EnCore Mailing List
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Kevin Jepson
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Warning long post!

More Moo Thoughts

Kevin_J waves to everyone.
Kevin_J says: Good Evening Folks :)

I really enjoyed the online meeting we had during the symposium and I've been playing around in the new version 5 of enCore since then. I really encourage anyone, who hasn't had a chance to try it out, to get a User ID and give it a run.

While doing that, I've been thinking back on our discussions about the Spatial Metaphor and the competing metaphors of MOO, WEB and DESKTOP. The competition/contrast between them is very obvious when using the new version, more so in fact than when using our current and previous versions.

As I've "wandered" around and tried out my usual ways of doing things I've found some, IMHO, serious issues with how enCore effects the original MOO metaphor and therefore the Spatial Metaphor itself.

I in no way want to suggest that enCore in it's current or beta form is somehow "flawed" or wrong. I also do not want what follows to be considered a critique or flame of the great work Daniel has done on v5. A massive programming effort like this deserves much appreciation and kudos.

Critiques, comments and discussion are welcome.

With that little disclaimer out of the way :)

Here are a couple of weird things that I have noticed.

EXITS

The first biggy for me has turned out to be the exits, or as the WEB side of enCore would say "Links". I've talked about the whole exit thing recently but I decided to give the enCore system a better run, as a user, to see if it was just my familiarity with the text side that was the problem.

No such luck.

The ability to move through the virtual space is one of the key immersion aspects of MOOs. As I mentioned before, having directions associated with the action of moving solidifies the users perception of where they are. As I wandered through the "link forest" that appears in the WEB page side I did not get a sense of where I was relative to any other place. I found that I had to either use the Map utility or try to remember the names of the rooms I'd been in.

This sense of being "lost in the links" is very common, at least for me, when doing random web surfing. Sometimes the only solution is to go "home"
and try again, I find this quite frustrating.

I can see how this would be much less of a problem in a "designed space"
like VRoma where the layout of the space is controlled by the designer and the descriptions/imagery built to include enough info to know where the user is going. In a user built environment, like a typical social MOO or where the students are allowed to build in an educational MOO, the resulting link forest could be very disruptive to the spatial metaphor.

There are probably cosmetic changes that we could make that would reduce this effect like the "exit frame" coupled with layout changes.

However there is a more fundamental issue here, as I see it, that could be a real problem going forward. That is that room creation in enCore automatically generates the links between rooms. These links are cryptically named, to the users at least, and are not available to be used from the text side as commands. What's more they are not even "visible" from there.

Even if we use the old @dig command which, thankfully is still available, and name the exit with a sensible direction there is no way for the user to find out what that direction is without using the cryptic command @ways. We are stuck with the WEB metaphor's links rather than the MOO's exits.

From the WEB metaphor standpoint this is no big deal, nobody knows or cares "where" a link on a webpage "goes" after all. Neither for that matter does a user care "where" a shortcut "leads" on a DESKTOP.

In a MOO however, the direction and destination of an exit are critical to the user's perception of a space. It is indeed a holdover from the text based world to have each exit referred to by it's direction not it's destination, but I think it is important to have those spatial cues.

In a similar vein, in v5 there is a strange, to me at least, phenomenon that occurs if one "looks" at something that could be a room or an exit. I created a generic room called "portable room" and dropped it. A look refresh shows the portable room with a building icon. If I click that icon I GO TO THE ROOM, even though it has no exits or entrances. If I type "look portable" in the client the same thing happens!

The other equally strange effect of this is that an @examine command does the same thing?!?

In v4 only a click on the room object's link results in a move.

A similar thing occurs in v5 if one has re-named an exit with a reasonable direction like "down" and then you type "look down"...POOF you are now in the room on the other side of the exit.

This is a big disruption to the spatial metaphor, IMHO. There is no way to describe what an exit looks like, as a "Long damp tunnel, dimly lit with torches" for example.

I don't think simply "looking" at an object should initiate ANY action, like moving the player. While perhaps useful for building traps for the unwary, there are very few things IRL that respond to simply being looked at. This behaviour seriously breaks the spatial metaphor by eliminating the sense of moving "through" a virtual space and confusing the process of moving with that of looking.

Looking was always a reasonably safe option in text MOOs. When in doubt look or @examine/ @show. I can imagine some surprising and unwanted teleports in v5.

A better idea, IMHO, would be to make sure that "moving" was separate from "looking", unless the user is browsing from the WEB and not logged in, when the link clicking makes good sense.

PAGE GENERATION

By which I mean the process that is used to create the WEB description/display of anything. This is a problem that I've had since v3 really. It only became really obvious in v4 because the WEB page and link generation became more complex.
When I create a room and then give it a text description everything is cool, boring, but cool :)

However if I wanted to change the behaviour of the room or an object by modifying the look_self

verb things get interesting. The system generates the page and it is not intuitive at all to me how that description/code is arrived at. Creating a more complex "room like" object with actions that change the description for example, becomes more difficult because in addition to changing the text description we have to mess with the WEB page generating verbs.

Unlike in the classic object oriented MOO system, I can't just go up the hierarchy of objects to find the verbs. The object's _html verb links to non-object based verbs which do the heavy lifting. This is quite an elegant solution to the problem really, BUT it means that the writer/programmer of MOO codes for objects is constrained by the system rather than supported.

Why are these of concern?

One of the great things about MOOs, which distinguish them from many other multi-user systems, is the ease with which new objects can be created and the children of those objects modified, while maintaining existing functionality. There is little re-inventing the wheel needed.

I wouldn't expect many users of these systems, especially in the educational environments where enCore will be mostly used, to actively program new objects. However, if the mechanisms by which the user actually experiences the system are not easily accessed then we, as in the designer/owners, will be stuck supplying ALL the objects in these worlds. Only then can we be sure of how they will behave/display. This breaks one of the great strengths that MOOs have IMHO, and places an unreasonable burden on the creators of the virtual worlds we want to have.

The primary display mechanism in enCore is, for better or worse, the WEB page.
I have problems with the way rooms and spaces are delivered and experienced through this mechanism.

That may not be of much concern to the designers of educational systems, they are usually presented TO users as much as created BY them, however the constraints imposed by this WEB emphasis limit the usefulness of this great system to anything else. That means for example, that I would have to spend a lot of time with cryptic WEB/html commands to make my pages LOOK like anything because the straight text, while expressive and potentially elegant
:) LOOKS BORING.

I think it is very important that as we "improve" the enCore system that we don't constrain the user/designer in the process. By removing functionality, the ability to "look" and "see" the text description of an object IN THE TEXT FRAME, or changing a core functionality, the arbitrary assigning of exit names and the non-intuitive effects of "looking" and @examine, take tools away from those who could use this system.

Daniel asked a very reasonable question in a post to the Development list recently and I'll quote it here in case others haven't seen it:

Daniel asks "I think that if you want to telnet, OK, (but why do you use the enCore database then?...)"

I can only answer that for myself of course.

I'm fascinated by the excellent tools that have been developed to assist users in the more arcane aspects of using MOOs. The WEB based utilities are truly awesome, IMHO.

Things like the enCore MOO Mail system, object creation and editing tools, programming tools and, in V5 HTML Chat and threaded forums, would be a fabulous addition to any MOO. In addition the ability to generate WEB pages on the fly and linking multimedia content and graphics to MOO objects and spaces have vastly improved the users experience, at least the look and feel part.

These things make enCore a potentially great system, BUT, if in the process of "improving" the system we loose the very things which make MOOs unique, their immersive spatial qualities, we

have gone backwards.

We must be careful to always add functionality while not destroying the existing capabilities.

Personally, I would love to figure out a way to excise the enCore web tools and utilities into a package that could be used with a more "normal" MOO.
That would be the best of both worlds, IMHO of course :)

Ciao
KJ

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