tion, and exciting demonstrations like Professor Bederson's latest work on Fish Eye Menus <http://www.cs.umd.edu/hcil/fisheyemenu>. Throughout the day, many presentations were made using the lab's own Kid Pad software <http://www.kidpad.org>. Kid Pad provides a zoomable user interface for hypertext authoring with single display groupware functionality and support for enactment of hyperlink traversal. Symposium attendees were provided with a CD containing copies of Kid Pad and PhotoFinder - a program that supports direct annotation of personal photo libraries < as well as a two volume set of Video Reports illustrating the lab's key achievements.

It would be impossible to do justice to all of the ongoing work presented by the HCIL ensemble in this limited space, so the interested reader is encouraged to visit the lab on the web <http://www.cs.umd.edu/hcil> where they can download technical reports and learn about all of the lab's other research activities.

The HCIL Symposium Series has turned into a significant HCI mini-conference in its own right. Next year an even more exciting and diverse group of participants from around the world will gather at College Park to discuss their work and to share in the exciting innovations that continue to emerge from the HCIL — I'll be there. ❖

Workshop Report: Online Communities. Supporting Sociability, Designing Usability

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On June 1, 2000, I had the privilege of participating in a workshop that was held in conjunction with the 17th Annual Symposium and Open House at the University of Maryland College Park's Human-Computer Interaction Lab. It was chaired by Jean Gasen, Jonathan Lazar, and Jenny Preece (whose new book, "Online Communities: Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability", ISBN 0471805998, is being published by Wiley). This was the second year in which the organizers addressed the topic of Online Communities in this form and it was immediately evident from the number of participants in this year's event that interest in the topic is on the rise.

You can find a full list of the participants and a number of their writings on the Workshop Web Site. Those in attendance fell into several 'camps' mirroring the makeup of our own hypertext community, with 'sys builders' and the like. In addition to the expected numbers representing various constituencies in higher education, there was also a strong and rather unexpected .com contingent from the commercial sector probing questions of 'profitability' and 'data collection' policy for their business as well as their social ramifications. While a few of these exchanges may have felt a bit out of place in our academic setting, the fact that commercial interests would embrace such a forum is actually rather encouraging when one thinks about it.

The two major goals of the workshop were to look at how we can make the software that supports virtual communities more accessible to a wider range of users and how we can manage the interpersonal relationships that unfold in this environment to address disputes, guard or profit from personal information provided by community members, and sustain our online communities over time.

The workshop website can be found at: http://triton.towson.edu/~jlazar/hcil2000/oc_workshop.html

The morning began with a unified session in which participants went over their backgrounds. The organizers then outlined their thoughts about the key issues facing online community designers and several systems were described. The next two sessions bracketed a sumptuous Chinese Buffet Lunch and saw the group divided into two panels. The first was composed of representatives of the education/distance learning sector discussing their experiences and the second combined those interested in e-commerce and system design.

My presentation http://www.cloud9.net/~futurist/workshop was part of this second breakout group and began with an overview of the American legal system in which I explored how different bodies of law address issues with analogs in the online environment. Then I turned from legal patterns to Christopher Alexander's work on architectural Design Patterns and pointed out that many of the followers of Alexander's movement had neglected to adopt his "process" best explicated in the third volume of his Design Patterns Trilogy, The Oregon Experiment.

Applying this process to the problem of promoting the long term sustainability of online communities, I offered a brief analysis of the decline of MediaMOO as a result of its excessive reliance on a charismatic founder and programmed social events. I then concluded by proposing a "Principle of Severability" through which independently useful facilities might be provided to draw users into the community independently of its social aspects and by which affordance would be provided to enable developers and users of such services to sever them from the shared environment.

For examples, software written to provide a new facility that operates within a conventional MOO can only be used in the MOO environment. The Principle of Severability would call for a redesign of the MOO software development architecture so that such user-designed facilities could be exported from and function

independently of the MOO. By so doing, the disincentives to investing time in a program that can't be used 'outside' the environment would be eliminated while the benefits of developing within the shared context would remain. Likewise if the online community offers useful data analysis or research tools that have sufficient value in their own right, users will be drawn to return even in the absence of "special events" or any expectations of seeing specific community members.

Other presentations offered Design Patterns for virtual environments, applications of grounded theory, and general participatory design considerations. The workshop will be more formally written up through SIGCHI and you can find abstracts of all of the presentation on the web.

As the two breakout groups reassembled to summarize the day, we were all struck by several key points. Software usability and interpersonal sociability are closely interrelated and as a research field the area is still too young to draw any hard and fast conclusions. Issues of privacy and economics need to be addressed and we need to start thinking about metrics for their evaluation. Finally, we need to consider the different perspectives of the stakeholders in an online community when looking at its success. It is quite possible to have a community that is unsuccessful from the economic perspective of investors, a personal triumph from the subjective perspective of its founder, a waste of time from the perspective of a casual visitor, and a critical source of emotional support from the perspective of its local core users.

There was a distinctly hypertextual character to our discussions throughout the day as several key threads were revisited and recontextualized. The participants will likely stay in touch and reassemble at next year's HCIL gathering as the Online Communities Community continues to grow. In closing, I'd like to thank our organizers, hosts, and fellow participants for making this forum such a success. ❖