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ABSTRACT

One segment of a computerized adventure game system (Multi-User Dimensions, or MUD) designed for learners of English as a second language (ESL) is described. The acronym MOO refers to MUD Object Oriented, the programming language used for the system. The system allows for individuals in different locations to communicate directly with each other, through Internet, in the game context. The segment discussed is "schMOOze U," a game based on a virtual university. Users, identified as characters by fictional self-descriptions, can move about within this context and according to a set of rules and regulations defined by the user community. This networked virtual reality game is intended to remove ESL learners' communicative inhibitions. Users can learn commands in a "classroom," engage in word games, write texts for the library, participate in grammar exercises, have conferences, and stage events; one user hosted a party. An online dictionary is provided. A characteristic of the game system is the common use of puns. Within the first year of its existence, the game logged in 350 permanent characters and guests from over 1,000 sites around the world. The report concludes with a brief essay about schMOOze U written by one Hong Kong user. (MSE)

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What the Heck is a MOO? and What's the Story with All Those Cows

MOO is an acronym for MUD Object Oriented. The object oriented part refers to the type of programming language used for the program. The MUD part is itself an acronym, and depending on whom you talk to stands for either Multi-User Dungeon or Multi-User Dimension. The latter interpretation of the acronym comes closer to reflecting the reality of most MUDS today.

Because all work and no play makes both Jack and Jill bored fairly rapidly, almost simultaneous with the birth of computers was the birth of the computer game. In the early 1970's some fantasy fiction fans at the Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory invented a game called Adventure. Like today's MUDS, it was entirely text based. The player assumed the role of a Tolkienesque traveler, and entered a universe to fight off enemies, overcome obstacles, and eventually discover treasure. Unlike commercial computer games developed around the same period, Adventure had no definite plan. Users entered the game universe and by using their imagination, could turn virtual reality into actuality. This game however, was limited to a single user. In 1978, Roy Trubshaw, a student at the University of Essex, England, wrote what he called a Multi-User Dungeon, or MUD. This was a networked multi-user game that allowed users to communicate with each other to cooperate on adventures together. In 1989, the first 'social' MUD was developed. With the introduction of TinyMUD, the purpose shifted from gaining points, seeking treasure and killing things, to communication and world creation. It stressed cooperation and interaction rather than competition and mastery. From 1990, the number of MUD programs increased rapidly. Although most were still based on fantasy or science fiction worlds, MUD environments based on actual places began to appear. Today you can take a trip to BayMOO and experience life in San Francisco in the past, present and future. The genre has also been taken over for academic purposes. MediaMOO, run by Amy Bruckman of MIT, provides a virtual meeting place for students and academics working in the area of media and communication. There is also BioMOO which serves biologists. Many large private companies have in-house moos where employees can meet on an informal basis to brainstorm and exchange ideas.

At the beginning, of this part of the paper, I promised to reveal the secret of all the cows and cow puns on schMOOze. Every MOO or MUD has a theme, and since I am a not a fan of science fiction and fantasy novels, I ruled that out immediately. If the MOO had been built for other than non native speakers, I might have considered basing it on Garcia Marquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. However, given the intended audience, I chose to build a virtual university. The actual layout of the buildings was quite easy, but when it came time to pick a name, I hit a brick wall. I wanted a name that would reflect the theme of the place, and following convention, it would also contain the word MOO. After toying around with names like EFLMOO and others of the same ilk, I came up with schMOOze since the basic purpose of the moo was to provide a place for students learning English to converse. And the cows. . . No matter how serious the current use of the medium is, the history of MUDS is rather short, so their designers feel obligated to continue the tradition by interjecting a bit of whimsy. I like cows, so that was my contribution.

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I have related a bit of the history of MUDS and given a kind of definition, but I would like to expand that definition to reflect how MOOs are used today, and especially how it relates to schMOOze U. The best current definition of MOO is a computer program that provides synchronous communication in a networked, text based virtual reality. Let's look at each part of the definition.

Many of you may have had experience using email, bulletin boards or lists. With all of these you write something and somebody may or may not read it at a later date. If you are lucky, you will get response or feedback in a day or so. If the reader logs on frequently, the response may come as soon as an hour or less. Some programs even allow the writer to request that acknowledgment to be sent when the email is read. This type of communication is analogous to writing a letter or in the case of lists, posting something to a bulletin board. It is asynchronous.

On a MOO, however, when you type something, the response is immediate (unless the person to whom you are speaking chooses to ignore you) because the people to whom you are speaking are connected to the system at the same time you are. The common practice when logging on is to type @who to see who is currently logged on. The @who command not only tells you who is there, but also when they arrived and how long it has been since they typed anything (idle time). In this sense, MOOs are similar to InterRelayChat (IRC), and in the real world (RL) analogous in some sense to a party line telephone conversation.

However, even with conference calling, it is impossible for the average person to talk with more than two people at the same time. Because MOOs are networked, that is can be reached from any part of the Internet, the number of people logged on at the same time could be in the hundreds, and depending on the hardware used, in the thousands. In actuality, the number tends to be between 1 and 20.

So far, this part of the definition could be describing IRC, a system that commonly has 1500 people logged on at the same time. But the 'virtual reality' part of the definition is what sets these two systems on opposite sides of cyberspace. In popular use, the term 'virtual reality' is used to refer to systems that offer users visual, auditory and tactile information about an environment that exists as data in a computer rather than as a physical space. Think *Lawnmower Man*. OK, now stop thinking about it as this is not the definition of 'virtual reality' as used when referring to MUDS. Imagine instead reading a description of a locale in a book. Imagine reading the description of one of the characters. If the book is well written, for the time you are reading it you may feel that you are there. This is the type of virtual reality I am referring to when talking about MOOs. Like a book, the MUD interface is completely textual; there are no sounds, smells or pictures. Unlike a book, you and the other characters present can step out of the pages and create your own story. But before you do that, you must decide who you want to be. Since the other people inhabiting this imagined space cannot actually 'see' you, you must write a description of yourself for them to read. At the same time, you must declare your gender. Neither of these need reflect reality. Once this is done, you are free to roam about the imagined space of the moo. For the technical minded, this is accomplished by a software program that consists of a database of 'people', 'rooms', 'objects' and 'exits'. The program accepts connections from users on a computer network and provides each user with access to that database.

OK. I think I understand what a MOO is, but what do you do there?

I have been teaching ESL for about 15 years and tramping around cyberspace for about six years. I teach ESL in New York City, and one frequent complaint I have heard often from my students is that they have no opportunity to practice English once they leave the classroom. As an answer, I have recommended joining college clubs, doing volunteer work or if they are religious, joining their local church, synagogue or mosque. However, looking back on my own language learning experience, I realized that this is easier said than done. And reflecting on my lack of proficiency in the one foreign language I had tried to learn, I could comprehend the obstacles that an EFL learner faces. Almost from my first day on a MUD, I thought that this would be a wonderful experience for students learning English.

Because MOOs are text based, everything is language dependent. People are unable to rely on the conventions of gesture and the nuances of tone to communicate. This is not to say that learning these forms of communication are not important; however, we have all seen students fall back on the vacant smile when they don't understand the speaker. People smile on MOOs too. [Julie smiles], but it usually indicates pleasure, amusement or humor. The cyberspace equivalent this type of smile would probably be no response at all. However, the usual response is "I don't understand." or for the more seasoned denizens of cyberspace a "Huh?". One does not 'lose face' so easily on a MOO since you have no face to lose. Because the other people with you on the MOO only know what you choose to tell them, not understanding something which was said or making a grammar error does not produce the same 'sense of shame' that face to face encounters so often do. MUDS are also democratic milieus allowing people to reach beyond race, gender, religion, social class and cultural ghettos. They are worlds unto themselves, and since the interlocutors may never meet in real life, the demands of social self-preservation are much less inhibiting.

When I have tried to explain the MOO experience to people, I often get the comment "So you just sit at your terminal typing at strangers?" Well, in a sense this is true since I haven't met in person most of the people I know in cyberspace. However, stranger is probably the last word that would come to mind when referring to them. If any of you have exchanged email or actively participated on an electronic list, you may have anecdotally noticed that confidences are exchanged much more readily than in face-to-face relationships. This tendency toward increased intimacy was documented in a study done by Hiltz and Turoff entitled *The Network Nation: Human Communication via Computer*. This is even more apparent for the inhabitants of a virtual space such as a MOO. Because of the perceived proximity, a type of 'shipboard syndrome' develops and for the time they are logged on, the MOO becomes a virtual community. In a modern world where even children make play dates, this is an important factor for our students, especially those who are studying English in a country other than their own.

Although being on a MOO is disinhibiting, it does not mean that chaos reigns. Like a real life community, people on MOOs are enmeshed in a web of social rules and regulations. These rules are formulated by the MOO inhabitants. For example, one does not go to another player's room without

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sending a message requesting permission. Foul or abusive language will quickly lead to shunning by other members of the community. Conversely, being helpful and friendly will raise one's status.

The Why and How of schMOOze

As I mentioned before, I saw the potential benefits of introducing students of English to networked virtual realities. Brief forays by the students into real time communication activities showed that the interest was there. Also, although I never logged and analyzed our conversations, I saw a dramatic improvement in language skills of a physics professor in Venezuela that I had been talking to on-line for a period of two years. This gentleman is 65 years old, and is not enrolled in any formal English classes. From his case and others, I deduced pedagogical advantages of spending time in cyberspace. The problem was that existing MUDs for the most part would prove very daunting for the non-native speaker. For one thing, because text is all there is, participants on most MUDs pride themselves on clever use of language. Following the tradition of *Calahan's Crosstime Saloon*, puns abound. Also, since the themes of many MUDs are derived from American science fiction and fantasy novels, I felt non-native speakers would likely miss the point of a town named Tanstaaf. I know I did for about two years. In addition, breaking into an electronic community is many times a test of fire for newbies as most MUDs were run by males and unless your character was a helpless female, you had to prove your mettle by learning the ropes on your own. Finally, the disinhibiting effect of electronic communication has its downside too. Because most MUDs do not screen players, the gamut of negative personalities can run from the obnoxious to the out and out crude.

Thus I saw the need for a MOO dedicated to students studying English. I envisioned it as a safe, friendly, simply laid out place where students of English could come and converse. I chose the university model as one that, though a bit trite, would be universally understood. I built the necessities: a campus, library, administration building, classroom building, dormitory and student union building. I tried to keep the descriptions of the rooms interesting but simple.

To introduce people to the mechanics of being on a MOO, schMOOze has three classrooms – beginner, intermediate and advanced – where simple explanations of each command are given. By typing LEARN <topic> the player receives a simple explanation of the basic MOO commands such as say, look and page. An exit to the beginner classroom is located at the Entrance Gates where players first arrive upon connecting to schMOOze.

In the Student Union Building in lieu of spacewar games, I installed Hangman, Jotto and Scrabble. Also in the Student Union is a cafeteria, complete with food and a somewhat surly cook, Ed. Both Ed and the menu are programmable, that is, the text they output can be changed. In the library, there is a USENET feed where one can read over 2,000 newsgroups, and a gopher slate to enable players to reach out from the MOO to get information from other sites. Also, in the stacks there are books where students can 'write' text for everyone to read. In the basement of the Administration building is the entrance to a tunnel which leads eventually to the dormitory. The tunnel is actually a maze, and to get to the other end, one must decide if certain sentences are

grammatically correct or incorrect. Each correct answer brings you closer to the exit of the tunnel. The sentences presented can be changed at any time, so it is possible to use the maze to reinforce any grammar point. The dormitory itself has 50 rooms which are owned by individual players. To own something on a MOO means being able to describe it and create objects in it. Thus, just like a college dormitory, each room is decorated differently by its owner.

For teachers interested in using schMOOze as a virtual classroom, there are three conference rooms. In these rooms, one can specify a course name, write out a roster and define the seating arrangements. For example, if the teacher decides to have students sit at four tables for discussion purposes, only those sitting at the same table can hear each other unless a special command is given to 'speak up'. Also, the door of the room can be locked so that only those on the roster will be admitted when a class is in session. In each of these conference rooms there are blackboards that operate much like real life ones.

One of the most popular features on schMOOze is the online dictionary. One needs only to type LOOKUP <word> and the definition appears. What is actually happening is that the MOO opens up a telnet connection to Webster, a remote site, retrieves the definition, and displays it on screen. Only the person who actually asks for the definition sees it. It is seamless, as it is done in a matter of seconds. In conversations I have had with students, I can almost know by their response time when they are looking up a word I have used. And, I confess, I use it myself frequently.

No matter what features a MOO has or doesn't have, what determines its success is the people who inhabit it. Since the target audience was non-native speakers of English, I didn't make a public announcement when schMOOze opened. By public, I mean posting it on half of 2000 groups of USENET. The initial announcement was sent only to TESL-L, the USENET group misc.education.language.english and a few lists dedicated to educational networked virtual realities. The goal was never to have hundreds of people logged on. schMOOze U. was planned as a small, private college. Character registration is done by email. That is, people who want a permanent character, send email to me with their real name and the name they want to use on the MOO. I then finger the email account to make sure that the names match. Anyone can log in as a guest. However, all wizards can see the site from which someone is logging in and if there are any problems, it is just a matter of typing a simple command to ban future logins from that site. In the time schMOOze has been in operation it has only been necessary to 'redlist' one site. The above measures may seem heavy handed, but are really just precautionary. The bottom line is that there is no type of censorship on the MOO. All conversations are private, and unless someone files a complaint via MOO mail, wizards remain detached from the actual social workings of the MOO.

The Present and Future

Thus far I have related a little of the history and rationale of MUDs and some of the features of schMOOze. Now I'd like to talk about the present and future. Since the MOO opened in July, 1994, to date we have 350 permanent characters from 20 countries. There have been guest logins from more than 1000 different sites.

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What happens in the future will depend on the inhabitants of schMOOze. MOO is a very versatile programming language and one need only spell out an idea for our resident programmer to make it a reality. To give an example, a young man from Taiwan wanted to have a party. He wrote an announcement in the MOO newspaper suggesting various times and dates and asked everyone to vote. Once the date was decided, a party room was created complete with food and a DJ that took requests. Not all ideas require the use of a programmer. A teacher from Hong Kong set up a role playing game for his class, and another teacher from Australia devised a scavenger hunt. The uses of the MOO are only limited by imagination.

Although I have used the pronoun "I" in this paper, I don't want to give the impression that schMOOze was built single-handedly. Eric Schweitzer also of Hunter College 'built' at least half of the rooms on campus. He has also been on line with me almost continually since January, 1994 when we began the project. (Another definition of MOO is More Online than Off). Also, despite all the fancy ideas in the world, neither Eric nor I would have gotten very far without Jon Wanderer, our resident programmer. And finally, schMOOze would still be a gleam in the eye of my PC at home if it weren't for Dynamic Network Software, a private company in New Jersey that generously provides the server which schMOOze runs on.

In conclusion, I think the following essay written by Li Chi Wai Ann of City University of Hong Kong best expresses the MOO experience.

Hello!

I have wonderful experience with Mooing and I would like to share my experience with all of you. Through internet services, I can login to a Moo called schMOOze University and I have much fun there. Have you ever been to there? It is a wonderful and interesting place.

Remember the first time John brought me to MOO in class last semester, I was so excited and I think I started to get crazy about the Moo at that time. What a wonderful place! I can meet different people from different places and 'talk' to them through computer. It is amazing, isn't it? People can talk with you although they are far away from you in real life.

Through talking with people there, you can know more about the culture, life style, custom and habits of other nations or countries if you really want to get such information. Besides, you can get as many friends as you want there and the only thing you have to do, is to show your sincerity of making friends with others.

Keep the friendship through talking in MOO only? No, of course not. Actually, after communicating with people in MOO, you can go further with your friends in MOO, maybe you can ask for their email addresses or their postal addresses, then they can also be your penpals.

But there is a difference between email penpalling and Mooing. You will find that it is much easier to catch your friends' feelings through conversation than through email because even if you misunderstand some points, your friends can correct you immediately and you can avoid harming the friendship by misunderstanding.

Crazy with Moo.

Ann