

# Persistent Conversation: A Dialog Between Research and Design

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## 1. Introduction

Persistent conversation is human-to-human interaction that is carried out over computer networks; it is produced by typing, speaking or other means, and, unlike face-to-face conversation, it leaves a trace -- in the form of text on a computer screen, sound files, etc, -- that persists for varying amounts of time. Examples of persistent conversation include interactions carried out using email, mailing lists, news groups, bulletin board systems, textual and graphic MUDs, chat clients, structured conversation systems, and document annotation systems.

Persistent conversation differs from spoken conversation in interesting ways. For example, because it leaves a perceptible trace, persistent conversation can occur asynchronously with lags of minutes to months between conversational turns, as happens in e-mail. Alternatively, the turns of persistent conversation can overlap, with many participants effectively 'speaking' at once, as often happens in on-line chats. Freeing conversation from the lock-step synchrony of face-to-face talk has major implications both for the ways in which people and groups turn persistent conversation to their own ends, and for the design of systems which support conversation.

Relaxation of synchrony is just one of the characteristics that distinguish persistent conversation from its spoken counterpart. Other characteristics include textual and graphic compensation for the loss of social cues present in face-to-face conversation; the possibility of very-large-scale conversations with hundreds or thousands of participants; and the social and ethical consequences (in terms of responsibility, accountability and liability) of the creation of potentially permanent records of what used to be an ephemeral process.

The particular aim of this minitrack, and of its associated workshop, is to bring together researchers who analyze existing computer-mediated conversational practices and sites, with designers who propose, implement, or deploy new types of conversational systems. By bringing together participants from such diverse areas as anthropology, computer-mediated communication, HCI, interaction design, linguistics, psychology, rhetoric, sociology, and the like, we hope that the work of each may inform the others, suggesting new questions, methods, perspectives, and design approaches.

## 2. Papers

This is the fourth annual minitrack on Persistent Conversation at HICSS. We received a wide variety of interesting papers for the three previous years (see [1] for the first year's set of papers), and this year continues the trend. This year's papers analyze conversations in systems ranging from USENET newsgroups (the first session) to Web sites to document annotation systems. They address the design issues raised by familiar applications, as well as proposing novel designs for visualizing very large scale conversations and supporting reflective, coherent conversation in educational contexts.

This year's papers:

- \* Democratic Participation in the Discursive Management of Usenet, by John C. Paolillo and David Heald\*
- An Empirical Exploration of Mass Interaction System Dynamics: Individual Information Overload and Usenet Discourse, by Quentin Jones, Gilad Ravid, and Sheizaf Rafaeli
- Developing Legible Visualizations for Online Social Spaces, by danah boyd, Hyun-Yeul Lee, Daniel Ramage, and Judith Donath
- Managing Long Term Communications: Conversation and Contact Management, by Steve Whittaker, Quentin Jones, and Loren Terveen
- From Comments to Dialogues: A Study of Asynchronous Dialogue Processes as Part of Collaborative Reviewing on the Web, by Hee-Cheol (Ezra) Kim
- Designing for Pedagogical Effectiveness: The TextWeaver™, by Cindy Xin and Andrew Feenberg
- \* Designing for Community: The Effects of Gender Representation in Videos on a Web Site, by Susan Herring, Anna Martinson, and Rebecca Scheckler\*

## 3. References

- [1] Persistent Conversation. Special Issue of the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, Vol. 4, No. 4, June 1999. <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol4/issue4/>

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\* Nominated for best paper award.