

## **A Walk on the ICE**

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"The world within which members of a text-based virtual reality interact is built from words, and it is a world where sentences, words, and letters are the sum total of the "places" people meet, where they tell and listen to stories, create stories in tandem, play, work, and live (for some) significant portions of their lives with friends, colleagues and virtual strangers " (Kolko 1995: kolko.html)

### **Prelude:**

Two years ago we started taking groups of ESL learners into 'Text Based Virtual Reality' (TBVR) as part of an attempt to integrate use of such spaces into the set curriculum. The original MOO project was a fascinating experience and is still run in the centre. It also left us with the question: Now what? Having introduced and trained learners in the use of MOO spaces via the project, we were then inclined to let them alone to enjoy the freedom the use of these spaces encourages. Indeed, it seemed that further interference with the learner's navigations was inappropriate to the medium (Fanderclai 1995). However, the use of these realms as a classroom tool remains a tantalising concept, combining as they do, the elements of speech, writing, role-playing, programming and community.

This paper is an exploration of a specific use of TBVR - not just as powerful communities for authentic communication and collaboration in language learning (Warschauer 1995, Frizler 1995, Turbee 1996) but exploiting the role playing and the writing aspects. The 'Walk on the ICE' takes a group of adult ESL learners through 'the creation of imaginary characters who interact in MOO space according to their designed personalities in a town, also created by the learners. These interactions are then written up as narratives and posted on the web allowing any newcomer to read, catch up with the current plots and then join in themselves. The end result is a bit of a soap opera, more Melrose Place than Hamlet. This community produced environment not only permits the "creation of belief" (Kolko 1995: Kolko.html), creating a space where words are the walls, the views and the pathways but a place where the players on the stage have access to written histories where, like any good soap, they can choose and identify with their favourite characters and contribute to the unfolding tale.

### **The Stage Set:**

ICE stands for 'Integrated Cyber Environment'. 'Let's take a walk on the ICE' is an irresistible expression overheard on an old Phantom cartoon. The 'Walk on the ICE' project is based around exploitation a variety of computer based facilities: two different types of MOO and the World Wide Web with ancillary use of programs such as PAINTBRUSH and MS WORD. Much of the action also takes place in class hence the use of the term integrated. The main stage set uses TBVR or in this instance MOO space. The term Text Based Virtual Reality is used here to cover what is often generically known as MUD or Multi User Dungeon<sup>i</sup> programs. Bartle and Trubshaw's original MUD was designed in 1979 at the University of Essex as a computer based version of the Dungeons and Dragons type adventure game. A later variant of the program type called TinyMUD was designed by Aspnes at Carnegie Mellon University in 1989 to include a social element and permit players to chat as they played. This format has been built on since and now comes in a number of guises. Figures in 1993 (Bruckman 1994) indicate 424 publicly announced MUDs based on twenty one different types of software accessible via the Internet. These different types of software and their acronyms (MUD, MUSH, MUCK, MUSE) can be confusing but essentially all types of MUD offer an environment in which players can interact with both objects, each other and move around in a 'pseudo' three dimensional space in 'real time'. TBVR is typified by textual descriptions, a sense of 'terrain', entrances and exits. Communication within TBVR is synchronous via text. Many of these environments are user extendible, many still offer adventures and riddles to solve and roles to play however, a growing number offer communities with homes and common areas, bars and libraries where the main focus is not the Tolkienesque slaying of the dragon but meeting and collaborating with people from all over the globe.

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This history and the distinctions have an effect. Text Based Virtual Reality<sup>ii</sup> has a particular richness and depth in terms of language that distinguishes it from other forms of synchronous computer mediated communication. The roots of the program type in adventure and role-playing games gives the software genre a strong sense of realm. Most MUDs provide maps, most have roads and pathways or walks or textual descriptions of houses on a Gormengast scale which can be wandered through' and explored, wardrobes lead to new countries and gardens bloom with designer flowers planted by previous visitors. The nature of the realm permits the player to walk through literature and the nature of the communities invites them to contribute to it. Textual descriptions are read to discover new exits and objects, descriptions are written by players to inform the rest of the realm population who they are (or indeed who they wish to be seen to be (Reid 1991, Turkle 1995) ).

For the walk on the ICE, a particular variant of the TBVR program was used: MOO (MUD, Object Oriented) space. The MOO variant is based on software written by Pavel Curtis of Xerox PARC (Curtis 1993) and offers a powerful internal programming language based on object oriented concepts. This enables both sophisticated creation of generic objects and easily accessible creation of particular objects. In other words, players can make things and leave them in the environment to entertain other players; they can 'program' wind up toys; they can write notes to friends not connected and leave them in a room to be picked up and read when the recipient arrives. New rooms and regions can be created (dug) and textual descriptions entered that are visible with a simple command:

**look**

CHARLIE BROWN'S OFFICE

Charlie Brown's office is a three-level house in the inner of Jarp Town. It is an old house. There is an office on the ground level, living room and kitchen on the first level, three bedrooms on the second level. This house was built in 1901. It was a Victorian style. Although it is an old house, it looks quite pretty and lovely. Charlie Brown is living in the house by himself. The house was given by his parents before they died. This house was only worth \$AD 20,000, but it is worth \$AD 659,050 now.

Description of Charlie Brown's Office: Written by ICE player and entered into the MOO

**Dramatis Personae:**

There are two sets of *dramatis personae* in this opera. The actual players, that is the students and their teacher and the characters or puppets that they created that go through' the motions of the drama itself. It is not the scope of this paper to comment on the nature of the puppets invented by the students. The exercise was class driven and the students created their characters in groups. It is worth noting that avatars chosen by ESL students in other projects have sometimes demonstrated the freedom from self (Turkle 1995) that can be a liberating and powerful facet of MOO use for the language learner. (Turner & Pohio 1995). The primary group of players consisted of a class of mixed nationality, mixed gender, adult ESL students at the Queensland University of Technology International College. Their English language abilities were in the upper intermediate ranges. Most of the students had been in Australia for a few months or more and had established a rapport with their class teacher that contributed a vital element to the project (Allwright 1988). In its later stages the project also included a secondary group of players, upper primary school children engaged in a writing day as part of a Queensland University of Technology Writing Project. It was interesting to note how the 'soapie genre' (Stewart 1990) of the project enabled these two very different groups to appreciate and 'pick up the plot'. Like the characters in a soap opera too, the creators main concerns were love and the sensational: Jenny loves Banana in spite of his theft of her necklace and ring; Andy returns from war and discovers that Jenny and Banana are married<sup>iii</sup> .....

Aqua-Duck : An Evil Gambler  
Krang : The Merciless  
Ed : A boring McDonald's Worker  
Jewels : A good-looking roofer  
Andy : A dangerous soldier

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Raquelle : A student  
Rusty : The town Bikey  
Sally : Unemployed  
Glacius : A security guard  
Skittles : A waiter  
Roo : A law student  
Charlie Brown : A logical lawyer  
Micky : A detective  
Gwendolin : Part time morgue attendant  
Tomato : A bossy student  
Ketty : A tall, attractive student  
Banana : A high school student

Current characters designed by ICE players

As is typical of soap operas, characters are fairly stereotyped. Tomato is very much the Sarah (Neighbours) of the piece, Gwendolin is reminiscent of Kimberly (Melrose Place).

### **Stage Directions**

The project commences with the design of the characters or avatars to be used in MOO space. Players were encouraged to create characters in groups using language but to cement their reality by using a simple paint program to create pictures<sup>iv</sup>. These pictures are then posted on the web for future reference and to act as an introduction for other groups entering the opera. The next stage consisted of discussion as to how the characters might interact, drafting the plot. The players were also introduced to MOOing in a social MOO in order to familiarise them with the basic commands required for MOO interaction. Two MOOs were used: SchMOOze and Connections. Different MUDs, like different pubs, have an atmosphere and clientele. SchMOOze owned and operated by Julie Falsetti, is an ESL community. It provides a great social atmosphere, an on-line dictionary, language games and much more. SchMOOze was used as a place to introduce students to the concept of TBVR and some of the basic MOO commands required to navigate. It has also been informally observed that a motivational excitement is quickly produced when students encounter someone new to talk to in a MOO that will give them the momentum to learn the basic commands. The body of the walk on the ICE took place in Connections, a MOO owned and operated by Tari Fanderclai. Connections was set up as a place to bring classes for collaborative projects. It is designed around the concept of realms. This meant that the project could be enacted without disrupting other MOO users. It is an observed phenomena of virtual communities both in TBVR and other synchronous CMC, that players will adopt and explore temporary characters, genders and histories (Reid 1991, Turkle 1995). To have a whole village of soap opera characters might well be considered bad netiquette and create the kind of confusions that Vargas Llosa describes in "Aunt Julia and the Script Writer"<sup>v</sup>.

Another class encourages the students to create their world and their characters. In this instance the stimulus for the discussion was an article from a newspaper on the global village (If the world were a village with a population of 1,000 ...). These characters are then used as the focus for discussion: what will happen when ...? As the students gain more confidence in their avatars the discussion gets more complicated and the groups enlarge upon their characters - where they live and the layout of the town they live in. The stage is then set for the rehearsals and the players enter their designer realm in the chosen MOO to enact the lives and stories of the opera. After rehearsal (operatic event, virtual life?) the players then write up the stories or narratives of the events using a word processing package. These documents are then reviewed and added to the web site as part of the on-going opera. Groups entering later are able to read (catch up with the plot) and join in for another cycle.  
..... to be continued ....

### The Directors Cut

The 'Walk on the ICE' in its present form took a typical English Language course session - twelve weeks. During that time we involved two different classes of students and a group of upper primary school students. In terms of language work (both ESL and mainstream) it was felt that the project satisfyingly covered a range of desired skills within the set curriculum. The players (no longer learners?) were given situations where they had to discuss and collaborate in order to construct an identity and an environment. This was the process by which they reached the required goal of creative writing. It enabled the variety of learners to concentrate on their individual forte, stronger visually oriented learners focused on the use of images as part of the process, drawing both characters and maps. Some focused on the written descriptions, others on the role-play and the speaking. The plots were sketchily drawn up by collaborative groups but only came into existence as a result of the totality of each players involvement.

"MUDs make text interactive, spontaneous, and collaborative; writers cobble together a collective hallucination (the rooms, object, and characters), breed narratives of love and war, and jam like improv poets with their chat" (Davis 1994:43)

In the walk on the ICE, the writing process gets turned into a stage show where the audience are themselves the writers and the readers. In terms of our original goal we were pleased to see a whole new realm of potential open up for the use of TBVR. In particular, one that actually exploited the chaotic nature of the domain and encouraged the kind of freedom that we had so enjoyed offering players in earlier projects.

Some of the more intricate stories got lost in the rehearsal stage and were never written up. We will never find out about Gwendolin now - this is an apparent facet of soap operas (Stewart 1990), later perhaps she may come out of the storeroom (Crossroads) or we may have a character waking up and realising that the whole of the past year has been a dream (Dallas).....

The 'Walk on the ICE' website is available at: <http://www.fed.qut.edu.au/tesol/cmc.html>

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Warschauer, M. 1995 " *E-mail for English Teaching*" TESOL Inc

**MOO addresses:**

SchMOOze: telnet schmooze.hunter.cuny.edu 8888

Connections: telnet connections.moo.mud.org 3333

**More about MOOs and Computer Mediated Communication:**

WWW: <http://www.fed.qut.edu.au/tesol/cmc.html>

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<sup>i</sup> The use of the expression DIMENSIONS is frequently seen as a more respectable alternative to DUNGEON for this acronym

<sup>ii</sup> The term TBVR is used here to differentiate between the text based MUDs and what is sometimes referred to as GMUKs or Graphic Multi User Konversations. This more recent form of program is similar to TBVR in that they permit the interaction of the player with objects, people and space but have a Graphic User Interface which means player descriptions are created with icons, room descriptions images. These GMUKs (The PALACE, WORLDS) are more closely related to chat zones such as the IRC or communicators such as ICQ and POWWOW.

<sup>iii</sup> The war that the students had affecting Andy so much was actually created by a meteor hitting the earth - we all feel that Deep Impact (Mimi Leder, Paramount Pictures & DreamWorks Pictures) probably built on our plot!! The current cycle of ICE narratives has ended in a giant tidal wave ... sound familiar?

<sup>iv</sup> MS paintbrush was used in this instance. Images were created as Bitmaps and then re-formatted for the web with Lview Pro.

<sup>v</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa "Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter" read the book before you see the movie!