following research question:

***Does visualizing the cues & patterns present in social archives help users understand the spaces they inhabit and the relationships they maintain online?***

The answer is most certainly yes. But how exactly do these visualizations help users?

As I tested these systems, two main processes emerged as the leading practices utilized by users to understand and reflect upon the massive archives they were presented with: discovery and memory.

Discovery dominated interaction whenever users were not familiar with the archives they were looking at. For the purposes of this thesis, unfamiliar archives translated into collective records in public environments. On the one hand, Newsgroup Crowds and Authorlines allowed users to quickly form impressions of different newsgroups and authors without having to read large quantities of postings. On the other hand, History Flow, introduced users to the world of wiki page editing, revealing impressive mechanisms of collaboration between hundreds of writers. In both cases, users were exposed to the visualizations and the archives themselves for the first time so, a lot of the impact I was able to measure rests on novelty. Future work should seek to understand what happens when users are given continuous access to the kind of visualization tools presented here. How does long-term usage differ from once-in-a-lifetime experiences? Moreover, how do users interact with a visualization system as their knowledge of the archives being displayed grows? How does increased familiarity change the types of insight that users draw from these tools?

In order to address these questions, there are two independent aspects of “familiarity” that need to be clarified. The first is familiarity with the archives being visualized and the second is familiarity with a given visualization system. The former has been explored in this thesis in chapter III, where I talk about visualizing personal email archives. The latter has yet to be investigated. Except for the activity traces in Chat Circles, all other history visualizations in this thesis exist apart from the communication spaces that generate the archives being visualized. This is a significant limitation of the work presented here.

The ideal scenario would be to have history visualizations integrated in the communication interfaces of newsgroups, wikis, email clients, etc. Only then will we be able to determine what happens when users have constant access to visualizations of past communication behavior. My belief is that, as users become familiar with a given visualization tool – that is, as users become

used to what others look like in a visualization system – they will become more effective in using this tool to perform a lot of the social categorization that we carry out offline: from typifying people and utilizing prototypes, to manipulating representations of self. After all, these visualizations function very much in the same way that mirrors do: they allow one to see what others look like as much as they allow one to examine oneself.

The other important lesson to draw from the visualizations of online public spaces is their function as aids for understanding privacy implications online. In evaluating Newsgroup Crowds and Authorlines, users were shocked at the amount of data they could access about an individual's past behavior. These were seasoned, heavy newsgroup users who knew that Usenet posts are always public and persistent. Nonetheless, several of them gasped at the amount of information they could interpret at a glance in the visualizations. By functioning as effective mirrors of online behavioral data, these visualizations constantly remind users of the persistent nature of online environments.

Visualizing archives with which users are already familiar was the main theme in the *Personal Memories* chapter. There, a progressive series of visualizations explored different aspects of personal email archives: patterns of email traffic, growing collections of email contacts, and email content over time. Unlike the discovery process that was key in the *Collective Memories* chapter, here users enjoyed interacting with the visualizations because these provided them with opportunities for narrative of past events in their lives. In essence, the systems aided users' personal and social memory. Themail, with its display of key words over time, afforded opportunities for rather nuanced storytelling. The ability to fetch original messages in Themail was essential for building trust – whenever users spotted words they did not recall having used, they would look at the messages that were related to that word.

In fact, a common thread in the progression of projects both in the *Collective* and the *Personal Memories* chapters has been the increased attention paid to content. My earlier projects integrate content to a lesser extent than do my later ones. For instance, History Flow's tight coupling of visualization and content, assures that patterns can be readily understood and categorized. In Themail, the fact that there were multiple layers of content analysis – background, most frequently used words, columns of monthly, unique words, etc – gives the user different levels of access to the contents of their archives.

Evaluation of these tools revealed the importance of these visualizations to the communities and individuals that generated the documents being displayed. Unlike traditional information systems that are built for expert analysis of someone else's data, here the visualization were given to the owners of the data. The unexpected uses that emerged from the user studies reveal that visualizations systems can be utilized in much more flexible and personal ways than the information visualization community realizes today.

This thesis stands as firm proof that information visualization ought to be seen not as an *end* in itself but, instead, as a *means* for communication.

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