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Guest Editorial: Towards Machines Able to Deal with Laughter

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1 INTRODUCTION

LAUGHTER is a significant feature of human-human communication. Laughter is characterized by a complex expressive behavior that includes major modalities: auditory, facial expressions, body movements and postural attitudes, and physiological signals. It conveys various meanings and accompanies different emotions, such as amusement, relief, irony, or embarrassment. Laughter has a strong social dimension. For example, it can reduce the sense of threat in a group and facilitate sociability and cooperation. It may also have positive effects on learning, creativity, health, and well-being. Because of its relevance in human-human communication, research on laughter deserves attention from the affective computing community. Several recent initiatives, such as the Special Session on Laughter at the 6th International Conference on Affective Computing and Intelligent Interaction (ACII 2015) and the series of Interdisciplinary Workshops on Laughter and other Non-Verbal Vocalizations in Speech, witness the importance of the topic.

Recent research projects (e.g., [1]) focused on laughter by investigating automatic laughter processing, and by developing proof-of-concepts, experiments, and prototypes exploiting laughter for enhancing human-machine interaction in a broad variety of application scenarios. Major research areas where scientific and technological breakthroughs emerged are, for example, those related to the scientific investigation of the different forms of laughter expression and of the mechanisms of laughter elicitation (see e.g., [2], [3]), automated laughter detection from multimodal data sources (see e.g., [4], [5]), and laughter synthesis (e.g., in artificial agents) taking into account multiple sensory modalities and their timing (see e.g., [6], [7]).

The goal of this special issue is to gather recent achieve-

ments in laughter computing in order to trigger new research directions in this area. Special attention is devoted to computational models of laughter in human-machine and human-human interaction, capturing the multimodal nature of laughter and its variety of contexts and meanings. The special issue ultimately aims at providing an interdisciplinary perspective of ongoing scientific research and ICT developments regarding laughter computing.

2 CONTRIBUTION

Twelve submissions were received for the special issue and each of them was reviewed by at least three experts of the related domains (affective computing, emotion psychology, computer graphics, computer vision, signal processing, and so on). Five papers were chosen and finally accepted for publication after revisions, including a second round of reviews. This long process ensured that the papers collected in this special issue represent to date the most innovative ideas and techniques related to laughter computing. The five papers provide indeed a broad coverage of the key aspects related to laughter and its computation. Two papers concern the investigation of laughter expressions and their meanings by using different laughter elicitation techniques. Two papers address laughter detection from different perspectives (i.e., by using a wearable device and by analyzing audiovisual input). One paper is devoted to laughter synthesis.

Concerning investigation of laughter and its facets, the work by Hofmann, Platt, and Ruch addresses empirical work about the relation between laughter meaning and facial expressions. The authors recorded and analyzed structured conversations in which participants retold stories involving the 16 positive emotions proposed by Ekman; these emotions include sensory pleasures such as taste and smell, reactions to one's own accomplishments such as pride and relief, as well as responses to the behavior of others such as gratitude or schadenfreude. They then looked for presence and intensity of Duchenne ("genuine") smiles, non-Duchenne ("fake") smiles, as well as laughter. Results showed that amusement and schadenfreude were related with most laughter, whilst gratitude and contentment resulted in the least intense behaviors. In addition to providing fine-grained empirical evidence on how these behaviors are related to emotions, the results of this study can also be

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potentially used to improve generation of appropriate facial expressions and behavior of artificial agents.

Whereas Hofmann, Platt, and Ruch used structured conversation to elicit smiles and laughter from their participants, Fortin and Cooperstock used a different approach: they developed a novel tickling device, which permitted a precisely controlled amount of vibration to be delivered to the bottom of a participant's foot. In an experimental study, they measured the effectiveness of this device at eliciting laughter, either with or without accompanying laughter sounds. The response of the participants was measured through a combination of self-reports, behavioral, and physiological measures. Results showed a clear relationship between the vibration intensity of a stimulus and the self-reported perceived ticklishness. Moreover, hearing laughter had a significant scaling effect on this perception. The properties of the stimulus, however, did not have an effect on the behavioral responses – rather, these were mainly affected by the participants' mood.

Regarding laughter detection, Perusquia-Hernandez, Hirokawa, and Suzuki developed and evaluated a wearable device for analysis of facial expression. They utilized a small device that sits on the user's ears and connects Electromyography (EMG) electrodes with muscles associated with Facial Action Units 12 and 6 to detect genuine smiles. The device enables capturing very subtle and quick facial expressions by using EMG rather than computer vision or signals from other modalities. Further, the work focuses on spontaneous expressions rather than posed facial expressions or actors. As a concrete output of their research the authors present a proof-of-concept of wearable device that can detect subtle facial expressions and validate its accuracy and robustness through a number of studies.

Turker, Yemez, Sezgin, and Erzin approach laughter detection by facing the problem of audiovisual continuous laughter detection, one of the core challenges in affective computing and more broadly in improving our perception of human communication dynamics. Their work does not only introduce a meticulously designed and validated study, seeking to understand the value added of video and audio modalities, but also positions the paper in the tradition of a number of multimodal laughter detection experiments. The proposed work leverages an established affectively colored dataset for their evaluations and achieve state-of-the-art performance in their experiments. They find that both facial expression data and head motion dynamics are relevant for laughter detection performance, especially under difficult and noisy conditions.

In their paper on laughter synthesis, Ding, Huang, and Pelachaud built a laughter behavior controller to generate the upper body movements of a virtual character from laughter audio inputs. They proposed a new continuous-state statistical framework to capture laughter dynamics from human data and constructed a module to infer head and torso movements at each time frame according to the current value of loudness, computed on the audio input, and the output inferred from previous time frames. To train the statistical model parameters the authors recorded a dataset, which contains human laughter behavior and laughter audio. Additionally, they employed a rule-based method to yield shoulder animations from laughter audio.

3 CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

Papers in this special issue at the same time address key challenges in laughter computing and open novel research directions. A clear example is the development of methods for detection and synthesis of different laughter types and their meaning. Such research challenge emerges, for example, in the paper by Hofmann and colleagues. Whereas their work describes different expressive patterns and their meaning, the process of automatically detecting and synthesizing different laughter types is still largely unexplored. This is nevertheless an important skill for machines that need to establish a socially meaningful interaction with humans, such as, for example, social robots. Misidentification of (human) user's laughter expressions by the machine may have a relevant negative impact on the interaction. For example, confusing an ironic or schadenfreude laughter with a hilarious one might lead to the wrong identification of a user's change of attitude toward the social robot. Detection of different laughter types can be addressed, for example, by considering the moment in which laughter expressions appear during the course of the interaction, by introducing models of laughter contagion, or by considering additional aspects of the verbal content (e.g., joke or irony modeling). Indeed, modeling contextual information (e.g., in the verbal channel) opens new exciting opportunities for building applications that exploit laughter. Moreover, both the papers in this special issue and the paradigmatic example of analysis and synthesis of different laughter types, as a future research challenge, point out the strong multidisciplinary characterization of this area. Research requires a deep interaction between psychologists, human scientists, and computer scientists to have at the same time a solid theoretical background corroborated by a strong experimental evidence, and a robust computational approach.

Whereas no paper in this special issue explicitly addresses audio synthesis, believable laughter audio overlapped with speech synthesis (i.e., co-occurrence of laughter bursts within speech utterances) remains a crucial challenge for building effective laughter machines.

Future works may also address laughter computing for commercial applications, e.g., according to the principles of Positive Computing. Systems for automatic stress monitoring or depression detection would benefit of algorithms able to detect/monitor hilarious laughter (and distinguish it from other types of laughter). Modeling hilarious laughter can be exploited in systems that explore the positive outcomes of laughter for well-being. For example, they may be a part of an interactive system for training/elicitating positive attitudes. An interactive system may measure user's laughter and use this measurement as a feedback to control such a training/elicitating process.

Finally, laughter computing applied to multimodal interfaces can contribute to develop system that increase creativity and facilitate sociability in educational and artistic contexts. A laughing interface can, for example, be exploited to reinforce the user's perception of pleasantness in performing a joint task, or the degree of funniness of an artistic performance in an audience.

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