

Introduction

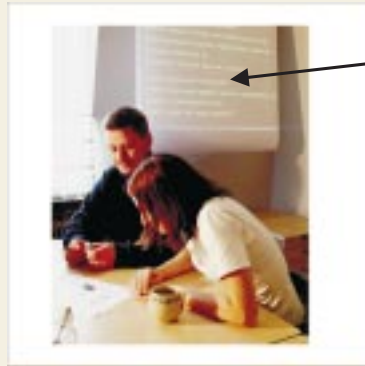
The initial inspiration for the ChatterBox comes from a novel by Douglas Coupland, called *Microserfs*. The main character Dan, ponders on whether machines have a subconscious of their own or not. He starts to create a "SUBCONSCIOUS" file on his computer by writing down random words that comes across his mind. Even though the content of this file is fragmentary and largely at random, it comes to represent an alternative story or a complement to the main story of the novel.

With the ChatterBox we wanted to create an alternative view of what is going on at a certain place. The idea was not to give an exact or accurate picture of the activities, but rather to create an entertaining public resource that could serve as inspiration to think about the work in new ways, as a support for becoming aware of ongoing activities, or as a piece of art.

Related Work:

"Calm technology" (Weiser and Brown 1996). Awareness support and ambient displays: AROMA (Pedersen & Sokoler 1997), Ambient displays; turning architectural space into an interface between people and digital information (Wisneski et al 1998), VisualWho (Donath 1995) (cf. also Tickertape (Fitzpatrick et al 1998) and Portholes (Dourish & Bly 1992)).

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The ChatterBox

The ChatterBox generates and presents short "phrases", based on written material produced by people working at an office.

Instead of introducing yet another window on the desktop computer screen, the ChatterBox uses displays that are situated where people naturally move around, e.g. in corridors and lunchrooms. The purpose is not to make people stand and look at it for long periods of time, but to invite them to take a quick glance while passing.

The aim has been to create an information resource that is integrated with the environment. Thus, it was designed with wallpapers rather than ordinary information displays in mind.



Prototype

The first prototype used text documents as input and returned a continuous sequence of "phrases" made up of three to five words. The words were randomly selected from a database containing the words from the original texts. Words that were not likely to convey any informative meaning, such as prepositions and conjunctions, were filtered out using an algorithm based on statistical measures of word frequencies. The generated texts were presented as scrolling text in a console window.

Experiences

We have tried the prototype in the corridor and lunchroom of our office and at a large reception party. As displays, we have used projectors and background projection monitors.

Most people found the ChatterBox interesting and entertaining, although many requested further development. Despite the lack of almost any "correct" sentences, the ChatterBox gave rise to a number of informal discussions and gave its audience a few laughs. However, it was clear that the random phrases were too abstract to be informative for the purpose of supporting awareness about activities. Also, random phrases seem to require too much attention to make sense to the viewer.

To-Do List

- More advanced text-processing to create more correct sentences (easier to read and understand)
- Save more of the original context? For instance to transform whole sentences or paragraphs, to swap words between sentences with different origins.
- More appealing and interesting visualisations.
- Empirical studies: long term studies in order to find out how the ChatterBox is perceived and used over time, e.g., how "calm", entertaining, inspiring etc. it is.

