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,
School of Architecture and Planning,
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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Contents

Abstract **2**

Thesis Committee **3**

Acknowledgements **4**

Contents **5**

List of Figures **7**

1 Introduction **9**

1.1 Motivation 10

1.2 System Overview 11

1.3 Organization of this Document 11

2 Foundations for the Design of an Online Sociable Environment **13**

2.1 Communication Channels and Media 13

2.1.1 Text-based Communication 14

2.1.2 Graphical Text-chat Environments 15

2.1.3 Video-based Media Spaces 18

2.1.4 Audio as Primary Communication 20

2.2 Socio-spatial Grounding 22

2.2.1 Avatar Proxemics in Graphical Text Chat 22

2.2.2 Milgram's Studies of Crowd Formations 24

2.2.3 Whyte's Sociological Studies of Urban Architecture 25

3 The Design Process of *Talking in Circles* **28**

3.1 Speaker Identification 28

3.2 Spatialization 30

3.3 Circle Motion 36

3.4 Drawing and Gesture 36

3.5 Sound Booths 40

4 The Implementation of *Talking in Circles* **43**

4.1 Design Requirements and Iterative Prototypes 43

4.2 Shared and Subjective System Rendering 45

4.3 Basic *Talking in Circles* Graphical Elements 47

5 User Experiences **50**

5.1 Evaluation of New Social Environments 50
5.2 Encouraging Experiences 51
5.3 Problems and Limitations 52
5.4 Specialized Users 53
6 Summary and Conclusions **55**
7 Future Directions **58**
7.1 Likely Fruitful Directions 58
7.2 Other Potential Directions 59
Bibliography **61**

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 p. 12 — Six participants conversing in Talking in Circles

Figure 3.1 p. 29 — Diagram of several moments' sample speech between James and Alice and corresponding graphical feedback

Figure 3.2 p. 31 — Output volume as a function of distance from a speaker

Figure 3.3 p. 32 — Diagram of sample speech between James and Alice and corresponding perceived speech volume

Figure 3.4 p. 34 — Three conversations in a Talking in Circles chat session. Al and Sandy are speaking, while Josh draws for Yef

Figure 3.5 p. 34 — Screenshot from the point of view of Al, the blue circle, as Sandy and Andy are speaking. Andy is within Al's hearing range, while Sandy is now outside it

Figures 3.6a, 3.6b, 3.6c p. 37 — Participants' representations cannot overlap each other in Talking in Circles. Here, Albert approaches Norman, then moves swiftly around him, akin to crowd motion

Figures 3.7a, 3.7b p. 40 — Two examples of drawings from Talking in Circles

Figure 3.8 p. 41 — Six participants conversing in Talking in Circles. Allen, Jackie and Sam are listening at the music booth, Kurt at the news booth

Figure 4.1 p. 44 — Typical desktop setup for a Talking in Circles session

Figure 4.2 p. 46 — Talking in Circles system diagram showing an overview of network transport of data and its rendering for participants

Figure 4.3 p. 47 — Talking in Circles login panel

Figures 4.4a, 4.4b p. 48 — The music and sound booths

Figures 4.5a, 4.5b p. 48 — Built-in icon bar and how each appears when displayed by a participant

Figures 4.6a, 4.6b p. 49 — Albert's circle as it appears in Talking in Circles when not speaking (left) and when speaking at normal volume (right)

Figure 4.7 p. 49 — RAT control panel. Though not generally used during a Talking in Circles session, this control panel permits adjustment of the local microphone and speaker amplification