Living Inside the Poem: Enhancing English Literature Classes with MOOs

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Abstract: MUDs Object-Oriented, or MOOs, have been used in education for a long time. Yet, there are very few studies that exemplify the integrated use of MOOs within the curricula. Realizing that MOOs can play an important role in literature classes, this study analyzes the integration of MOOs in English literature curricula using activity-centered design as framework. This approach seeks to find an alternative to using computers in a tacked on fashion, as some additional component not related to the course content, or letting the computer software dictate course content. The Romantic Circles project is a high quality, editorially controlled, collaborative Internet resource for education and Villa Diodati is the MOO associated with the project. This paper reports results on integration of the Villa Diodati MOO in college level English literature classes.

When introducing computers into a humanities course, there is often a concern that the technology will overtake the class content rather than serve as a handmaid in delivering ideas to students. Despite the seemingly disjunctive nature of humanities computing, teachers feel the demand from administrations, students, and contemporary culture to make computer use part of course design. Navigating these demands alongside curriculum requirements can be difficult and the challenge of humanities computing is to find a balance between using computers in a tacked on fashion or letting the computer software dictate course content. MUDs Object-Oriented, or MOOs, have been used in education for a long time. After their beginning as role-playing games, and their popularity as social spaces (Curtis, 1992), MOOs have found a respectable place as learning environments (Bruckman, 1998). Yet, there are very few studies that exemplify the integrated use of MOOs within the curricula. Realizing that MOOs can play an important role in literature classes, this study analyzes the integration of MOOs in English literature curricula using activity-centered design as framework.

Romantic Circles and The MOO "Villa Diodati"

The Romantic Circles (RC) project is an editorially controlled, collaborative Internet resource dedicated to humanities education, particularly the study of nineteenth-century British literature and culture. It is an online educational network built by and for a national community of teachers and students. The content focuses on literary works of aesthetic excellence and historical importance produced by experts under peer-review and general editorial oversight. The site offers teachers a trove of riches: hypertext links to examples of Romantic poetry and prose, links to the information on Romanticism, including materials on historical context, music, art, science, philosophy and contemporary culture. Connected with these resources is the Romantic Circles MOO, called *Villa Diodati*. The MOO is named after a villa in Switzerland along the banks of Lake Leman famous for its summer of 1816 guests including Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Mary Shelley who devised *Frankenstein* at the Villa. The virtual Villa Diodati is a textual and visual MOO using Encore software on top of Lambda MOO core. Encore merges robust capabilities of web technology with interactive and programming capabilities of traditional MOOs.

MOO and the Literary Text: Architectured Space

The fit between literature and MOOs is possible because MOOs construct reality in much the same way as literature does: through language and play. The design of our activities is based on the concept of a poem and a MOO space as *architectured space*. Some words in a poem seem key and the reader circles, interprets and investigates them. Similarly, in the MOO a user types "look x" to see the word/object better. As the poem develops, new spaces open and the poem takes us to new places. In the MOO, we open new doors and each MOO space leads to new spaces. As a reader reads a poem s/he reacts to it. In the MOO, as a user occupies a textual space and reacts to it by "speaking" or "emoting." Poetry is a space of encounter and the poet has an experience, which s/he narrates in order to give the reader a similar experience. The MOO space represents real time interaction with a textual space

and by putting the poem as a textual experience together with the MOO as a textual experience students have a greater sense of encounter.

Activity Centered Design

Gifford and Enyedy (1999) propose that "the focus should be to design activities that help learners develop the ability to carry out socially formulated, goal directed action through the use of mediating material and social structures." Furthermore they explain that, "as students move through the activities they progress from being partial participants, heavily dependent on the material mediation of tools, to full participants, able to more flexibly use the cultural tools of the normative practice." We have integrated the use of the MOO in the literature class within a framework of Activity Centered Design. The activities that the students participate in are *modules* inspired by and based on the work of Romantic authors. The MOO acts as a *mediational* tool that aids students in understanding and interpreting the work of the authors. It also provides them with an avenue to produce their own work and be an author. In this process they are supported by their peers and their instructors who help and critique their work, thereby providing opportunity for true apprenticeship. The students are also assisted in their work by examples from students in previous classes and they are able to build their work on them, and by other assignments that lead up to their work in the MOO. Table 1 describes how students interact with a module, Wordsworth's "The Valley."

Table 1: Student Encounters with the MOO Space

Stage1	Stage2	Stage3	Stage4
Students learn the basics MOO programming from the instructor. They are divided into groups of five students and the assigned leader of each group follows the instructor through the Valley rooms and for homework they take their group through the Valley and log the conversation for use in class discussion.	In class after the students' encounters, they discuss how nature is mediated in a poem and in a MOO.	From the Valley, students then move to an encounter with the aged man. Finally, students move to a cottage. Here they examine a journal that has Wordsworth's moral to his story, his "rash judgment" of the old man. The room also has some questions to help students process the space of their encounters and to prompt further discussion.	After completing their MOO encounter for homework, the next class day the students discuss what happened in the space. Later, the students read Wordsworth's poem in class for the first time and discuss how the words of the poem were translated into a MOO space.

Initial Outcome of MOO Use in Classes

The "Valley" module has been used in freshman introduction to literature classes—one class at the University of Alabama and three classes at Georgia Institute of Technology. The initial response to the use of MOOs has been very positive and we have now started to gather more evaluation data. A survey was distributed to students in May and we are in the process of analyzing the data. Future plans include in-depth interviews with students over the summer and enhanced implementation of the MOO in Fall 2002.

Conclusion

Over the last three years the Villa Diodati MOO has been used to teach high school and college students about literature and culture of the Romantic period. Over these years there have been trials and errors as to what assignments work best in this environment. This paper has shown how using the framework of Activity Centered Design the Villa Diodati was integrated in college curricula. We have made consistent progress towards achieving our goal of successfully integrating the MOO in the curricula and hope that *Romantic Circle's* literature MOO would serve as an example and model that meets the challenge of humanities computing.

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