

Professional Education Session

A HISTORICAL CYBER-ARTIFACT CALLED MEDIAMOO:
A STUDY OF A PAST ON-LINE COMMUNITY FOR MEDIA RESEARCHERS
AS A MODEL FOR USE IN THE MEDIA STUDIES ACADEMY

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This paper is based on a larger research I performed for my Master thesis in Media Studies at New School University, New York City in 2001. It took the form of a case study that sought to learn the circumstances surrounding the phenomenon of MediaMOO, an on-line virtual community launched in 1992 (built by media researchers and devoted to the discussion of Media issues) in order to evaluate its possible incorporation into the academic Media community as a model and as a project worth studying in programs' courses. My main objective was to analyze if what happened in this one-of-a-kind on-line environment that mixed educational and professional Media cultures, could happen in a similar agency set up in a university domain. While my main concentration is on MediaMOO as a microcosm of virtual culture and of Media professional culture, from beginning to end, I have tailored my research as a possibility for improving Media Studies by means of an specific structure of the Internet as a tool and as a media system. Specially, I look closely into the class situation formed by a small group of participants who would be effectively able to carry out collective projects on such a system.

The growing use of virtual environments in educational settings during the 1990's was based on the assumption that active learning provides a superior experience to passive learning, a notion that can be traced back at least as far as John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. That is, students who participate in responsive learning environments in which they become engaged in full body-mind kinesthetic learning not only retain more information but also manifest a fuller understanding of the information presented. In the same sense, Dewey reiterate throughout his masterwork that "play and work correspond, point to point, with the trails of the initial stage of

knowing” (2). In virtual environments three basic applications should exist: visualization, that is, seeing connections and relationships that would otherwise be difficult to comprehend; reproduction of RL professional and academic experiences and construction of participatory tools and techniques.

My assumptions in this study were led by what is known as Pragmatism, the American movement in philosophy founded by C.S Pierce and William James, marked by the doctrines that the meaning of conceptions is to be sought in their practical bearings, that the function of thought is to guide action, and that thus is preeminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief. In our classes of “Foundation of Media Theory”, at the Media Studies program of New School University the notion of Pragmatism was intertwined by professor Peter Haratonik with the development of Media Studies as an academic discipline. Haratonik often joined the Pragmatism guiding principles to those of John Dewey to suggest that to understand Media we first must comprehend that ideas must have consequences and must provide alternatives, which are aspect directly related to the creativity and inventiveness components of Media Studies. In this sense, with the arrival of the Internet as Media format, speculations around the relation of creativity and technology shaped around the offer of infinite sets of alternatives to users. In the case of MediaMOO as a cultural and social formation of the Internet, the technology proved to be a tool for empowerment of community creativity of media professionals and its correlated occupation based on the testimonies of many of its participants and outsiders who observed this and experienced other virtual groupings.

I looked at MediaMOO as a model that would open possibilities for experiences in a virtual on-going lab for graduate Media students to interact with their equals and assemble projects, such as those in film or video pre-production and web design planning, in a highly detailed practical fashion. The range of correspondences between the foundation of both Media Studies and MediaMOO strikes me as worthy of intellectual study. My hypothesis for envisioning this model was based on the assumption that MediaMOO clearly fits in the organization of Media Studies (as an academic discipline) as a playground where students would go to be trained as better

mediators of the mass communication processes they are taught to manage in class. A potential model based on the MediaMOO's lessons is meant to be a superior learning environment that would accompany courses and that would let the Media community explore the Internet as a media format that opens up possibilities to explore other Media.

Since its creation, MediaMOO's hybrid system distinguished it from all the other virtual communities in how it combines the playful quality of MUDs and the characteristics of the computer mediated collaborative activity for professional uses. MUD stands for "Multi-users Dungeon, Dimension or Domain"; as MUDs began to be used for social, professional, and educational purposes, the term "Dimension" was then substitute for Dungeon. The first MUDs in the late 1970s were multi-player dungeons and dragons games that were performed over the Internet. In 1989, James Aspnes, a graduate student at Carnegie Mellon University, established a MUD that enabled people to create text-based worlds. "Common types of MUDs include MOOs, MUSES, MUSHES and MUCKs, and you'll hear various translations of those acronymns. Using each type of MUD is somewhat different, but most MUDs share certain characteristics:

- ?? MUDs are text-based environments. Communication takes place in text, and people, rooms, and objects are all described in text.
- ?? Regular users receive their own characters which they describe and may customize in other ways, and which they use to move about the MUD and communicate with other people.
- ?? MUDs are made up of many different rooms, usually interconnected, sometimes haphazardly, often according to a planned geography. Users can move from room to room, talking with those who are in the same location at the same time.

MediaMOO was built on the top of LambdaMOO, the piece of software and the site developed and run by Pavel Curtis at Xerox PARC. The original MOO server ("MUD Object Oriented") was written by Stephen White and it consists of a programming philosophy that enables participants within the system not only "to talk" and exchange

messages but to collaboratively construct the virtual world in which they interact. Members of the Netoric Project, one of the most prolific activities in MediaMOO sum up the virtues of the system by explaining that users can add to the MUD by building rooms and objects. Simple commands allow novice users to make a wide variety of objects, and those who choose to learn the MUD's programming language can create complex objects. In one of the logs of the Netoric Project's Archives, I found an useful explanation to this idea: "Again, all of those objects appear in text; if you create a washing machine, users will see it 'work' because you make it print out text describing the operations of a washing machine" (log 1).

In her essay *The MediaMoo Project: Constructionism and Professional Community*, MediaMOO's creator, Amy Bruckman, who currently works as a professor of the College of Computing of Georgia Tech, stated that she had planned this system as a place to explore the serious side of virtual communities by building a MOO whose main requirement is that all members have to be actively involved in Media research (5). Development of the system began on October 28th, 1992, and MediaMOO was opened to the public on January 20th, 1993. Since that moment, participants started going to MediaMOO to meet people who share their intellectual interest in Media research, to brainstorm and to hold colloquia and conferences in order to contribute to group and individual goals in this field. At the beginning, other online systems such as the popular Internet Relay Chat (IRC) seemed to put in jeopardy the advantages of MediaMOO. But later MediaMOO proved its potentialities, as Greg Siering explains on a The Netoric Project's session:

GregS explains IRC: "IRC (Internet Relay Chat) offers the real-time discussion that MediaMOO provides, but without the virtual context of rooms and objects; IRC deals only with speaking and some actions" (Log 1).

As the suggestion of 'professional in Media' was interpreted broadly by the administrator, MediaMOO was a magnet for a wide range of practitioners from journalists to anthropologists and librarians. The community was kept in full swing for about 8 years. In some periods, its population reached the number of approximately 2000 participants from over 30 different countries. The synchronous

and asynchronous communication involved, the immediacy of the exchange, the constant access to geographically distant colleagues, and the blending of work with play made MediaMOO uniquely appealing as a place for members of a professional community to come together. As Tari Fanderclai, the other founder of the Netoric Projects, asserts, “New collaborations arose, new projects were born; boundaries between established authorities and newcomers to the field blurred somewhat and previously disenfranchised members of the academic community found audiences” (1).

This study was inspired by two questions that intrigued me as a graduate Media student and professional: First, have any pedagogical and professional goals in Media Studies yet been achieved in cyberspace? And second, do Media students, faculty and administrators know of the existence and achievements of educational and professional MOOs and particularly of MediaMOO? In this study, I have imagined Media Studies and MediaMOO as associated entities and have commented in detail about how these entities could benefit from each other. Some similarities can be pointed out between both organizations even before starting a more serious analysis:

- ?? The acknowledgement of the presence of a communicator(s) and a recipient(s).
- ?? Modes of achieving communicational goals.
- ?? Design as a means and a result.
- ?? Intentionality and meaning.
- ?? Performance that involves a) constant changes of the environment and of constructed objects that enable interactions and b) the effects that these perpetually changing environment and objects have on the communicator and recipient.

Back in 1968, computer science pioneer J.C.R Licklider, who was deeply concerned about the role of technology in education, compelled us to appreciate the importance of the new computer-aided communication by understanding the dynamics of “critical mass”, as it applies to cooperation in creative endeavor. He claimed that “Society

rightly distrusts the modeling done by a single mind. Society demands consensus, agreement, or at least majority. Fundamentally, this amounts to the requirement that individual models be compared and brought into some degree of accord. Licklider states that “the main requirement is for communication, which we now define concisely as “cooperative modeling”—cooperation in the construction, maintenance and use of a model” (22). Thinking of MediaMOO as a model, the idea of *practice* in French scholar Michel De Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*’s evocative assumptions brings up a substantial finality if use in the Media Studies academy. De Certeau sustains that when a space is practiced by its users, it becomes a “practiced place”. It is to *practice* the relation between enjoying and manipulating, where the production of goods for the community of interest creates a possibility of an expectation or better yet, as De Certeau says, “a belief”. And to believe in a setting for communications is to relate to the other I am communicating with. Even being aware that MediaMOO presented to me a defunct “practiced place” in Michel De Certeau’s use of this term, I wanted to explore it as an observer of what it currently offers to Media Studies: the intact legacy of a past cyber-community of new media researchers. The data gathered in this modest study of MediaMOO revealed some traces of common and controversial issues and the structure of the relation individual-group in the Media Studies field and the implications for social behaviors in Real Life (RL) academic and professional settings.

Licklider also claimed that the dynamics of media communication are so model-centered as to suggest that perhaps the reason present-day two-way telecommunication falls so far short of face-to-face communication is simply because it fails to provide facilities for externalizing models. In the same way, in my research I have suggested that a model based on MediaMOO for use in Media Studies which would integrate different types of organizations with differing cultures and needs such as film, TV production or media management, could also be developed. A project such as MediaMOO, can also give Media Studies Alumni the opportunity to keep themselves integrated to the Academia.

I have also adhered to the idea of ‘The Virtual Organization’, explored by Terri Toles-Patkin, as integral not to only on-line education but to Education at large as well, including Media Professional Education. He claims that ‘The Virtual Organization’ is a simulation of a collaborative environment built on the Internet that provides students with a substantive example of organizational communication. This means that as students progress through the simulation—for instance, a MOO environment--they would be able to build on their knowledge and test their ability to perform new and interesting tasks and furthermore to concentrate on present purposes in their communications projects that will forge their active occupations as professionals. This way, the advantages to students participating in a Virtual Organization go well beyond simple participation in a classroom exercise.

By the end of 1999, operations in MediaMOO started to decline considerably due to internal and external circumstances I take into consideration in this study to evaluate the viability of using a system like this in the Media Studies Academia. At present, as Bruckman said, MediaMOO is a largely historical artifact (“one of the living dead”, she declared) worth investigating. The community’s administration was handed over to Michael Day in 2001, a devoted old-timer and professor of Linguistics at the University of Northern Illinois who is being working to reinvigorate it.

The reasons of the failure of MediaMOO is not the object of the study. It is rather what made it so functional for people related to the Media field. However, the actual status of MediaMOO brings up some intriguing issues for academic research regarding the stability of virtual groupings in general and professional virtual groupings in particular over time. Some causes of the fracture of MediaMOO had already been mentioned by its members in the 6th anniversary forum in 1999 called *MediaMOO: Autopsy and Redesign*: the failure to implement a more effective recruitment of new members and to up the technological gears; the splintering of the community into sub-communities; the division among members over policy issues; and the creation of other MOOs founded by MediaMOO alumni who wanted places of their own (1). In the same forum, member Van* Faussien, opined: “MediaMOO

thrived because it had early adopters/pioneers who by their very nature are going to move on to something new, something slick, brave new trails in new world”(7).

In my endeavor, I take into consideration internal and external criticism that insisted on arguing how ineffective virtual communities are for consistent collaborative activity and that states that MediaMOO has suffered from this syndrome. For instance, researchers Alessandro Aurigi and Stephen Graham believe that most virtual environments (whether inadvertently or not) reflect a commercialized and non-interactive space more appropriate for marketing purposes than civic engagement (25). Even more radical is Lawrence Lessing, a former Harvard University law professor. In his book “The Future of ideas”, he conceives that nowadays the aggressive regime of copyright protection has allowed the media and software giants to monopolize our cultural, intellectual, and political life. In particular the Internet, which once promised to be a wonderful new mechanism for producing and distributing culture vertically and horizontally, has been reduced to a territory occupied and interweaved with commercial hurdles.

However, when it comes to the specific case of MediaMOO, a more obvious explanation for the fall of MediaMOO can be based on K.J. Ward’s notions on cyber-ethnography and virtual communities. He thinks that when it comes to the life span of virtual groupings, the hybrid space that emerged in most of these systems is neither absolutely physical nor virtual. “First of all, through its convergence with the physical the virtual community’s existence is apparent, though not unconditionally virtual. Secondly, the participants are depicted as having transitory, unconditional relationships with the virtual. That is, they will only participate for short periods when they require use of the resources that the virtual community has to offer” (1). Then, it strikes me as proper that the people who are preparing themselves in academy to become a professional, are the ideal candidates for such system as they basically make use of academic tools for short periods, that is, a year or a semester.

Despite all the pitfalls that affected the functioning of MediaMOO and that eventually took the community to an end, what this virtual community entails as a case study is

the ideal joining of professional, social and civil activity. One way or another, the community got to meet some of its inhabitants' complex expectations in using this virtual place, as Bruckman once expressed: "(In MediaMOO) I started to see the media transformed back into a two-way process where people are not just consumers but producers" (Roush, Wade 2). Just as De Certeau thoroughly explained in *The Practice of everyday Life*, the way individuals occupy a place is what creates the complex structure of practices. "These practices bring into play a "popular" ratio, a way of thinking invested in a way of acting, an art of combination which cannot be dissociated from art of using" (XV). From a survey I applied to some MediaMOO's members, I selected some processes that highlight the characteristics of "practice" in the system and by which MediaMOO developed and persevered throughout over nine years.

During the 1990's several accounts began to note that debates about new communications technologies were leading to a (re)viewing of pedagogy such as Atkins, 1991 and Spender, 1995. My thesis is intended to add to this growing body of (re) vision from the perspective of Media Studies as an academic discipline by pondering whether the MUD-like systems as an construct could be incorporated in our Media Studies curriculum. Since I started researching this project, I anticipated that the dynamic registration process of academia defined by regular enrollment of new members would eliminate one crucial problem that led to the decline of MediaMOO; as it was the lack of new blood on the part of participants that tended to create redundancy in its system interactions. At the moment I performed this short research project, future efforts within MediaMOO were pointing towards better techniques to help its members to develop more profoundly rooted expectations about the nature of the community, and to convey those expectations to potential new members.

In many respects, MediaMOO confirmed the assumption that community- provided support is crucial for learning how to interpret and produce Media through design and construction in the digital environment. Media Studies fundamentally entails collective projects that integrate the creation of products, channels, conditions to deliver these products to an audience and the anticipation of the complex process of

reception. In pursuing this research, I have looked at the ways in which the intense process of designing, of developing a plot and characters and of understanding the process of audience development in MediaMOO could contribute to the preparation of people who are just starting out in this field of study. Particularly, MOOs brilliantly highlight, what De Certeau points out as “the ‘exorbitant’ focus of contemporary culture and its consumption: reading. From TV to newspaper, from advertising to all sorts of mercantile epiphanies, our society is characterized by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or to be shown and transmuting communication into a visual journey. It is a sort of *epic* of the eye and of the impulse to read” (xxi).

As the use of a system based on MediaMOO could take the media educational environment into a higher level, a closer look into it on the part of program administrators becomes both desirable and appropriate. As John Newhagen states, “the Net engages users in cognitively effortful tasks and challenges them to be active” (6). This way, we ought to take the time to understand what those challenges and barriers to use are for media makers. A more profound implication that goes beyond the scope of this study would be: What effects would variable cognitive skills implemented in pedagogy, such as the ability to solve problems, have on the ability of users immersed in a Media Studies environment to fully exploit the Internet potential in order to improve themselves as future media makers?

Before I go on explaining the four asessions that took most of this research I would like to present some comments on the information gathering applied. According to Herbert Blummer, a body of images determines the direction of one’s research –ideas one starts out with, the questions one asks to check out, the answers one finds plausible. Blummer considers these images to be theories or explanations of something – “stories about how events and people of a certain kind come to be the way they are” (30). Based on this statement, the stories of my study were constructed on primary sources that explore the evolution, pitfalls and achievement of MOOs and MediaMOO in particular and on secondary sources, that is, the evidence that was discovered through empirical exploration. My goal has been to study the culture of

MediaMOO by exploring its remnants and by interviewing a group of people who built it and inhabited it and therefore who could help me to understand things from the inside. From a Media Studies perspective, I aim to contribute to the large and far-reaching project described by Cheryl Lynn in her book *Conversation and Community* that involves a better understanding of cyberspace and online interactions. She has said that “Before a general theory of electronic community evolution is possible, an enormous number of cases are necessary, as well as some sophisticated comparison between studies” (16).

Through Michael Day’s support and assistance (who I was referred to by Amy Bruckman herself) I obtained a character –carmnb- through which I explored the community as if I were a site evaluator and identified important traces of its arrangement of players, rooms, objects and diverse tools and mediums for communication within the community. I practiced note-taking techniques and tracked down my queries making copies of MOO text in word files.

Parallel to these observations, I applied a survey that consisted of one semi-structured questionnaire. I prepared a two-part questionnaire for MediaMOO members: the first part was designed to extract information about influential events, situations and conversations that involved design, role-playing, an audience development and a second part that was meant to explore their opinions on how the MediaMOO experience could be translated into the Media Studies academic terrain. This questionnaire was completed totally and partially for eleven former members of MediaMOO, some of them, key subjects in the development of the community.

Based on Cheryl Lynn’s views in her book “*Conversation and Community, Chat in the Virtual World*”, I have pursued this research as a valuable contribution to the Media Studies arena, furthermore if we bear in mind that this academic discipline has just started to consider in its curricula more courses related to technology, Internet, sociology and media-making. In this sense, my study is intended as a contribution to a wider use of the Social Network approach for understanding the interplay between computer networks, CMC, and social processes. I also follow Lynn when she uses

Skeggs' notions to remember that in a research of an on-line community, sensitivity to, and responsibility for, power relations, representation, and dissemination are, far more important than issues of which method to use. "And attention to the processes by which we produce our research and theories is far more important than the concern with getting it right" (203).

Now, let me go over the four conceptual foundations this research is structured about that analyze MediaMOO as a model from which Media Studies can absorb some important lessons. They back up my assumption that a medium or system based on MediaMOO and Media Studies, as an academic discipline, can work as complementary entities.

?? *The MOO, MediaMOO and Media Studies related to each other.*

I have evaluated the significance of MediaMOO within the MUD and the MOO history and in turn, within the development of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and the Internet. As Elizabeth Reid in her essay *Electropolis* explains "Computer-Mediated Communications Systems (CMCS's) use computers and telecommunications networks to compose, store, deliver and process communication" (3). For instance, MOOs and chat rooms (IRC) have been among the most popular types of synchronous CMCS over time. My motivations for this study are based on Dewey's notions on the relation of social medium and education, which from the field of social psychology, contribute to the hybrid background of disciplines that form Media Studies. Specifically related to the contemporary idea of "networks" is Dewey's assertion about the influence of the social environment in calling out certain responses from every individual. In his masterwork *Democracy And Education*, Dewey states that the particular medium in which an individual exists leads him to see and feel one thing rather than another; it leads him to have certain plans in order that he may act successfully with others; it strengthens some beliefs and weakens others as a condition of winning the approval of others.

For Dewey, the social environment gradually produces in the individual a certain system of behavior, a certain disposition of action. Obviously, the words “environment” and “medium” denote for Media students more than surroundings that encompass individuals and groups. Following Dewey’s points, I underline that these concepts denote the specific continuity of the surroundings with the individuals’ own active tendencies. My point is that if an environment consists of those conditions that promote or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, the characteristic activities of a living being, then we should pay more attention to the environment in which Media Students “grow” because it can help define their present and future activities as media scholars and producers, and it can make these activities what they are meant distinctively for. I believe that in an ideal environment for interactions among Media Students the apparently obvious relationship between people and communication must be made deliberate to induce an open dialogue that focuses on it. As J.C.R Licklider, pioneer of Computer Engineering, states that now, more than ever, there is a main concern to prioritize the mutually reinforcing aspect of communication, that is, the creative aspect of communication when studying the Media. “Creative, interactive communication requires a plastic or moldable medium that can be modeled, a dynamic medium in which premises will flow into consequences, and above all a common medium that can be contributed to experiment with by all” (21). This is where, in my view, the MOO construct fits into the whole idea of Media Studies.

Alternatively, Dewey also emphasizes how educational the environment for communication among members can get:

“Our net result thus far is that social environment forms the mental and emotional disposition of behavior in individuals by engaging them in activities that arouse and strengthen certain impulses, that have certain purposes and entail certain consequences. A child growing up in a family of musicians will inevitably have whatever capacities he has in music stimulated, and, relatively, stimulated more than other impulses which might have been awakened in another environment (...) Some kinds of participation in the life of those with whom the individual is connected are inevitable; with respect to them, the social environment exercises and educative or formative influence unconsciously and apart from any set purpose” (3).

Based on the above comments, I would like to propose an analogy between Dewey's notions and the assumption that Media professionals and students "grew up" together in MediaMOO like a family, which stimulated their special media-related capacities. I believe that MOOs provide humans with alternatives in Dewey's use of the term and that these specific alternatives turned MediaMOO into an ideal collaborative environment for its members. In his CMC bible *The Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold, back in 1993, recognized the significance of social opportunities for people that share the same professional interest. "Although it (MediaMOO) opened with a party, and the atmosphere is informal, MediaMOO consists of people who are studying virtual communities. In that context, meeting someone socially at an event like an inaugural ball has implications for everyone's intellectual and professional life" (174).

The validity of this case study that situates MediaMOO and the "Mediamaking" learning as reciprocal systems to function in the academy, relies on the need to examine the glorious past of the community in order to sift through its current transitional phase in which, according to its administrator, efforts are being conducted to get it under way again. In this matter, all evidence seems to point to the academy as a viable alternative for putting in practice a model based on MediaMOO. Some omnipresent aspects in Media Studies that have been essential to MediaMOO's operations must be documented:

- ?? The implementation of a writing laboratory built on the premise of functionality of the sender-receiver relation;
- ?? The relations between conversation and situation in networked activities;
- ?? Audience awareness that involves study of impact, feed-back conditions and action-taking, and
- ?? Design and construction of:

MOO elements such as:	that interlace the Media Studies notions of:
Rooms	Space, location, atmosphere, ambiance, and circumstances.
Objects	VCR, TV, videos, movies, recorders, books, publications.
Players/actors	Identity, role, group and collective, representation, context.

Taken as a whole, as member Lee-Ellen Marvin points out, MediaMOO was a Media research project that itself highlights the notion of Community in the media making process. In MediaMOO, the Media has been the motor for empowerment of community creativity and productivity. “One might question whether these benefits can be obtained with less time commitment through other media—but this analysis ignores other benefits of the MediaMOO. For media researchers, coming to understand this medium (the Internet) may be interesting in itself” (Bruckman & Restnick 5).

-A cyber “practiced place” called MediaMOO.

For Resnick and Bruckman, the philosophy of Constructionism argues that people learn with particular effectiveness when they are engaged in constructing personally meaningful projects: “learning by doing is better than learning by being told” (1). Based on these statements, MediaMOO was planned to be a place for self-directed learning that due to its MOO nature often seemed chaotic but that was uniquely effective and enlightening to Media researchers. To create the project of MediaMOO, Bruckman started researching for her PhD dissertation in the Epistemology and Learning Group at the MIT Media Lab. It was entitled *MOOSE Crossing: Construction, Community and Learning in a Networked Virtual World for Kids*, and was designed to get children excited about reading, writing and programming. In addition to her dissertation, she and Restnick also based some of their insights on Seymour Papert’s analogy between educational technologies and Brazilian samba schools. In samba schools, a community of participants gather daily to have fun and teach each other steps and costume-making skills in preparation for Carnival. “The samba schools are social centers, where people go to socialize, and they are

environments in which novices and professionals mingle. Learning is spontaneous, self-motivated, and richly connected to popular culture” (2). From my view, the popular culture of MediaMOO can be regarded as a professional Media culture and its participant, as Sandy Stone describes in her essay *Will the Real Body Please Stand Up*, can be seen as “the technosocial subject”, who “is constituted as part of the evolution of communications technology and of the human organism, in a time in which technology and organism are collapsing, imploding into each other” (18).

MediaMOO has been one type of communication system that contributes to the properties of network communities—therefore, this study is concerned with those properties that are linked to social characteristics and their relationship to underlying technology, with an eye towards the design of communities themselves and of systems to support them. In particular, my approach outlines the relationship between real and virtual worlds, the role of social rhythms and the development of community as matters for examination and consideration.

-Presence: MediaMooers as agents; role-playing and organization.

In Virtual Reality, the constitution of identity and the presentation of self are done through text-discourse and narratives of self. These representations of self are declarations of identity constituted as both text and context in a textual world such as MUDs. Marc Giese explains that one of the major differences between virtual communities’ cooperative narrative and more traditional narratives is the expectation of interaction with the other members of the community. “This makes the narrative more fluid. Once written, the text does not assume the stability of a traditional fictional narrative. It is subject to additions, modifications and negotiations” (12). It’s worth pointing out what it takes to become a skilled MOO player. Anna Cicognani sees the MOO player as a kind of *agent*, a person who acts in the MOO via commands (or words). The word “command” in the MOO has an acting/action function more than a simple communication one. “The effect of commanding is not a promise or a wish, but an effective action: commands perform actions on and through object properties of the virtual environment” (4). In *Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?*

Stone notes that the agents in cyberspace are the sculptors of the binary relation technology/culture. The agents make technology and culture constitute each other, “studying the actors and actants that make up our lively, troubling, and productive technologies tells me about the actors and actants that make up our culture” (1).

In MOOs, commanding is performative: by issuing a command an agent can exchange communication, retrieve information or temporarily or permanently change the environment. In *Cultural Formations in Text-Based Virtual Realities*, Reid explains that MOO’s commands steer players toward the creation of social contexts and the formation of social networks. “The actions which players may take, and the emotions they may express, are delimited by the commands available to them; yet at the same time these commands suggest to players the emotional and social possibilities open to them” (35). In consequence, the player in a MOO is seen as a doer or better yet, as a performer. Cicognani comments that in a MOO, an individual issuing commands can be considered to be giving a performance.

Regarding the view of the player as agent, Thierry Bardini in essay *Bridging the Gulfs: From Hypertext to Cyberspace* brings up Brenda Laurel’s notions in her book *Computers as Theater* to point out that the two qualities of responsiveness and capacity to perform actions present in MOOs comprise the metaphor of agency that in turn, entails that of the agent. Bardini emphasizes that Laurel doesn’t argue for the personalization of the computer but for its invisibility. He also points out that this invisibility must be the result of a negotiation between user and designer on the competence of the interface agents. “The first step in this direction is to realize that human agents in the interface, like characters in a play, cannot be separated from the plot itself. The thesis supported here will be that the identity of the character is comprehensible through the transfer to the character of the operation of emplotment, first applied to the action recounted; characters, we will say are themselves plots” (24). The MUD system provides players with a stage but it does not provide them with a script. As I have stated before, in a system like MediaMOO, players are entitled to construct a great deal of the space they settle in. This way, MOO players

are “plots” in the sense that their characters are first written and then enacted by interacting with their space.

With the discussion of “emplotment” in mind, Reid in *Cultural Formations in Text-based Virtual Realities*, indicates that drawing a parallel between MUDs and novels or plays is tempting. “The results of the ‘pose’, ‘say’ and ‘feeling’ commands cause interaction between players to resemble these literary forms superficially, and the social dimension of MUDs can be viewed as multi-authored interactive text” (17-18). Yet, despite this possibility, Reid emphasizes that MUD sessions do not truly resemble scripts or books. The language is simply not the same. “It is more dynamic and less carefully constructed. Interaction on a MUD is, after all, interactive, synchronous and ephemeral. Although sessions may be recorded using computer programs designed for the purpose, MUD interaction is not designed for an audience uninvolved in its production. This interaction is not enacted to be read as an artifact, but to be experienced subjectively” (18). In this sense, I reiterate that community and identity in MUDs are both, text and context. This way, the audience of a MUD is at times integrated by the players into the action. Audience and actor roles are exchanged frequently. This point is very significant for my study because it involves two key subjects in Media Studies: audience and synchronicity.

Concerning to this point, incidentally I came across some thoughts of the English theater director Peter Brook in his book *The Empty Space*, that happen to be useful to make an analogy between Media (in which theater is included) and MOO systems. I follow Brook’s emphasis about the interactivity of theater as an interactive medium that demands synchronous actions. In this sense, theater is opposite to film and TV and alike to the Internet. Also, Brooks uses Wunderer and Monica’s research on theater and audience to explain about the absolute necessity of the presence of the audience in theater but also about the “responsibility” of the audience. “This responsibility means that the actual performance is established only by having both parts—spectators and actors—coming together” (qtd. in Brook 2). In a simulated environment like the theater stage or a MOO room, the dynamics of space creation and of internal manipulation of characters are reciprocal to the space in which they are

embedded which in theater includes the area reserved for the audience and in the MOO, all the other rooms and public areas occupied by the rest of players logged on. This means that every element in action (either a character, a piece of furniture or an audience) is inherent to each other.

In his book “The Virtual Community”, Rheingold cites Laurel to point out that the strong identification players feel with artificial characters in a computer database “is an example of the same human capacity for mimesis to which Aristotle attributed the soul changing (and thus, society-changing) power of drama” (155). Following Laurel’s inspiration from Greek philosophical figures, the analysis of Plato’s dialogues in the light of character logic made by Ruby Blondell Elinor, J.M West and Joanne Vaugh, offers me an elucidating interpretation of character and identity creation in the context of a community like MediaMOO. In Plato’s Dialogues, as Vaugh explains, only characters speak, while Plato remains silent, absent and distance from the words spoken by his characters. West emphasizes that “When Plato leaves his readers-listeners in *aporia*, he or she must rediscover the unique structure of a particular dialogue, as well as how it is unresolved and where it is incomplete” (West 111).

For her part, Vaugh emphasizes on the subversive nature of the Plato character. She argues that text presented by the character created by Plato stands in for the speaker. “Determining the text meaning (s) thus depends on knowing not just the language in which the text was written, but also the context in which it was produced and is read, the literary history of which it forms a part and the interpretative community (ies) to which it is addressed” (39).

I have also found correlation between the way Plato constructed his dialogues and the philosophy of MOOs regarding of players and character creation. Like any literary artist, Blondell believes Plato speaks to his audience in a variety of ways. “Since his preferred form is that of the dramatic dialogue, some of these ways of speaking resemble those of a dramatist who airs a range of views through a variety of characters, without being committed to any of them while remaining free to suggest

approval or disapproval of various points of view by means of such “literacy” features as characterization and dramatic structure. Thus Plato ‘speaks’ to us through the choices he makes in his use of dramatic form and characterization” (West 9).

I believe it is important to bear in mind as Media Students what Lenny Fonner sustains about the MUD quality of “enabling” performance. Performance creates a MUD momentum as it organizes the space, spurs the *hyperpersonal* and increases chances of rich human interactions. The hyperpersonal is a state, coined by Andrea Chester and Gillian Gwynne detached from “real life” that involves a more intimate and socially desirable exchange than face-to-face interactions. Chester and Gwynne, as some other researchers of virtual worlds, have observed that the benefits of online anonymity and pseudonymity for learning include a rich range of findings from increased equity to higher participation on the part of all involved. Also, based on his own research on MUD communities as educational environments, Colin Mook emphasizes that when people engaged in a MOO learning experience they start learning to interpret themselves as textual metaphors; and once they have become comfortable with moving that textual self through the MOO environment (which includes communicating with others), they can experience the virtual world in very real ways. He describe this as “pure immersion”. He conceives that getting knowledge in a MOO community is deeply intertwined with feeling a full range of emotions; this way, engaging in group work and recreating are activities that help to form legitimate human relationships (4).

In this sense, according to Fonner, the MOO performance is quite an example of an advanced assimilation of the possibilities of the Media. He believes that areas such as “literacy or film criticism” in the future are going to have to be much more trans-model and multimedia to effectively encompass the range of performances being created, especially when online, interactive media such as MUDs can turn simple conversation into a ‘performance’ of its own, complete with an audience that may themselves join in the fray.

-Place: Composite MediaMOO, the role of design and construction

The permanent change and construction of the MUD environment is based on design principles. In the essay *Defining a Design Language in a text-based Virtual Community*, Cicognani explains that, to a certain extent, citizens of a MUD have the unique possibility of defining their own space. Regarding to this point, Stone explains that when she started to write her history of virtual communities, she looked into MUDs to search for an apparatus for the production of community and for the production of the body. She observed that members of electronic communities act as if the community met in a physical public space. “The number of times that on-line conferencees refer to the conference as an architectural place and to the mode of interaction in that place as being social is overwhelmingly high in proportion to those who do not. They say things like ‘this is a nice place to get together’ or ‘this is a convenient place to meet’”(14).

On one hand, in MUDs, “objects” are conversation pieces constructed to interact with the space and other participants. Objects in MUDs are text-based, written in MOO code. On the other hand, MOO environments are divided into rooms. The whole environment—a complex structure of a chain of “rooms”, composed of descriptions, response, messages, tasks, verbs and properties, relies exclusively on the MOO database and the interpreter. In the essay *Communication in the Virtual Classroom*, Colin Mook explains that these rooms should be understood as “areas” that are divided into specific components. Three types of environmental components make up the area description: 1) Static Setting, the unchanging portrait of the area; 2) Tangible Setting, the manipulable, interactive portions of the area and 3) Dynamic Setting, the changing elements of the area. “Following the area description comes a list of the contents of the area. The list of contents is automatically generated by the MOO according to what is currently defined as “being in the area” (Mook 2). The final section of each area (“Available Exits”) provides, for quick reference, the methods by which the user may leave that area. By reading descriptions such as the setting of a room, and by writing actions such as ‘go north’, the user interacts with his or her environment.

In order to constitute community, it is necessary for MUD members to contrive specific verbalizations of physical conditions, that is, to construct metaphors. Bjorn Sorensen notes that the space metaphor in connection with the present state of electronic on-line communication is characterized by a double determination –“the container metaphor: space as a room and the orientational metaphor: space as outward movement” (8). By using orientational metaphors, MOO members expand the MOO territory. In particular, Beaubien states that to understand MUDs, one has to understand the crucial role that computer programming plays in the design and everyday functioning of MUDs. Beaubien remembers that since most MUDs allow some form of computer programming within the game, players can actually change the game itself as they play.

The necessity of design –of form and content—linked to the idea of the metaphor is an promising issue for students in the field of Media as it is related to the need of creating constructivist learning environments than then could be translated into media experiences directed to the audience. In my opinion, it should be of special interest of Media Studies program to design and develop models that allow us to observe how the global computer networks will further develop and how they will affect individuals and society in all levels. In MediaMOO, the design process implies settings and object creation in community. Certainly the design of space belongs to a different nature and discipline, different from supporting tasks related to communication. However, in cyberspace, the design of space comes together with the realization of communication processes among actual and future users of that space. When it comes to specific systems based on human-computer interaction, as Bardini states, the role of designer blends with that of the communicator, to create an endless dialog with the user of the system. In a MOO, digging and constructing spaces follow a logic or argument more than one of architecture. Space building in MOOs creates “situations” in the way participates engage in the on-going process of piecing together parts. Cicognani explains that “As in any other programming language, verbs can be “chained”, which means that a verb can call a series of other verbs and change a matrix properties, plus output messages in response to the action” (6). In MOOs,

there is an implementation of reflexive design, as Bardini explains, “When using a system, the user should be able to change it, to re-design it. To call for an extended virtuality is to call for an alternate reality where roles can be exchanged” (18).

All things considered, MediaMOO, as a case study, highlights the importance of the formation of an interpretative community in the process of learning to understand Media. In this study I have carefully observed how in MediaMOO the means of conversational role mixing of creators and spectators widened the possibilities and promises of the creations involved, an aspect that motivated me along the lines as potential for Media Studies.

My questions from now on are rather directed towards whether or not Media students perceive themselves as belonging to a community, and if so, how do they characterize that community? And furthermore: How can program planners promote community in our academic context and gain the benefits of an effective ‘membership’ for everyone involved? The presence of a community, whether on-line or on-site, includes commitment to a common purpose, recognition of members and guests and contributors. Community should be incorporated in the future of media readability especially when it comes to Media Graduate Studies because we must make use of the unrealized potential of the Internet as not only as a media format but as a learning environment. But for that to happen as member Peter Wasilko points out in essay *Online Communities: Supporting Sociability, designing usability*, is necessary a mutual combination of human relationships and technology, “Communities with good sociability have social policies that support the community’s purpose and are understandable, socially acceptable and practicable. Successful online communities also need software with good usability that is intuitive to learn, consistent and predictable.”(1)

To a considerable degree, I see the example of MediaMOO as a comprehension of crucial parameters that fuel the computer software and network culture. Contrary to many experiments with this category of MOOs, creators of MediaMOO took care of not only to stretch the ways the technology can create a “conference”, but stretching

the metaphor of “conference” to create a whole new form of social and intellectual event for the Internet. Over time, for each MediaMOOer, his/her own collection of data (objects, rooms, sessions, conversations) came to be interesting and important for evoking their Internet experiences. MediaMOO participants were strongly influenced by insight, subjective feelings, and educated guesses. Thus, each individual’s repertoire was reflected in his/her space and presence on the MOO. Each colleague gave their data to incorporate into other colleagues’ models, which came to be the essence of the communication task performed on this system.

When I asked about the real use of a system like MediaMOO in Media Studies, member Siering was both expectant and doubtful. He told me that the interactions with among people in related fields would certainly be valuable, as would the notion of active social/professional relationships with colleagues around the globe. However, he pointed out that nowadays an improved level of interaction exists more commonly among students and new professionals; therefore, projects like MediaMOO are not as vital in laying out such opportunities and concepts for them. Nevertheless, Siering pointed out that interaction of media and communication—of speaking, acting, building, and creating—that was at the core of MediaMOO and related projects would help students find those connections between media and human interaction that are vital to the continual growth of new media. I support Siering when he says that despite the fact that “connections” of technology and human are becoming more common now, MOOs will be good for reinforcing those interconnections. He also agrees that more diverse media incorporated into such spaces would help even more. Thus, for Siering the emergence of a MultiMediaMOO is an imminent fact.

As a final point, I would like to recall that the roots of the word Cyberspace well describe any space that is a field for human effects through environmental interaction. In her essay *Will the Real Body Please Stand Up*, Sandy Stone explains that in the environment in question, that is, in the social world of virtual culture that she calls *technosociality*, technics is nature. “When exploration, rationalization, remaking, and control mean the same thing, then nature, technics and the structure of meaning have become indistinguishable. The technosocial subject is able successfully to navigate

through this treacherous new world. S/he is constituted as part of the evolution of communications technology and of the human organism, in a time in which technology and organism are collapsing, imploding into each other” (18). From the sources I consulted, I can extract that many believe that MOO has been the forerunner of technology that will in the future provide the sort of structure needed for the “common place” of civilized society.

With this study I believe I contribute to the trend of the network culture with a view to effectively incorporating the notion and the practice of technology into Media Studies. Technology properly refers to any human organization of tool use. Technology, Media and Cyberspace evoke a shared space of common goals that has been made habitable by credible and memorable things (creations) in De Certeau’s notions. This comprehensive sense of “habitability” should be considered in the design of new pedagogies in Media Studies. MediaMOO is a remarkable exploration of this idea to be taken into further directions.

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