Chapter VII

MOOs: Polysynchronous Collaborative Virtual Environments

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Abstract

This chapter defines, describes, and assesses the form of collaborative virtual learning environment known as MOOs. MOOs offer opportunities impossible in any other actively developed online communication tool, but they have remained largely the purview of hackers, coders, and academics. This chapter deals with understanding what a MOO is, what key features make it a valuable collaborative environment, and issues of accessibility, access, and governance. Key aspects include defining and historicizing MOO, exploring the technology’s current development, discussing issues that presently limit large-scale acceptance, and speculation about the possibilities and the future of MOO. The chapter considers text-based multimedia environments; general features of synchronous and asynchronous technologies; the notion of polysynchrony; tools for rapid prototyping, education, or training of users; application accessibility; costs in hardware, software, and manhours; and whether it’s worth organizations getting involved in MOOs at their present state of development.
Prologue

One dark, winter evening, gathered around a Norwegian coffee table laid with strong English tea, a Mexican pear dessert, and American chocolate chip cookies, a small group of women began a discussion that generated more blank stares than a report about the United States’ national budget. Seven of the 10 women were teachers representing three different levels of education from four different countries.

“Candice tells me you’re teaching for Florida State,” began one. “But how in the world are you doing that from here? By email?”

“Partly,” the other answered. “But I’m also using a lot of my own Web pages, blogs, Blackboard (a courseware), and a MOO.”

“Ok,” laughed a third, “you lost me after ‘Web pages.’”

“And I’ve just gotta ask...what the heck is a MOO? I’m guessing you don’t mean the sound a cow makes,” grinned another.

Most of us who teach online are familiar with the mild amazement that comes with the concept of conducting a class without ever seeing one’s students, and those of us who use the virtual environments of MOOs are equally familiar with the quick bovine jokes and uncomprehending looks that surface when we happen to mention the tools we’re using.

What is a MOO?

In brief, MOOs are text-based virtual environments that allow users to create representations of people, places, and things, and share them with others (Nolan, 2001). A MOO is a collaborative space where people come together for communal purposes. They construct the MOO-space according to agreed-upon criteria. They can create their own towns, buildings, rooms, objects, and personal avatars, and then interact with others in these created spaces. The spaces can be institutional—like a school or a classroom—or they can be literary, like the topology of a novel. Or they can be chaotic, like a frat house. Each MOO has its own personality, characteristics, special features, and purpose that creates cohesion and community within its boundaries.

Literally, MOOs are collaborative online virtual environments that go worlds beyond the concept of a chat room or a simulation. A simple way to visualize a
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