MOOSE Crossing:
Construction, Community, and Learning in a Networked Virtual World for Kids

by

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ABSTRACT

In research about the Internet, too much attention is paid to its ability to provide access to information. This thesis argues that the Internet can be used not just as a conduit for information, but as a context for learning through community-supported collaborative construction. A "constructionist" approach to use of the Internet makes particularly good use of its educational potential. The Internet provides opportunities to move beyond the creation of constructionist tools and activities to the creation of "constructionist cultures."

These issues are explored through a specific example: MOOSE Crossing, a text-based virtual world (or "MUD") designed to be a constructionist learning environment for children ages 8 to 13. On MOOSE Crossing, children have constructed a virtual world together, making new places, objects, and creatures. Kids have made baby penguins that respond differently to five kinds of food, fortune tellers who predict the future, and the place at the end of the rainbow—answer a riddle, and you get the pot of gold.

This thesis discusses the design principles underlying a new programming language (MOOSE) and client interface (MacMOOSE) designed to make it easier for children to learn to program on MOOSE Crossing. It presents a detailed analysis, using an ethnographic methodology, of children's activities and learning experiences on MOOSE Crossing, with special focus on seven children who participated in a weekly after-school program from October 1995 through February 1997.

In its analysis of children's activities, this thesis explores the relationship between construction and community. It describes how the MOOSE Crossing children motivated and supported one another's learning experiences: community provided support for learning through design and construction. Conversely, construction activities helped to create a particularly special, intellectually engaging sort of community. Finally, it argues that the design of all virtual communities, not just those with an explicitly educational focus, can be enhanced by a constructionist approach.

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In memory of
my grandmothers:

Florence Fox Bruckman
Norma Brodney Cohen

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Table of Contents

Abstract....3

Acknowledgments....7

Table of Contents....10

1. Introduction: MOOSE Crossing....13
   - 1.1 An Evening at The Crossing....13
   - 1.2 Construction and Community....16
   - 1.3 What is a MUD?....19
   - 1.3.1 MUD History....19
   - 1.3.2 Personas....20
   - 1.3.3 Places....22
   - 1.3.4 Objects....25
   - 1.4 Prior Work: MediaMOO....27
   - 1.5 The MOOSE Crossing Project....27
   - 1.6 Outline....30

2. The Day After Net Day: Approaches to Educational Use of the Internet....33
   - 2.1 The Hype and the Reality....33
   - 2.2 Distance Education....35
   - 2.3 Information Retrieval....37
   - 2.3.1 Children Accessing Controversial Information....38
   - 2.4 Knowledge-Building Communities....40
   - 2.4.1 Global Science....40
   - 2.4.2 CSILE....42
   - 2.4.3 Professional Communities....43
   - 2.4.4 Real-Time Writing....46
   - 2.5 Technological Samba Schools....47

3. Designing Enabling Technologies: The MOOSE Language and the MacMOOSE Client 53
3.1 The Need for a New Language 53
3.2 The Design of the MOOSE Language 56
3.2.1 A Gently-Sloping Learning Curve 58
3.2.2 Intuitive Simplicity Versus Formal Elegance 59
3.2.3 Be Forgiving 64
3.2.4 Leveraging Natural-Language Knowledge 65
3.2.5 Avoid Non-Alphanumeric Characters 68
3.2.6 Make Essential Info Visible and Easily Changeable 72
3.2.7 It's OK to have Limited Functionality 74
3.2.8 Hide Nasty Things Under the Bed 75
3.2.9 A Design Philosophy 77
3.3 The Need for a New Programming Environment 78
3.4 The Design of the MacMOOSE Client 80
3.4.1 A Tour of MacMOOSE 81
3.4.2 Equal Access for Few Versus Unequal Access for Many 88
3.5 Designing Empowering Technologies 89

4. Collaborative Learning Strategies: Storm's Weekend with Rachael 91
4.1 Storm's Weekend with Rachael 91
4.2 Friday: Diving In 93
4.3 Saturday: Independent Progress 102
4.4 Sunday: More Mutual Reinforcement 105
4.5 Monday: Camaraderie Combats Frustration 108
4.6 Tuesday: Collaboration 110
4.7 Seven Months Later: Meeting Face to Face 114
4.8 Conclusion: Integrating Technological and Social Contexts 116

5. Community Support for Construction 119
5.1 Uzi's Frustration 119
5.2 Pilot Study: Programming for Fun 120

5.3 "Did You Really Make This?": The Importance of Role Models 124
5.4 Situated, Ubiquitous Project Models 126
5.5 Emotional and Technical Support 128
5.6 An Appreciative Audience 135
5.7 Local Community and Online Community 145
5.8 An Extended Example: Lady's First Script 149

6. Constructionist Culture 159
6.1 A Felicitous Type of Community 159
6.2 "Television Fans and Participatory Culture" 159
6.3 Objects of Construction 160
6.4 Worlds Made by Their Inhabitants 166
6.5 Sharing Scarce Resources 168
6.6 Believing in Users 170
6.7 Construction and Community 172

7. Conclusion: Constructionism and Virtual Communities 175
7.1 Open Research Questions 175
7.1.1 The Social Implications of Distributed Systems 175
7.1.2 The Cognitive Implications of Graphical Media 176
7.1.3 Gender, Technology, and Learning Styles 178
7.2 Contributions 183

Appendix: Five Children's Creations 187
Goofy 188
Mouse 189
Angela 212
Werdna 213
Rowena 219

Bibliography 224