The rectangles around each buddy denote the whether the buddy has used their keyboard and mouse recently.

We ensure that a contact sees his buddy at the same size the buddy sees him, taking into account both the physical size of the respective screens and the field of view of the camera. This mirrors the equilibrium people adopt in physical encounters between proximity and privacy, more formal exchanges take place at greater distances while intimate relationships allow close distances.

Going live

Having established awareness, we must enable easy transitions to and from conversation. A single click on the current snapshot of a buddy enters a full duplex real time audio video conversation.

Another single click ends the conversation. On entry, each party "steps towards" the other by reducing the virtual interpersonal distance, mirroring the change from peripheral awareness to focussed attention in physical encounters (See Figure 3).

Figure 3 Going Live

Initial Evaluation

The prototype application has been in use by 5 or 6 people for over a month, feedback suggests that the awareness information provides an increased sense of presence and closeness. However some psychological barrier remains to actually initiating conversations.

Part of the problem could be due to the presentation of the audio snapshots. While the visual information is always present, perceiving the audio information requires using headphones, which most users do not do continuously. A solution could be some visual representation of the audio information such that rhythms and changes can be perceived visually.

Summary

We are attempting to support informal communications by heightening the awareness between individuals such that the apparent barrier to entering conversation is reduced. We achieve this by appropriately presenting frequently updated audio-video snapshots that provide both long term rhythms and clear indication of current activity. Entering or leaving a conversation requires only a single click.