

Multi-User Object Oriented (MOOs)

Reflective Experience Paper

Cheryl Choy

Introduction

What is a MOO? Technically, it is a form of object oriented programming. However, for the non-techies, it is a community of online users who make "objects" to create virtual worlds of their own. There are MOOs for socializing, for learning a new language, for exchanging research or simply for fun. MOOs are not only for adults, they are also for children. In fact, in the MOO world, age is irrelevant.

My first surf in the MOOs was an educational experience for me. I had no knowledge of shared virtual environment until this experience. I had heard of chat rooms and virtual reality but I never had hands-on experience in any of them. Although MOOs work in a chat-like environment, it is not merely one. My initial impression on chat rooms was not positive. I remembered watching a friend communicating in one and found the conversation unproductive and confusing (because of the multi-threads present in the chats.) On the other hand, the concept of virtual reality interested me. However, my simplistic understanding of virtual environments gave me the idea that it was reserved for the technically informed that has access to visors and gloves (of course, in recent years, virtual reality games have become more commonplace.) MOOs gave me a different perspective.

As I reflect upon this experience, I also seek out ways to represent my thoughts. Unfortunately, due to the fragmented experience I have in MOOing, it is difficult for me share in-depth encounters. Most of my MOOing is random. I deliberately went to different categories of MOOs to explore the various cultures and purpose within those MOOs. I was also particularly interested in the artistry of the MOOs because I enjoy multimedia and graphics. However, graphical MOOs proved to be less interesting, most of the "conversations" conducted there were either superficial or salacious in nature. Nevertheless, I must admit that my first impressions with graphical MOOs were positive. They are intriguing and they offer a sense of mystery.

In the text-based MOOs, as I have shared in class, many of them were quiet and I had very few engaging moments. Most of the time I roam around aimlessly, reading notes and descriptions. Actually, such moments are useful when one is new to these environments. All in all, MOOing has been a positive experience.

In view of my limited MOOing opportunities, I have decided to report on this reflective exercise based on MOOing experiences and readings on this subject. I grouped my reflections according to three apparent functions of MOOs. They are: MOOs as social environments, MOOs as playgrounds, and MOOs as educational environments. Within each of these sections, I discussed elements of what we reviewed in class. The conclusion contains some afterthoughts.

MOOs as Social Environments

In my research for this paper, I was surprised to find the number of social MOOs available for interaction. I cannot help but wonder what made MOOs such attractive social grounds. MOOers confessed to spending many hours in MOOs.

What makes MOOing so addictive? What is their magnetism? As Diane Davis quoted in her paper, (Non)Fiction('s) Addiction(s): A NarcoAnalysis of Virtual Worlds, "Virtual Reality is the LSD of the electronic age...VR, even text-based VR, has proven itself to be one potent trip" (High Wired, page 270).

In my quest for answers, I made the following observations:

1) *A Gathering Place*

MOOs are virtual gathering places. They are like real life bookstores, cafes, restaurants, churches, bars, etc. People travel to these places to find a friend, to be with people, to browse at things, to share issues or beliefs, to experience new things, or simply to be around. MOOs offer many of these interactions in a virtual mode. Like many gathering places, they attract people.

For instance, teenagers gather in McDonald's, yuppies gather in fashionable cafes, women gather in malls, and men gather in sports bars. MOOs are one of the virtual gathering places of people.

Although MOOs do not have the tangible commodities as in real life gathering places, they have other conveniences. MOOers need not worry about traffic or parking, a MOO does not "close", cost is low, there is no dress code, and they do not even need to pay for an air-ticket to meet overseas friends. The last feature is inviting because in real life, most of us do not have the luxury to travel round the world to meet people across cultures. I was excited when I logged into Little Italy. Although I do not speak Italian (I knew a few words and I was with a friend who spoke the language), the thought of being able to transport myself to that part of the world and be in their real time zone was thrilling for me.

While email and chat rooms offer the same real time communication capability, MOOs are more focused and creative. They have structure and rules, they let you build and customize your environment. MOOs can be ideal places for networking, exchanging of ideas and work, or a support group to get together. Eventually, these gathering places become communities of their own. We choose the community we enjoy, we go there often and we become a familiar figure. It is similar to going to our favorite bar, restaurant, or hotel where our name is known. It gives us a sense of belonging. MOOs offer more than just belonging, they give us "ownership." This promotes loyalty and more MOO interactions. Before we realize it, we have begun a new life, a virtual life.

2) *A Virtual Life*

The ability to have an alternate life, in this instance, a virtual life, is appealing to many. We have our roles in real life but many times, these roles are limited by factors such as physical limitations and social conventions. Virtual roles free us from them and MOOs are places where we can assume these alternate identities.

MOOs are relatively "safe" places. Safe in a sense that these are places where we can be who we want to be, act the way we want to act, and say things the way we like it to be without serious consequences. For example, homosexuals need not be in the

"closets" and lonely singles can become married couples. We are inhibited because virtual living carries no significant penalty, at most, one gets "toaded" or "gagged" by the MOO administrator. Moreover, with so many MOOs around, it will not be difficult to find another MOO to start all over again and assume another identity.

Another attractive feature in the MOOs is the ability to assume anonymity. We do not need to reveal our true identity when we log into a MOO. We can literally be anyone or anything. As one player commented, "You are what you pretend to be...you are what you play" (Turkle, page 192). In fact, I find many MOOs encourage such pretense. For example when we log in, we are encouraged to describe and verify our gender. There are many type of gender available. For example, gender options in Meridian Moo included neuter, male, female, either, Spivak, splat, plural, egotistical, royal, or 2nd. I entered "Spivak" once to see what that species was, I was informed that my pronouns were: e, em, eir, eirs, eirself, E, Em, Eir, Eirs, Eirself. I believed I became an alien type. At that moment, I felt somewhat lost because I did not know how I should behave. I had trouble assuming anonymity. I had not expected myself to be baffled because I thought pretending was an easy thing to do. Obviously, it is not the case and I am worse off than the *distributively challenged*¹ (High Wired, page 282).

There are benefits and drawbacks to this freedom of assuming personalities. One benefit is the ability to use these personalities to manifest the idiosyncrasies of oneself. For many of us, our behaviors are often defined by the norms of society and in the environments we are in. We are expected to behave in a certain way in our real life roles. For example, a judge or a law enforcement officer is expected to have exemplary conduct and a priest is expected to be upright. The ability to assume other identities in the MOOs allow us to move outside of our confines and discharge the responsibility of being who we have to be. We can become our other "selves." For some, it is to be the opposite sex. Zoe, mentioned in Turkle's book "Life on the Screen" found gender swapping a rewarding experience:

"I got really good at playing a man, so good that whoever was on the system would accept me as a man and talk to me as a man...It was very validating. All those years I was paranoid about how men talked about women. Or I thought I was paranoid. And then, I got a chance to be a guy and I saw that I wasn't paranoid at all" (page 222).

Another benefit of virtual identities is that it helps to express ourselves more readily than in real life. These adopted identities liberate inhibitions and make communication candid. We are able to do so because our real self is not exposed to judgement or ridicule. We are protected by a cover—an identity.

One drawback I envisage in these virtual episodes is that we can get so absorb in them that it affects our real life. If we always "hide" behind an identity to resolve issues, we may have difficulties confronting real life situations, we may also become withdrawn and socially inept. I share Turkle's concern on the overindulgence of virtual living. She asked, "...is it really sensible to suggest that the way to revitalize

¹ "*Distributively challenged*" people are those who cannot manage several different personas, connections, and contexts at once.

community is to sit alone in our rooms, typing at our networked computers and filling our lives with virtual friends?" (Turkle, page 235).

MOOs as Playgrounds

Tarniwoof says, "Do you promise to take Silver Shimmering Winterlight as your mudly wedded wife, in sickness and in health, through timeouts and updates, for richer or poorer, until linkdeath do you part?" (Turkle, page 195)

Tarniwoof and Winterlight took the vows of marriage in a MUD. They played; a role, a game, with words. In real life, they may never have met. It did not matter, it was only a game. The MOO is a wonderful playground. We can be a king, a princess, a frog, a warrior, a dragon, a machine, almost anything we can imagine. We do not need to be trained to "act" in this theater, we just need to know how to "play."

There are various ways to "play" in the MOO. One way is to develop our personae (characters) in the MOOs. We "play" when we describe and give personalities to these characters. In text-based MOOs, players use words to describe their characters. This particular one put a smile on my face:

A small cinnamon-colored ball of short, fluffy fur and green splendor stares up at you with twinkling eyes and a vivacious smile. A mouse, you realize after a moment - a mouse wearing a tiny, white silk shirt and close fitting green velvet breeches. She bows deeply and doffs a triangular, green hat with a bobbing golden plume pinned to the side...Her hat,...is a perfect miniature of those you have seen in full size...

(MOOSE Crossing, Bruckman's dissertation)

I like it because it brought me back to the days of fairy tales and make believe. When I read Amy Bruckman's excerpts from MOOSE Crossing in her dissertation, I could almost sense the fun these children were having. MOOs are ideal educational playgrounds for children and adults. Unlike computer games where psychomotor skills are mainly used, MOOs "force" the players to think, imagine, and interact socially. It is a good way to sharpen our creative writing and imagination. It is not easy to come up with a description that charms and leads the imagination of your players. Personally, I find this a challenge as years of "to-the-point" business writing robbed me of such creativity. MOO play will help balance my writing skills. In fact, if I intend to "play" in any of the gaming MOOs, writing a description is just one of the challenges for me. I logged into a text-based gaming MOO called "Merentha" and felt so overwhelmed. First, I had to decide who I was, then what I was, then what class and sub-class I want to belong to. After reading some of the "conversations," I did not even get out of the gates to "play" as the "language" they used were alien to me. They were strategizing how not to get hurt too badly using strange terms. Anyway, before I could decide what to do next, the system booted me out. I felt it was somewhat rude but perhaps I stayed too long without doing anything.

Such imaginative play can be powerful. No doubt, text-based MOOs do not offer the same kind of interactivity as graphical MOOs, it can be engaging as well. In LambdaMoo, I once stumbled into the master bedroom. The moment I entered, I was told I should not be there and the alarm had gone off. There were "beeping sounds" all over the

place. I panicked. I imagined a bunch of players or wizards charging into the room. Meanwhile, I tried all means to silence the alarm. Poor me, nothing worked. I decided to do it the "chicken" way and leave the room and pretended to be innocent before anyone "caught" me. When I left, a message flashed across my monitor accusing me of being irresponsible and leaving the alarm to disturb others. I felt bad and wondered if other players' monitors had this annoying "beeps." Of course, I went back to the room and tried again. I was helpless. I left again and of course that annoying accusation followed me. Finally, I told myself that this was just a programming feature and I should not be concerned with this. The point of the story is that without my knowing, I was drawn into the scenario by words. I was put in a playground without realizing it. It was fun.

I had wondered how traditional games such as board games or graphical computer games differ from MOO games. A thought that crossed my mind was that MOO players develop certain skills absent in traditional playing. In board games or graphical computer games, it is easier for us to begin playing by just reading the rules or watching someone else play. In the MOOs, it takes us longer to become familiar with "the game." However, at the end of it, the MOO player benefits more. If we play Monopoly often, we do not walk out of it as a sharper investor but if we play in the MOOs often, we learn to be adept with words and to be creative.

MOOs as Educational Environments

The MOOs represent an alternative learning application that is useful to both educators and individuals. Although this method of teaching may not be appropriate for everyone, it has some unique strengths.

MOOs are ideal environments for promoting self-directed, constructivistic learning. They encourage learners to explore and discover new knowledge; they contain mechanisms for learners to construct their ideas; they blend work and play together making learning a fun experience. MOOs enhance learning because educators can structure and design the MOOs according to their learning objectives. This environment can be adapted to suit both children or adults.

MOOs are also ideal to immerse handicapped learners into the mainstream. A good example will be those who have hearing disabilities. MOOs allow them contribute and receive ideas with ease. There is no need for machinery or interpreters to intercede this exchange and it helps to remove social stigmas that may otherwise impede their self-esteem.

Although MOOs are conducive educational environments, not all MOOs are successful models of this application. However, I find *Tapped In MOO* a good example of an effective educational SVE (shared virtual environment). As I am not able to compare *Tapped In* with many other educational MOOs, I will support my opinion by listing some of their strengths.

An apparent strength is that it conveys its purpose and concept clearly.

" TAPPED IN is a shared teacher professional development (TPD) workplace patterned after a real-world conference center. Teachers with diverse interests, backgrounds, and skills can share experiences, engage in mentoring and collaborative work, or simply meet their colleagues..."

(Tapped In website)

The defined purpose orient new members on the nature of this environment and keeps the community focused on meeting the needs of its members. It also attracts the desired audience for their purpose.

Another strength of *Tapped In* is its infrastructure. It is well organized and it has strong member support. For starters, *Tapped In* has at least fifteen partners and they are active in organizing and participating in events.

They also have good sponsors including the National Science Foundation and one of the largest research, technology development and consulting organization. It is important to have solid sponsors as MOO administration can be time consuming. They constitute the backbone of the MOO. These administrators (and/or wizards) help new members feel comfortable, answer questions, deal with technical problems, help in activities, etc. The wizards are usually around most of the time. This is one major difference between *Tapped In* and other MOOs. The presence of the wizards makes the environment friendlier and more active. Although the times I log in are usually quiet periods, it is comforting to have the wizards to interact with.

Having higher-end technology makes *Tapped In* more user-friendly. For example a web interface in the internet enable them to post information such as definitions, membership instructions, office hours, schedule of events, and others for members or interested parties to browse without logging into the MOO. The self-guided Web Tour is well designed and very informative, the two-dimensional floorplan of the MOO helps members visualize the MOO better and the *Tapestry* interface is also visually more appealing than other text-based MOO.

Perhaps the most significant strength of *Tapped In* is its ability to provide a rich collaborative environment. *Tapped In* partner organizations conduct on-line professional development activities and they share their resources to all the members. This makes it a rich resource ground. This keeps teachers abreast of current research topics and issues. This also enables teacher to seek out fellow researchers who may be interested to work together.

It also offers an online facility for educators to extend their expertise to others. Teachers can direct their students to attend forums or discussions conducted by other teachers. This facility widens the expertise pool of a school.

Tapped In carries tools that can simulate a real life classroom, these tools add to the value of learning experiences. Things such as the whiteboard, the recorder, and the projector are effective tools for this activity. I find the recorder especially useful because it serves as a note-taker and an archive tool, it helps to update students or members who are absent for an event, the recorded material can be used for assessment or reference. We can create our own spaces to conduct such activities, we can "lock" our spaces and maintain privacy. This is a useful feature if we want to limit the number of participants in one meeting or class.

All in all, *Tapped In* is successful because it is focused and well administered, it provides good member services, it has many resources for teachers, and it is able to promote ongoing interaction.

Conclusion

In summary, MOOs are fascinating environments. The social, playful and educational aspects of MOOs presented interesting elements for reflection. In the social

arena, MOOs can challenge the businesses of real life gathering places, whether it becomes a social evil or a surrogate mentor, it is still too early to tell.

In education, they are credible alternatives, however, it is interesting to note that "the success of MUDs on the Internet indicates that long-term use of MUDs is very engaging for some users, but initial exposure to the environment is consistently less compelling" (Mateas & Lewis, 1996). I suppose as in most learning tools, their effectiveness depends on their appropriate use.

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