Supporting Casual Interaction between Intimate Collaborators

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Over last decade, we have seen mounting interest in how groupware technology can support electronic interaction between intimate collaborators who are separated by time and distance. By intimate collaborators I mean small communities of friends, family or colleagues who have a real need or desire to stay in touch with one another. While there are many ways to provide electronic interaction, perhaps the most promising approach relies on casual interaction. The general idea is that members of a distributed community track when others are available, and use that awareness to move into conversation, social interaction and work.

On the popular front, we see support for casual interaction manifested through the explosion of instant messaging services: a person sees friends and their on-line status in a buddy list, and selectively enters into a chat dialog with one or more of them. On the research front, my group members and I are exploring the subtler nuances of casual interaction. We design, build and evaluate various groupware prototypes [1,2,3,4] and use them as case studies to investigate:

- how we can enrich on-line opportunities for casual interaction by providing people with a rich sense of awareness of their intimate collaborators;
- how we can supply awareness of people's artifacts so that these can also become entry points into interaction;
- how we can present awareness information at the periphery, where it becomes part of the background hum of activity that people can then selectively attend to;
- how we can create fluid interfaces where people can seamlessly and quickly act on this awareness and move into conversation and actual work;
- how we can have others overhear and join ongoing conversations and activities;
- how we can make these same opportunities work for a mix of co-located and distributed collaborators; and
- how we balance distraction and privacy concerns while still achieving the above.

References

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