Persistent Conversation: Discourse as Document

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Conversation is essential. It is the stuff out of which our social lives are constructed. We use it as a medium for decision making and conducting business. It is through conversation that we create, develop, validate, and share knowledge. The give and take of conversation—questions and answers, misunderstandings and corrections, objections and elaborations—is a superb way of unpacking and explicating complex subjects. And when computational or bureaucratic systems prove too rigid, it is through talk that we negotiate appropriate work-arounds.

As social creatures we are enormously skilled at conversation. We speak to people, and use their reactions to guide our remarks: nods and eye contact convey one message; questions and furrowed brows another; yawns and fidgeting still another. It is through conversation that we portray ourselves, advancing our personal goals, taking credit, sharing blame, and accomplishing other social ends, often with great subtlety.

Given the centrality of conversation to our lives, it is disquieting to see how drastically conversation changes when it takes place in the digital medium. Computer-mediated conversation (CMC) is quite different from its face-to-face namesake. It is cumbersome, particularly among more than a few participants. Conversations often seem to lack coherence, tending towards drift and dissolution. In CMC many of our finely honed skills become irrelevant. And the audience to which we are used to speaking becomes largely invisible.

Yet the changes wrought by the digital medium aren’t all negative. Persistence expands conversation beyond the those within earshot, rendering it accessible to those in other places and at later times. Thus, digital conversation may be synchronous or asynchronous, and its audience intimate or vast. Its persistence means that it may be far more structured, or far more amorphous, than an oral exchange, and that it may have the formality of published text or the informality of chat. The persistence of such conversations also opens the door to a variety of new uses and practices: such conversations may be searched, browsed, replayed, annotated, visualized, restructured, and recontextualized, with what are likely to be profound impacts on personal, social, and institutional practices.

This minitrack brings together designers and researchers from different disciplines who are grappling with the issues raised by persistent conversation. One goal is to deepen the understandings of how existing systems are being used to support conversation. Phenomena of interest include conversations carried out using email, mailing lists, news groups, bulletin board systems, textual and graphic MUDs, chat clients, structured conversation systems, document annotation systems, etc. Although such systems are typically designed with particular aims in mind, users are adept at turning systems to their own ends, and the ways in which they do so can be startling and enlightening. Another goal of this minitrack is to bring attention to bear on the design of CMC systems. Thus, descriptions of novel systems and innovative approaches, analyses of system usage, observations of the emergence of new practices, and discussions of the implications of existing practices for the design of new CMC systems, are all relevant. Finally, it seems clear that the tools, techniques, and approaches developed by different disciplines can be of great value to others engaged in this work.

The papers in this minitrack cover a lot of ground. The conversations examined range from synchronous chat to asynchronous discourse to intriguing blends of both. Audiences considered extend in size and composition from a relatively small work group to conversations among hundreds of people. Conversational topics range from social chat, to storytelling, to conducting business in the workplace, to political discourse in a public forum. Systems discussed include well-known applications such as IRC clients and novel one-of-a-kind design prototypes. The papers may be roughly divided between those that analyze existing conversational practices and sites, and those that propose, implement, or deploy new types of conversational systems. In keeping with the spirit of this minitrack, many papers blur these boundaries.

The papers begin with Herring’s analysis of interactional coherence in CMC. She examines a number of instances of CMC, notes the ways in which it lacks coherence, and discusses ways in which conversants compensate for incoherence, as well as observing that, in some situations, incoherence is not always an undesired
attribute of a conversation. She concludes by suggesting some desiderata for CMC design.

The paper by Donath, Karahalios, and Viegas discusses the design of CMC systems, showing designs for visualizing synchronous conversation (Chat Circles) and asynchronous conversation (Loom). This work pays particular attention to socially salient aspects of conversation such as its ethos, the size of its audience, and their activities with respect to the conversation, and tries to reveal information that participants can make use of for social purposes.

Adams, Toomey, and Churchill discuss an innovative CMC system design, this one intended to support the daily activity of a project team distributed across two time zones, eight hours apart. PAVE is a prototype of a tool for capturing a real-time distributed meeting and allowing the meeting to be re-played and annotated by a second group of participants, thus creating a composite meeting which may be accessed by all.

Next, Rosson describes the Web Storybase, designed to be a place for ordinary web users to tell stories about their web experiences, and to comment on the stories of others. She looks at its use over the course of three and a half years and analyzes the stories told, some aspects of the resulting conversations, and how the content and use of the site appears to shifting as web usage practices mature.

Light and Rogers offer an analysis of an asynchronous, public conversation, examining a political forum run by The Guardian newspaper for the 40 days leading up to an election in April, 1997. They pay particular attention to the different interaction models that such sites might use and note that different types of users seem to bring expectations about readability, informativeness, and discursiveness associated with different models.

The paper by Turoff, Hiltz, Bieber, Fjermstad, and Rana brings us back into the realm of design. Their interest is in supporting deep, asynchronous collaboration among hundreds of people. Drawing on their experience with the Delphi method, they explore the creation and visualization of content-oriented discourse structures which a group can collaboratively evolve in synchrony with their needs.

The minitrack ends with a paper by Paolillo, in which he demonstrates how information about the underlying social networks may be extracted from persistent conversations, a technique which can be applied to a great many ends. In the case at hand, an examination of linguistic feature distribution among members of an IRC channel, he uses it to reveal inadequacies of current accounts of the role of social networks in language variation.

A number of common threads run through the papers. Perhaps the most pervasive is the idea of providing visualizations of persistent conversation which can help participants navigate, understand, and control conversations. Entwined with this thread is the issue of coherence: how users compensate for lack of coherence, and how designers might support greater coherence. Another thread, and to my mind the one with the deepest implications, has to do with relinquishing a tight focus on the content and structure of the conversation itself. Instead, stepping back and looking at conversation as a social phenomena, occurring within an institutional context which imposes various roles and expectations, and being shaped by the constraints of the underlying technical system, can greatly enhance our understanding of conversation, whether ephemeral or persistent.