

Graphical Conversations

Write an analysis of the environments you visited. Think about how the graphics are being used: do they add a new dimension of expressiveness? make new types of interactions possible? facilitate more complex or subtle social communication? What are the differences between the graphical and text-based environments you have observed. What are the entrance requirements to the graphical sites? Are there specifically graphical forms of communicative competence? How are the graphics used to establish identity? to interact and communicate? What is the role of the background? How is motion used? What do you think works well in the systems you observe and what does not?

I explored Blaxxun's standard, the Worlds.com worlds, ActiveWorlds, Holodesk and various Oz worlds. In addition, i explored the traditional 2D chatrooms of MSN and the Van Gogh interactive museum..

I was quite upset to see that all of the 3D sites looked and felt the same; i was hoping for some level of diversity. In particular, i was stunned to see the limited mobility and reminded that it is quite annoying to move around a 3D space using arrows. Having visited Blaxxun's site first, i couldn't help compare the 3D image to the imagination put forth by Neil Stephenson in Snow Crash and feel that we are a long way off.

One of the main questions that i think about when i see a 3D graphical chat interface is "what is the advantage." I agree with Rossney that a huge advantage is being able to build on a physical character that people can remember over time. But i can't help but think that the conversations are more difficult, especially when the language gets wrapped up in the fact that i am talking to a soldier with full armour. I don't feel even remote fluidity, something i take for granted in a text-only chat.

In addition to the graphics getting in the way, the movement makes it extremely difficult to have a comfortable conversation with multiple people. I can't turn my head so the whole body has to go and i feel like i am indicating that i have to go to the bathroom, moving back and forth so much. One thing that grates on me in 3D is that i can't for the life of me seem to smoothly move and look at a flat panel of text. As a result, i play these games of back and forth trying to position myself in front of it and then turn to face it. This became exceptionally annoying when exploring the Van Gogh museum. Unfortunately, no one was there to talk to about this..

Speaking of which.. I found other players in 2 of the 9 3D worlds i tried. One, "Worlds" (generic) had about 10 other people so i was able to converse with a few, even though i was a penguin and obviously not an expert. Almost everyone else in the room seemed to be an expert in the space but i spent most of my time talking to the armoured guy who has been in the Worlds space for a year and loved it. His explanation was that he could relax and meet people, teach people to build their avatars (he felt useful) and that it was just comfortable to do after a long day at work.

All of the sites seemed to have been based on a rather frustrating standard - Pesce's VRML. This meant that 1) they all looked alike; 2) they all moved alike; 3) they were all really limited in their options. Although, in theory, i was in 1st person, i felt as though there was a wall between me and the rest of the world, as though i was looking in through a window and not really responding. I never feel that way when i am in 2D chats (textual or otherwise). Upon entrance to the space, you chose an avatar (or one is usually picked for me since i was a non-paying participant). Once you have an avatar, you are free to move. Most of the spaces have multiple rooms (although some are blocked off until you download them or

pay). You usually "teleport" to different rooms, although you can walk between them in some sites. You have no control over your avatar other than 2D movement (although, if you make your own, you have much more control). Unfortunately, i get the sense that i am playing a game more than interacting with other people. I realize that the people's words are actual people's voices but its hard to _feel_ that. And that's not just a mediation thing. I don't get the same feel with text chat or IM or email. I just can't place a finger on what it is that makes me feel so distant in 3D VRML chat.

As for the surrounding graphics, they grate on me in the same way that a couch in the Palace bothers me - what's the point? I don't feel anything except that i am playing a game and playing the roles that i am supposed to play. I don't find that it helps conversation as much as it helps pretend like we are not on the computer.

Basically, what it comes down to is that i outright despise 3D VRML chat. I have been trying to avoid it over the last 3 years hoping that it would eventually start to approach the imagination that i had set forth by the real Black Sun in *Snow Crash*. Unfortunately, i don't think anything has changed since VRML came out ?5? years ago.

As for the other (non-3D) places i visited...

I like *ChatCircles* as a way of communicating with people - i like the flow much better. Unfortunately, because of the lack of individuality and personal identity, i often feel as though the space is quite cold. In addition, while it can be a never ending space, its difficult to get a sense of what's going on without being in the space of conversation - i.e. no way to easily eavesdrop to see what type of conversation is going on. In addition, since you don't have a sense of the people who are talking, you can't make an assumption other than the movement of the circles indicating that they are talking.

Although i have even implemented *Comic Chat*, i can't help but think that it is more of a fun toy than a real conversation device. Most of the conversations that people have using it are trying to explore what funny features are implemented, what types of language detection, etc. After the novelty wears off, people stop using it. This is because its neither real nor abstract enough to allow for the conversation to be the focus instead of the graphics.

Then there is traditional 2D text chat... It has problems. There is a cap to how many conversations and how many participants. Understanding lurkers is challenging. Its difficult for newcomers to understand the threads and subtext. I admit the interface is broken. What i wonder then is whether the horribly uninteresting conversations that occur in text chat are due to the interface or the medium? I really hope that its the former because i believe that there is a possibility for meaningful virtual relationships. Unfortunately, i just don't think that current systems have allowed them to be built.