Using Text-Based Virtual Reality In The Classroom - A Narrative

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MOOs and MUDs : An Introduction

Text based Virtual Reality also known as MOOing, came about when people started using connected computers to play various role playing games - like dungeons and dragons. There are many game oriented Multi User Dungeons or Dimensions (MUDs) on the InterNet, and now, more and more Educational or professional MOOs (MUD Oriented Objects) are being built[1].

A MOO is an environment in which participants can communicate, via the keyboard, in 'real time'. This means that a student sitting at a terminal in Brisbane can 'speak' with a student at a terminal in the US and others in Indonesia at the same time. The delight of MOOs is that, not only do they allow synchronous conversation, but that they also provide the illusion of an environment in which the learners can move around, do actions and create objects. This means that MOOs are potentially much richer language environments than other synchronous communication facilities on the InterNet - such as International Relay Chat (IRC)[2] or TALK[3] where the interaction is more or less limited to conversation and 'emote' strategies - ch as the use of 'emoticons' (an emoticon is a face made with keyboard characters eg. **:)** denotes a smile). A MOO user can express emotion (via the keyboard), design their own room, admire others room designs and even provide virtual chocolate cake for parties. The illusion of three dimensionality given by a MOO also allows users to communicate in small groups, either in the privacy of their own rooms, or as an invited guest in someone else's. Users can 'walk' around various public zones, visiting a cafe and ordering virtual pizza perhaps or admiring the ASCII art in an art gallery. Existing as virtual communities on the InterNet, MOOs are developed and fashioned by their users, thus different MOOs have different characters and themes. The MOO we used for our project was SchMOOze, an ESL MOO, owned and operated by Julie Falsetti. SchMOOze can be found by telnetting to : arthur.rutgers.edu 8888, or by going to SchMOOze's Web page at : http://arthur.rutgers.edu:8888. SchMOOze is in the form of a small, friendly college campus, complete with library, student union building and dorms. Users tend to be students of English as a second or foreign language although users will find many people interested in cross-cultural communication. SchMOOze users also have access to a variety of on-line language games, a dictionary, a garden and a graffiti wall.

The advantages of using MOOs for language learners:

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[1] For a list of Educational MOOs, look at Jeffrey GalinÆs MOO Central Web Page: <http://www.pitt.edu/~jrgst7/MOOcentral.html>

[2] For further information about the IRC, try the USENET group: *alt.irc.undernet.FAQ

[3] TALK is a facility that allows the user to directly æcallÆ another user. The conversation takes place via the keyboard on a split screen.

If an InterNet connection is available, MOOing can offer language learners a number of advantages. Primarily, conversation in a MOO provides authentic practice, a safe zone, 'outside' of the classroom where learners can use their language skills. A MOO is a magnificent information gap activity - on an international scale. The opportunity for real life exchanges with other students from around the world is a highly motivational situation - many good friendships have been started in MOOs and continued via both email and snail mail! MOO descriptions are text based thus providing opportunities for reading and writing tasks. It has been noted (Warschauer 1994) that use of networked learning encourages those learners who might be shy to use their language skills in a face to face conversation. The textual nature of MOO interaction and the anonymity it provides can be seen as offering a safe way of practising English. It is also the author's observation that MOO use is an excellent way of improving typing skills - although inexperienced MOO users often have fairly 'slow' conversations with short sentences, the more experienced users quickly get their typing 'up to the mark'. That users are 'speaking' via the keyboard and in fact writing and reading is an area yet to be researched fully although further on, note is made of Lundstrum's (1994) critique of IRC conversations. A further aspect of 'letting your students free' in a MOO is the possibility of re-alignment of classroom roles. The learners, in theory, are allowed to take control of their learning situation while the teacher becomes a facilitator - literally in the background, while the learner's attention is on the on-screen activity and friends. This 'empowerment' (Fanderclai: 1995, Warschauer:1994) puts the learner in control of their own learning process. These and other claims have been made about using networks for language learners, the research is still in process and the jury still out on whether these are inherent attributes of networked classrooms or brought about by skilful orchestration by a teacher. Our attitude was very much that here was an opportunity for our learners to enjoy a new experience and supplement class based speaking, reading and writing work while at the same time introducing them to the InterNet as a 'real world' tool, something they have all heard about, that offers later possibilities for communication projects, writing projects or just keeping in touch with family and friends.

Some problems in using MOOs for ESL learners:

Using a MOO involves access to the InterNet and with many systems this is not an easy procedure, often involving a list of 'lock/step' commands. Once attached to a MOO, there are relatively few basic commands to learn[4] and students (and teachers!) seem to pick these up fairly quickly. Once a student has grasped the potential of using a MOO, there still remain some problems for the teacher using one with lower level learners: There is a strong 'novelty' appeal, which interests the learner but which may not 'carry them through' to become involved. Because of the nature of the medium, the screens and the information they convey, whip past quite quickly on the screen, sometimes leaving the novice lower level language speaker in a bit of a daze. Conversations take place without face to face 'clues' such as gesture and expression. To some extent, use of 'emoticons' and the 'emote' command help, but the students need to learn them. Experienced MOO users will sometimes use an argot to cut down on typing - for example, 'Where are you in RL (Real Life)?', 'r u in class now?'. It has been noted (Lundstrum 1994) that this use of language is very computer specific and might not do if transported to activities outside of the MOO - although the author

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[4] See Appendix I for a list of basic MOO commands.

remembers the same argot being referred to as Prince-speak rather a long time ago and being in common parlance amongst aficionados of his Royal Purpleness, many of them ESL students. Finally, as with other facilities that use the InterNet, there is a strong community support of 'Netiquette' or the notion that you treat people with the same good manners that you would if you met them in RL. The novice user, possibly misunderstanding the nature of a MOO and its community at their first meeting, might find themselves crossing the boundaries of netiquette and being asked to leave.

The Project :

The project class consisted of 15 students from Korea, Taiwan, Japan and one Vietnamese. Most had had very little experience with computers, some had used word processing in class, or been introduced to the old CALL favourites of STORYBOARD and VOCABULARY. A couple of the students were 'computer-phobic' and the rest were non-committal. These students were all attending a General English course at the university. Such courses are typically attended by a variety of learners. Some are in Australia for fairly short periods to improve their language level, others are looking to continue their studies and enter mainstream university courses at a later stage. Each session lasts 6 weeks and is based on a core text from the popular range. This meant that the project had to supplement the course work as the text had to be completed.
The idea behind the project was that the MOO offered the opportunity to supplement various aspects of the course and to provide practice in language items that the students were expected to achieve. It was also felt that to merely 'drop' our students into the MOO with no more than a few commands at their finger tips would not really exploit this rather wonderful facility to its full. Students introduced to MOOing in such away have been seen to sit and stare in puzzlement at a swiftly moving screen or have even 'put their foot in it', not realising that they are talking to real people but under the impression that they have been given some kind of game to play. Rather, we structured the project to give the students a thorough introduction and a specific task - related to course work - each time they entered the MOO. This meant that the learners were exploring the MOO via a structured activity, which then gave them the skills and the confidence to develop their own use of the MOO.

The nature of the course and access to CALL facilities meant that the project was structured into six units, each including pre-work in the classroom and MOO time in the CALL lab. Some units merged with other classroom activities and other aspects of the project were taken on by the students during Self-Access periods. As the learners progressed through the project, they became more independent and we found that they would dedicate more of their Self Access time to participating in the MOO of their own accord.

The Worksheets:

The first step was to establish pre-existing knowledge of the InterNet and create enthusiasm for the possibilities and to initiate understanding of the opportunities the MOO, and the InterNet in general, offered. Worksheet A was done entirely in class as

an introductory unit. It starts with a fairly unstructured brainstorming activity to collect feedback from the students about their concepts and feelings about computers. Tony, the Vietnamese student, a fairly laid-back young man, suddenly pricked up his ears and showed more enthusiasm than he'd shown previously, simply because computers in Vietnam are in short supply. This first session also covers a lot of new vocabulary, often not found in dictionaries but very present in newspaper and magazine articles. There are currently many such articles available, ranging from simple human interest stories to more controversial items dealing with censorship, all of which can be exploited in class in a variety of ways depending on the interest and ability of the learners. Some basic MOO commands were introduced and the students were given a short quiz to evaluate their understanding of the concept of MOOing. This first unit can also involve an excursion to a local 'cybercafe' to generate interest. There are many springing up all over the place and it seems appropriate to the set the scene for the MOO project in terms of 'leaving the campus'!

The second unit, worksheet one, was connected to a unit in the course book on descriptions and adjectives. Students had to give themselves a name and a description in readiness for their entrance to SchMOOze which asks for a name and brief description when a user connects as a guest. The students had a lot of fun with this one as they were able to use their imaginations and adopt a new persona if they so desired. At the same time they were practising lots of descriptive adjectives and the position and order of adjectives as well as coming to grips with a few more MOO commands. The worksheet demanded that learners enter the MOO using a name other than their own and then ask questions to establish each other's identity. 'Crab' - very quiet, shy Japanese girl, became a handsome, kind footballer with a multitude of girlfriends; 'Ken', who wants to find a girl friend who will be a close friend and share his sadness and happiness; 'Thanh', who walks alone at midnight; 'Bug-Talking', who made a subtle indication that the reading homework being dished out in class is a bit too much! These kind of flights of fantasy often provide the teacher with insights into learner's feelings that they may not voice in a normal class. One teacher writing about his MOO use, mentions that one of his students spoke to him for the first time within the safety and anonymity of the MOO (Guest 1995). Of our students, Crab in particular, seemed to benefit from this. Her previous work had been pretty well restricted to writing but suddenly she was actively discussing the sessions in class. We do not suggest that this was some sort of miracle directly attributable to MOO use but we do think the stimulus helped tremendously and gave the group a focus. At this stage users were expected to work with each other rather than assuming that other, non-class users might be present. MOOs are like cafes and bars in RL - you can never guarantee a full house. It is also in the nature of the MOO that there *were* other users present which added to the interest and intrigue of the activities.

The second worksheet was designed to foster moving around in the MOO. It is a particular delight of MOOing that users have the option of moving, either to visit MOO sights or to find privacy for a quiet conversation. It is also one of the more difficult concepts to get over for lower level language learners. This worksheet was designed as a treasure hunt with the students following clues and directions to find their way around the MOO and answer some questions. Students had to work in pairs and in doing so, had to discuss answers, read the text of the MOO descriptions, take notes, follow instructions and use all the MOO commands they had learnt previously.

In their evaluation of the session the students apparently found the activity very successful. Rie noted that she had to talk to her partner while she worked on the sheet, giving her lots of speaking practice. Kazu, a quiet student, would have preferred to work alone. Mitsue enjoyed it because she felt it was like a game. Don liked the structure involved. Tetsu thought it helped him but felt restricted because he was only talking to his partner. Yumi preferred to work with a text and newspapers. All the students however, were unanimous in the fact that they enjoyed it.

Worksheet three introduced the students to the 'emote' command or describing actions within the MOO context. Remember, all the 'action' is happening via text so that when the MOO users 'speak', what they actually are doing is reading, for example: "Crab says Hello" on the screen. When MOO users 'emote', the reader sees "Crab sighs"[5]. In this third MOO session, students had to use actions to indicate reactions or behaviour. Thus, instead of using direct speech, they had to key in, for example: "Dragon stares into space and thinks of what he is going to say next" or "Saluki asks Scorpion for a date". The brainstorming session for this unit resulted in huge amounts of language being produced. Students had been asked to find some idiomatic expressions for homework and these created a lot of interest while the MOO gave the students the opportunity to use them. We had some imaginative use of the emote command - eg :waits for a silly answer, :smiles like a winner, :tries to pick you up, :jumps up and down, etc. The emote command creates the atmosphere of MOO life, it is the way people in the MOO offer chocolate drinks, warmth and sympathy or even cold showers.

The fourth worksheet was entitled 'Gossip' and was probably the least successful worksheet in terms of following instructions on the sheet. Students by this time were well used to using the MOO and had been logging in their Self Access time to chat to friends made from around the world. By this stage they had been allocated 'character names' and passwords to enter the MOO and were no longer logging in as 'guests'. They were eager to try their skills for real communication and not only with classmates as the instructions suggested. The only drawback to trying to gear a class along these lines is that there is never any guarantee that there will be other people in the MOO when the class logs in or that the people there will be amenable to being interrupted. One idea is that it is possible to set up a meeting with another group of language learners from another institute at a given time. It must be said here that this is fraught with difficulties - servers down, time zone changes, cyclones hitting power lines..... but worth the effort. At this point we feel we must stress that a truly successful MOO session should always include a back-up plan for those occasions when the telnet connection is unavailable!

The final, formal MOO session was on 'building' a room. As previously mentioned, the character of a particular MOO is produced by its users. Once a user has a character name and a password, they are then entitled to ask for a 'room' which they can describe themselves. Some of the rooms in SchMOOze are fantastic, others reflect a MOO identity that the user has chosen, others are more simple and home-like. Our class built their rooms in pairs, the preparation taking place in class. Again, the pre work was linked to current course work where prepositions and descriptive language was being practiced. The rooms give the students a feeling of 'belonging' in

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[5] Julie Falsetti has probably taught half the Asian world to æsighÆ. See Guest (1995)

the MOO, a place where they can have a private conversation and invite their MOO friends to join them.

Our class was a little unsure of what room building meant but as they followed the worksheet and grasped the concept they became very enthusiastic. Some of the same class have later not only re-designed their rooms to be a lot more fantastic but also added various touches to their MOO characters in order to add their own touch to the MOO.

Although the room building was in theory the last formal session held with this class, who were then free to continue using the MOO in their own time, we did actually have one last class session in order to hold a 'virtual birthday party' for one of the students who had been involved in the project and who was leaving. Students were allocated different tasks in pairs - to be discussed in the privacy of their rooms in the MOO, such as decorating the rooms, giving a speech, choosing what food and drink should be offered and generally indulging in party preparation behaviour. It turned out to be a great finale to the project.

Some Thoughts About the Project:

The students loved the project, some have since moved into other classes but have become regular SchMOOze characters, others have become involved in regular exchange of email messages with friends made in the MOO. Comments from the students would seem to indicate that they enjoyed the project form the point of view of language practice, as much as communication with friends. One student wrote:

> *"I don't like computer class because it doesn't have a definite purpose relative to improving English skill or some programs are so simple so some students play games. The program (project - worksheet two) is enough to prevent problems like these. It gave me help to understand moving around the MOO and I really enjoyed it"*

As with any CALL activity, it is important that the students perceive some point to following it through. Toward the end of the project, their goals diversified somewhat, some students found membership of the virtual community satisfying, others appreciated the language practice opportunities it gave them. In both cases, we saw our students 'using' English and enjoying themselves and thus felt their labour had been 'authentic' (Kemmis 1977).

Bringing a class 'on-line' was not straight forward. We had problems getting the students InterNet accounts, accessing the MOO via our vax[6] and ensuring that there was always a back-up lesson should lightning strike (it did once). However, the general consensus was that it was well worth the effort. Other criticisms stem from the nature of the MOO: that they are rather anarchic, that the MOO descriptions are written at an 'advanced level' of language. If the students are prepared and the task worthwhile, the delightful MOO anarchy is a wonderful opportunity for authentic, independent interaction and language use. If the reading task/MOO activity is geared to the learners, then the text descriptions in the MOO are, as with any reading activity,

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[6] Known fondly as the VEX

very useful for the learners. The descriptions they wrote for themselves and added to the MOO were an interesting indication of how they reacted to the 'level' of the text. For example, the initial descriptions, written in class and then imported into the MOO, were fairly simple. Those students who have altered their room descriptions since have shown evident relish in designing more intricate and imaginative rooms and adding personal touches to their characters.

As this is a 'narrative', it would be nice to end here with the phrase 'and they all lived happily ever after'. However, the truth, just like in RL, is that the project students have since moved on and we, as teachers, have started a new class in the MOO. We are looking forward to seeing how the next class exploits the opportunity.

Truna aka j.turner Nov. 1995

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Appendix I

Some Basic MOO Commands

MOO commands allow the user to 'see' where they are, 'move' around the MOO, talk to other users on the MOO and 'build' their own environments in the MOO. The following are some basic MOO commands:

connect XXXX   This is the standard connection command.
say XXXX or **"**   This is used to 'speak' to other users.
look   This shows you where you are, or will show you other user's
        descriptions.
read XXXX   This enables you to read 'notes' and messages around the MOO.
page   This enables you to send a message to a user who is not in the same
        zone as yourself.
emote or **:**   This enables you to 'act'
@who   This shows you who is on the MOO and where they are.
map   This will show you the map of SchMOOze. You will still need to type '**look**'
        to see where the exits are.
@quit   This command takes you out of the MOO.

When you connect to SchMOOze for the first time, it is wisest to go direct to the classroom for a closer look at these commands. Telnet to:

arthur.rutgers.edu 8888

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