Talking in Circles:
Representing Place and Situation In an Online Social Environment

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Submitted to the Program in Media Arts and Sciences,
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Media Arts and Sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Abstract

This thesis presents work focused on the creation of a sociable space for communication online. Sociable communication requires the ability to converse with others using simple and meaningful mechanisms, supporting flexibility and expressiveness. Equally important is the ability for people to read the space they inhabit and make sense of it in socially significant ways, such as people-watching to observe others’ interests and interaction styles. A third key to sociable communication is emphasis on identity and embodiment, giving participants a strong sense of themselves and others through their online representations.

These issues are approached through research in areas ranging from sociology to urban architecture, directed at finding bases for the design of capabilities that are useful and engaging in the context of computer support for distributed multiparty communication. The result of this research is Talking in Circles, a graphical audioconferencing environment that employs abstract graphics for representation and provides lightweight access to multiple expressive modes. This thesis discusses foundations for work towards sociable communication online as well as the design and implementation processes involved in the creation of the Talking in Circles system. User experiences with the system, lessons learned and directions for further research into sociable communication are then detailed.

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