

MOOs as Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Many researchers have observed that the Internet has changed the concept of virtual communities (Barnes, 2001, 2003; Jones, 1995, 1998; Rheingold, 1993). A unique example of virtual communities is a MOO—a specialized interactive online community that is usually based on a work of fiction such as book series, theater or television (Bartle, 1990). MOOs share many of the features of multi-user dimensions (MUDs) in that both allow participants to create their own virtual worlds, but some researchers consider MOOs to be “more sophisticated” (Barnes, 2001, p. 94). In a MOO community, the participants or “players” create their own virtual communities—fantasy communities complete with world structures, interpersonal norms and social constructs. Individual participants create characters complete with environment, history and personality constructs. The characters interact and influence each other and their environments, just as do the members of real-world communities.

The MOO discussed in this case study is based on acclaimed fantasy author Anne McCaffery’s book series set on the fictional world of “Pern.” The players on DragonWings¹ MOO create and develop characters over long periods, often many years, leading to the establishment and creation of a strong MOO. In this article we provide a case study of the DragonWings MOO as a unique virtual community.

Because the concept of virtual communities is evolving with the Internet, and no definitive understanding of virtual community or virtual culture yet exists, we have chosen to structure our analysis of DragonWings MOO around the classical anthropological definition of culture and community. A seminal definition of culture, first articulated by Tylor (1871), provides the springboard for a number of anthropological definitions widely used today. Building on Tylor, White (1959), a prominent cultural scholar, defined culture as “within human organisms, i.e., concepts, beliefs, emotions, attitudes; within processes of social interaction among human beings; and within natural objects” (p. 237). He also identified symbols as a primary defining characteristic of culture.

White’s simple yet comprehensive definition yields clear criteria that lend themselves to our analysis of MOOs. At the broadest level, an application of the criteria provides support for the acceptance of the Internet as a distinct and unique culture. At a more particular level, they provide a convenient tool for the analysis of a MOO as a virtual community. In the remainder of this article, we will utilize the definition outlined above to demonstrate the features that make DragonWings MOO a unique example of a virtual community.

Culture as a Creation of Human Organisms

DragonWings MOO clearly evidences a culture that is a deliberate and conscious creation of humans (“within human organisms, i.e., concepts, beliefs, emotions, attitudes,” White, 1959, p. 237). The online participants (hereafter referred to as players) make a conscious decision to become members of this particular environment and community. Once players enter the MOO, they work together, in a manner unlike that of any real-world community, to create their community and culture. Players create their own characters, learn the rules of the community, shape their own and other players’ beliefs and attitudes, and consciously accept belief systems unique to this online environment. Because DragonWings MOO is based on a series of science-fiction novels written by Anne McCaffrey, participation in this MOO community often requires alteration of the participants’ real-world belief systems. (For example, in the world of Pern, a guild economy and apprentice system exist, there is no heterosexual bias and true gender equity can exist, at least notionally.)

Community building in DragonWings MOO is undertaken both by individual players and by administrative direction. (Administrators known as Wizards manage the software, create Help pages and provide administrative oversight, including monitoring rooms.) Players are informed by Wizards that there are places to go both online (within the MOO itself) and off-line to get more information about the rules of this community. An example of an

off-line source of information for DragonWings players is the “Dragon Lover’s Guide to Pern”—a print publication used as a reference tool about McCaffrey’s novels and the various MOOs online. An example of an articulation of community rules within DragonWings follows (from the Help area where players can portal to read the FAQs and general rules).

Note the comparison of DragonWings MOO to “other communities of human beings” followed by differentiation from the “real world.” Clearly laid out are directions for participating in a unique online environment. Equally clear is an acknowledgement of a diversity of real-world cultural norms concomitant with the establishment of a culture of tolerance and sensitivity in DragonWings.

Culture as Social Interaction

Culture, says White (1959), is developed “within processes of social interaction among human beings” (p.

237). DragonWings MOO exists both *because of* and *through* social interactions, as players interact with each other to develop characters, build relationships, shape story lines and move action forward. Players in DragonWings can learn to interact with others more effectively both through the processes of doing and through access to DragonWings MOO rules. There are several areas within the DragonWings site where members of the MOO can go to better understand interaction processes. One source is the Help Area, where players can learn general rules of conduct specific to the DragonWings MOO. An example is shown in Figure 2 under “Don’t shout”.

This example clearly illustrates guidelines for social interaction that are unique to the MOO environment and that facilitate pleasant interactions among players.

Other clearly stated rules that govern community behavior within the DragonWings MOO deal with methods of verbal communication. The MOO environment is text-based, with interactions dependent on typed text and

Figure 1. Articulation of community rules within DragonWings (from the Help area)

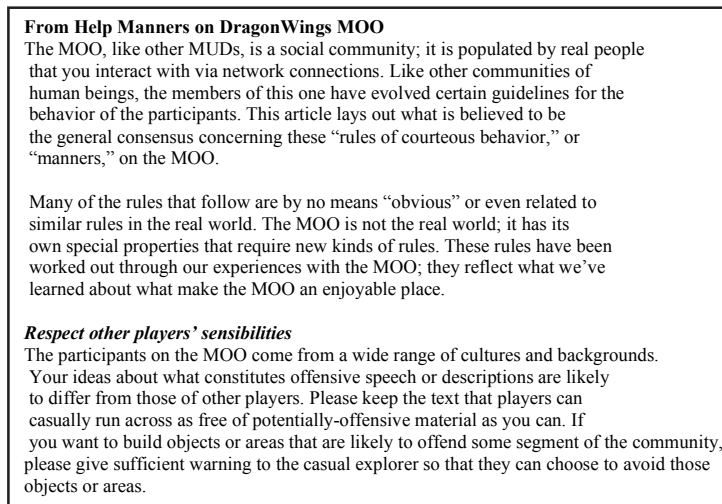
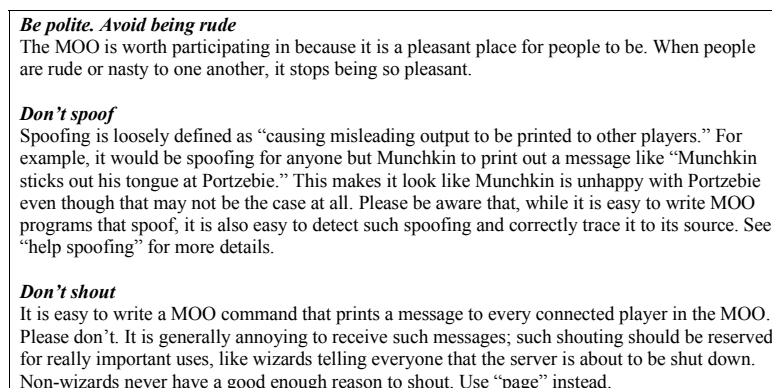


Figure 2. A source of help for DragonWings MOO members (from the Help Manners area)



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