The Design of Conversational Spaces

The Design of Conversational Spaces starts with the observation that conversation is everywhere online, but that its quality ranges from excellent to execrable. The negative end of that scale is astonishingly bad – moronic rants, off-topic rambles, vitriolic attacks. (“dude just stfu nobody watches ur videos just gtfo out of you tube oh no were hurting his little feelings i feel soo bad”.) It's enough to make you wish for the enforced public silence of 20th century media.

Yet not all online speech suffers this fate; many sites manage to host not just civil but productive conversations, from the talk pages on Wikipedia to the design conversations on github to political debate on Comment is Free. Programmers have contentious but respectful conversations on StackOverflow and #winprog; crafters on Etsy and Ravelry; mathematicians on Polymath; pop artists on DeviantArt.

This class is about the design of environments that support or encourage good conversation. We will explore what makes comments on YouTube so bad, and on Ravelry so good, a bundle of differences that includes the scale of the audience, the commitment of the participants to each other and to shared enterprise, and the willingness and ability of the participants police violations.

The class is designed to explore three forces that affect online conversation:

1. Forces that set conversational context (scale, homophily, identity)
2. Forces that guide conversations (visual and verbal cues, social rules)
3. Forces that restrict conversations (membership, karma, moderation)

These will be your toolkit for thinking about conversational design. The goal of the course is to sketch out a "pattern language" for the kinds of choices designers make when creating conversational or interactive interfaces or tools, and to understand the inevitable tradeoffs involved.

Work

All the design work in the class will be in small groups; this is not a studio class for individual ideas -- collaborating with one another is core to the class.

Coursework consists of several design exercises, as well as short readings and class discussion and presentations. You will look at at least one conversational environment every week, and participate in an online conversation with the class during the semester.

The first design exercises will be a studies of existing conversational interfaces; you will work in small groups to study online conversations, trying to understand what makes them work as they do, whether well or badly. For your mid-term, you will design a new interface for conversation around a single piece of content. Your designs will be to the degree possible, tested in the wild. For the final exercise, your group will decide to continue on an existing design, to undertake a new re-design, or to design a new conversational environment from scratch.

CLASSES

Week 1 (Jan 25): Tragedy of the Commons
Defining the problem; understanding conversational dilemmas as a Tragedy of the Commons.

“Fame is a Topology”: Excerpt from Here Comes Everybody, Clay Shirky (Handout)
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Assignment A: Create a Wikipedia account if you don’t have one; find two articles on subject you know about that have interesting Talk pages; read those discussion (and participate if you like); commit at least one helpful edit to each article; see what happens to your edit.

Week 2 (Feb 1): Identity and the Shadow of the Future
Identity provides incentive for good behavior, a process known as “the shadow of the future.”

Readings: Goffman, Erving; The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Handout)
Theories of Human Communication: Conversation Stephen Littlejohn, ed. (Handout)
Sites: http://DeviantArt.com; http://Flickr.com

Assignment B: Two groups of students should pick a conversational environment and examine user behavior in 3 conversations on the site. Be prepared to present the similarities and differences to the class next week.

Week 3 (Feb 8): Audience effect; Scale and Density
Conversation in groups is different than monologue or dialogue, and exhibits different patterns in large vs. small groups. (Groups in Assignment B present briefly to the class.)

Readings: “Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks”: Miller McPherson et al. (Handout)
Sites: Comment is Free (http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree)
It’s A Free Country (http://www.itsafreecountry.org)

Assignment C: The other two groups should pick two conversational environments and examine and compare the cues those sites send about the nature of participation. Be prepared to present the similarities and differences to the class next week.

Week 4 (Feb 15): Homophily and Satisfaction
Groups cluster around at least some similarities, and participants look for emotional satisfaction, even in practical, goal-oriented groups. (Groups in Assignment C present briefly to the class.)

Readings: “Flaming and the Design of Social Software”: Clay Shirky
“Conversational Terrorism”: http://www.vandruff.com/art_converse.html
Sites: git-hub; Apache mailing lists

Assignment D-1 (Midterm): Work in groups to design an interesting conversational interface around a single piece of content, to be presented in class.

Week 5 (Feb 22): Argument
The oldest, most widely observed pattern in all computer-mediated communication is the tendency for anger to be expressed easily and vehemently.

Readings: The Social Life of Information. John Seely Brown, and Paul Duguid (Handout)
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Assignment D-2: Present your interface. Continue work, taking class comments into account. Put an alpha version up by next week.

Week 6 (Mar 1): Social Objects and Public Signals
Metrics of behavior can be attached to identities, as can rankings, rewards and other information.

No readings or sites. Spend the time on your interface

Assignment D-3: Continue work on the (now live) interface, taking class comments into account. This is the week we will direct traffic to the site.

Week 7 (Mar 8): Class Discussion of Interfaces
In class presentations of final projects to outside reviewers.

Readings: Stack Exchange site creation: http://area51.stackexchange.com/faq
Sites: http://ACOR.org mailing lists; http://MetaFilter.com

Week 8 (Mar 22): Membership
Membership is the linking of personal identity to group identity, and to the recognition of the other members of the same group.

Sites: Various, for Assignment E

Assignment E: Two groups of students should pick three conversational environments that have explicit and highlighted comment policies, and compare them for the class next week.

Week 9 (Mar 29): Terms of Service
Rules exist on a spectrum from constraint to guideline, and can be enforced regularly or occasionally. (Groups from Assignment E present briefly to the class.)

Readings: Designing Social Interfaces, Christian Crumlish (Handout)
Slashdot FAQ: Moderation http://slashdot.org/moderation.shtml
Sites: Various, for Assignment F

Assignment F: Two groups of students should pick three conversational environments that have explicit flagging or karma rankings, and compare them for the class next week.

Week 10 (Apr 5): Flags and Karma
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Participant behavior, as understood by the site or by the other participants, can be made explicit. (Groups from Assignment F present briefly to the class.)


Assignment G-1: Work in groups to design and propose a final project.

Week 11 (Apr 12): Moderating and Editing
Modifying existing text is complex in social situations, since it alters an artifact that is part of the historical record.

Readings: Nomic Rules: www.earlham.edu/~peters/nomic.htm

Assignment G-2: Present your idea to the class. Continue work.

Week 12 (Apr 19): Self-modifying Constitutions
Many organizations are not just governed by rules, but by rules for how the participants can alter the rules.

Assignment G-3: Continue work.

No readings or sites

Week 13 (Apr 26): Open Issues In Conversational Design
Because user interface and user experience work have emphasized personal utility, group effects have been under-studied, leaving many important open questions.

Assignment G-4: Continue work.

No readings; prepare to present your work to the class.

Week 14 (May 3): Final Presentations
In class presentations of final projects to outside reviewers.