MUSH Building Tips

These building tips were originally written as part of a discussion about building on the mush-staff@mlists.com email list. Most of the tips are aimed to the person doing large-scale building from scratch, but there are also some suggestions for maintaining building. If you have any ideas for other topics that could be covered here, please contact saidar@ta-veren.org.

Build What You Use - plan ahead, avoid unused rooms
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Build What You Use

My number one tip to builders is usually to build only what you need, what will get used on a regular basis. How something will be used depends on the game, and includes factors like settings needed for common RP scenes, areas for OOC socialization, recreation of an area people would expect to see as part of that theme, etc. The one exception I make to that guideline is for organzation - most larger-scale building will have at least a couple of rooms that mainly exist as connections to other rooms, so you don't have 50 exits off of one place or whatever.

For this reason, I usually recommend that builders spend some time thinking before they start digging and descing. I find you can save time and bother, and make building more efficient by experimenting with the options before you type any commands, whether you sketch things out on paper or in your mind. I think there's a sort of inertia about building once it's in place on a game, so it's easier to make these judgements before the building is in play if possible. Builders will resent the removal of rooms, and even little-used rooms become part of the landscape - players will be disappointed if they're deleted, or annoyed if they constantly have to relearn the map of the game, etc.

If a room doesn't get used on a regular basis, I feel it's taking up more space in the DB than it's giving in value to the game. Bloated building also makes things more confusing for players - it's easier to get lost, to forget where the areas you do want to use are. On an RP game, too many rooms can also contribute to spreading people out further than you'd like, diffusing role-play instead of concentrating it.

Depending on the nature of the building, another factor to consider in the planning stages is where player building will be linked to it. If you're building something like a city, people will want to build businesses and homes, and you'll need to have somewhere to put these. You may also want to decide on a linking policy for player building, so you don't have 20 businesses in one district and none in the others.

Virtual Space is Different

I think one of the biggest mistakes many MUSH builders make, and one of the leading causes of rooms that don't get used, is trying to recreate a RL floorplan. I've seen many players build a home or apartment that includes all the hallways, closets and bathrooms a real home would have, without asking themselves if they'll ever use those spaces in any way. The space of a virtual environment gets used in a different way than the space of a real environment. I think one of the hallmarks of good MUSH builders is that they've learned to think in terms of the needs and uses of the virtual environment, and evoke the real instead of duplicating it.

One way to do that is to shift away from equating a room to a MUSH room, a door to a MUSH exit, or MUSH Places to only being tables. Most games have building tools that allow you to evoke a realistic space without laying it out on the grid. Using Places and +view, you can create and describe an entire house with one or two MUSH rooms. Places messages are entirely customizable, you can set them to be "walks into/out of the kitchen", and you can describe the kitchen in a +view. This type of building probably only saves you 10-25% of the DB space of doing it with rooms and exits, but it does allow you a more compact grid, or let you create the feeling of a larger area if you're working with limited @quota.

Even if you have extensive @quota, I recommend you do not use all of it in your initial construction. It's good to have a bit of quota available to make temporary rooms for plots and events. Also, you can't always predict everything that people will want from your area in the building stages. If you have some free quota, you'll be able to make additions if unforeseen needs come up after people have been role-playing in the area for a while.

Build to Support Characters and Role-Play

Building is a part of the fabric that makes up a game, and it can be used to support some game goals like what types of characters and RP you want.

As an example, I'll use the fictional OlympusMUSH, with the theme of ancient Greeks interacting with their pantheon of gods. Most players are ordinary Greeks, you have to be approved to play a god or goddess.

If the creators of Olympus spend most of their building energy on Olympus, the home of the gods, and have only a couple of rooms for the ordinary Greeks, that'll have consequences on player attitudes. Players will already prefer to play a god than a Greek, and that building structure will only heighten that desire. Players will get the impression that only god characters matter, regardless of what the news or whatever says the philosophy of the game is.

So the Olympus wizards decide to beef up the village building. Here they can also try and influence types of characters. Do they want to make sure they have hunters and shepherds? Then they should make sure to build some forest and pasture areas so people have places to RP hunting and herding. That won't "make" someone choose to be a hunter, of course, but it could help the idea occur to people, and shows those who do choose those character paths that their character has a role on the game, and that the admin are supporting those characters.

People like to feel that their characters are part of the fabric of the game, and that they "matter", and little things like this can help as much as big plots. Maybe even more so, since plots are ephemeral, but building is something available to every player, regardless of when he logs on to the game.

It can also help direct RP. The admin of Olympus MUSH shouldn't complain that all anyone RPs is tavern chat if the only thing they've built for people is a tavern. Olympus MUSH could add an arena for Olympics-like contests, a field for picnics, a village square for markets, etc. Again, that won't "make" people RP something else, but it gives them a place to have other types of RP, and can help give people ideas.

Building can also be used to try and limit RP that's not desired by the admin. If Olympus MUSH wants to be child-friendly, it can forbid the building of bathhouses or bordellos as public environments. If it allows those types of locations, it shouldn't be surprised if the RP within them gets risque from time-to-time.

Depending on the structure of the MUSH, a lot of this might come down to the building of area/faction leaders rather than wizards, but the wizards can help their faction heads by suggesting that they think about these sorts of factors when designing their building.

Grid Considerations

I think most people prefer building that is easy to navigate. Part of that is being logical, part of it is naming and marking things clearly (if an exit is a door on one side, it should be a door on the other, not an arch, etc.) A more complex structure can be unavoidable for a bigger area, and then it becomes useful to incorporate tools like ASCII maps, +compass, etc.

Exits are something I often find are poorly done. Most people don't bother with an exit description. Personally, I may not bother going through an exit if I can't figure out where it goes to decide if I want to go there, and it's not always possible to figure that out from its name.

(There are times when I'd break this guideline - a maze isn't much fun if it isn't maze-like, comes with a map, and all the exits tell you exactly where you are. ;)

Description and Writing

My impression is that lots of people don't really read descriptions all that thoroughly, and usually only the first time or two they encounter them, but there does seem to be a solid contingent of people who pay a lot of attention to them, and description is definitely a big part of building.

My main tip in this area is to think about ALL the senses, not just vision. I think a lot of times when people are writing descriptions, they only think about "what can you see?" A swamp description that includes the fetid smell of swamp gases, the feeling of soggy earth squelching underfoot and the sound of buzzing insects is going to be more evocative than one that just describes the visual landscape.

Detail is another thing I think about when writing descriptions. Too much detail, and people might not get a sense of the big picture. A lot of detail will also result in longer room descriptions (I try to limit myself to 15-20 MUSH lines for a room desc.). Too little detail, and it might not seem as "real" a place as it could have. I usually aim for a good overview, with a few details thrown in for spice. Instead of a forest room with "Acres of tall trees", I might try "Pines predominate, but here there you catch sight of a small stand of larch or birch trees."

The last factors I think about relate to language. You can take your time when writing a description, unlike the fast pace of RP poses, so you can take the time to use varied and more evocative words, and to vary the "subject verb" sentence structure.

Less desirable:

> The castle grand hall is huge. There is a huge fireplace on the north wall. Huge stained glass windows line the west and east walls. The throne is the hugest you've ever seen. Huge double doors lead out to the south.

More desirable:

> The cavernous grand hall echoes with the footsteps and voices of all who pass within. Heat radiates from the impressive fireplace on the north wall, although the air is quite cool near the massive double doors to the south. Gigantic stained glass windows line the west and east walls, the figures they depict dwarfing the tiny humans passing beneath them.

One other limitation I set on myself when writing descriptions is that they shouldn't "force" character reactions. This mainly applies to exit messages, but it can also apply to rooms ("you gaze on the crucifix in the church with reverent awe" - probably not, if your character is an atheist or a vampire). It can be really hard to force yourself to avoid this, as it usually means a more generic than creative message for an exit, but I figure it's better to leave the creative aspect to RP in this area.

This is an example of what I mean by forcing:

> Bob walks into the garbage dump, wrinkling his nose in disgust at the smell.

If Bob's a garbageman, he probably doesn't even notice the smell. If Bob's a rat puppet rather than a human character, he probably thinks the smell is nice, not disgusting. Taken to the furthest extreme, if Bob's a seagull puppet, he probably didn't walk in, he was flying. A better, albeit more "boring" message would be something like:

> Bob comes into the garbage dump.

It's boring, but it tells the character/puppet where he is, and he can RP out his reaction to that environment as appropriate.

Know the Rules and the Tools

Most games have rules and guidelines related to building. They may use a format for exit and room names to keep things uniform, or have guidelines for flag use. Familiarizing yourself with these rules before you start building will mean inspection of your building will take less time, and you'll have less to fix before it can be added to the active game world.

On Tales of Ta'veren, the building rules are available in 'news build'. Area leaders should read through all of the news entries in that section, as they will be working with players to link player building to their area building.

Builders should also be aware of their @quota limitations before they begin planning their building. On Tales, these are listed in 'news quota'. Most games that have @quota guidelines are fairly strict about them, you should work within those rather than working with the assumption you can talk the wizards into more @quota. (On Tales, builders are given a starting quota, and can request more up to the maximum quota for that type of building.)

You may also want to familiarize yourself with the building-related globals on the game that you can use to enhance your building. These may include tools like Places, +view and others. These tools allow you to enrich your building without needing advanced coding skills.

Builders on Tales of Ta'veren can read more about our building tools on this site:

- The room parent system.
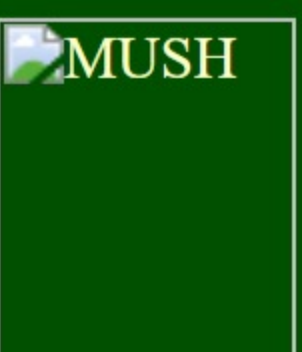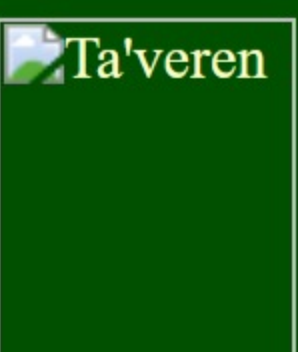- Additional building tools (Places, +view, ambience, mobile).

Updating Building

Once building is completed, inspected and put into place, I think a lot of us tend to forget it. It fades into the background and becomes an immutable part of the game. I think it's worth rethinking that a little.

Building can be modified for RP, or as a result of RP. In RL, we decorate buildings for holidays, change them slightly with the seasons. The same can be done on a MUSH. If there's a fire or a flood, that can affect the environment on the game, and the building can be updated to reflect that.

It's also worth reevaluating MUSH building periodically, like once a year or something. Are all the rooms still being used? If not, get rid of the ones that aren't. Do the characters using this area seem to have new uses this building isn't meeting? Modify or add to it to meet those needs.

Reinspect building periodically. If the builder's made any changes since it's been installed, those may not have been inspected. Stuff can also get missed in a first inspection. I recently had something I did reinspected, something that had been used by players for two years, and I was astonished at the number of errors that were found. It wasn't a huge amount, but enough to demonstrate that everything isn't always caught the first time, and players don't always contact you to tell you about errors they've spotted.