Appendix C – Text of "LambdaMOO Takes a New Direction" (LTAND)

LambdaMOO Takes a New Direction

<Wednesday, December 9, 1992>

I'm sorry that what follows is so long, but I want to share the historical context that I perceive for current events and for an announcement, which appears at the end of this message.

I should note at the very beginning that I had planned to put this message together several weeks ago, very soon after I posted my last *social-issues note. I talked about the general idea with the other wizards at that time and I was supposed to draft a message and send it around for approval. It seemed to me tonight, though, that I was procrastinating an awful lot and that I'd better just write it and send it now, while I'm (temporarily) up-to-date on *social.

As a result, the other wizards are seeing all this at the same time as you are; I don't think they're going to be surprised (except to the extent that Haakon finally doing something is always surprising), but y'all should know that they haven't approved this note in advance.

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Just over two years ago, I sent email to four people that I had met in the very first MOO, written by ghond and run on belch.berkeley.edu. I knew those four people by the same names they use(d) here: Gemba, Gary_Severn, Frand, and ghond. The email explained that I had opened the first "LambdaMOO", running a server derived from ghond's but with enough changes of my own that I gave it a new name.

There weren't very many of us in the early months, of course. Each of us pretty much knew everyone else and the only bureaucracy concerned taking care that the wizards didn't step on each other's toes in making changes to (and, really, creating from scratch) the first core of the LambdaMOO database. We were a very small cadre of friends (I remember the jubilation we all felt the first time there were more than 10 people connected at once) working together to build something that maybe, just maybe, somebody else would find interesting enough to visit more than once.

By the end of the third month or so, we had the core, the server, and the documentation in sufficiently good shape that we felt OK announcing the existence of LambdaMOO to rec.games.mud and thus inviting the world into our creation. By this time, however, we already had (as I recall) hundreds of players created by people who had heard of us simply by word of mouth. We were beginning to have a community, though it was so small ("How small was it?") that nearly every player who had ever connected had been personally greeted by me. (I know, it must be hard to believe that I used to venture regularly from my den, but it's so.)

We had, I think, already had some discipline problems, even then. I remember a couple of assholes from PSU who came in, changed their names to things I wouldn't want to say in front of my mother, and started cursing at everyone in sight. I remember going to try to talk to them about it, meeting stiff resistance, and finally recycling them in frustration.

After the public announcement, of course, the place took a little leap in popularity. We started seeing a wider variety of people coming through, I stopped being able to greet each new player personally, and we started having disagreements about what was and was not proper conduct here. Eventually, I was approached by a number of players and asked to draft a set of rules for proper MOO behavior. It was felt, by both myself and a number of the other players, that this was a new kind of place, that we had gained some useful experience with how well or badly certain kinds of behavior worked, and that at least some of the lessons we had learned would not be obvious to new users. With a written set of rules, we felt that new players could perhaps learn from our experience and that maybe the amount of friction would be reduced.

Accordingly (and after one of my usual periods of procrastination), I wrote a draft set of rules based entirely (as I recall) on the suggestions made by the players who had made the request. I showed the draft to a bunch of people and asked for their comments on its style, completeness, and correspondence with their impressions of the "right" way of things. After incorporating suggested changes, the first version of "help manners" was publicized in the newspaper; I had, I think, done as good a job as I could of trying to capture the public consensus of that (admittedly early) time.

Perhaps surprisingly, "help manners" worked quite well in reducing the number of incidents of people annoying each other. That society had a charter that reflected the general opinion and social pressure worked to keep the MOO society growing fairly smoothly.

We pretty much stopped growing over the summer of 1991, with a maximum of about 25-30 people commonly connected at once. At the end of the summer, though, as school restarted, we began growing almost alarmingly, with as many as 40 or 45 people often connected at the high points. I recall counting on the order of 350-400 people who had connected in the past week at that time.

As the society grew, so did the work load on the wizards. We were all spending a lot of time looking carefully at what players had built and deciding about requested quota increases, as well as other things, including arbitrating various inter-player disputes. The load of new players (with their understandable but frustrating disinclination to read documentation) and the ever-increasing number of quota requests were leading some of the wizards, including me, to feel stressed out and overworked. It became clear to me that something had to be done to reduce the wizardly workload, so at the very beginning of this year I created the Architecture Review Board, to try to shift some of the burden off of the wizards and onto a larger group of experienced players.

It took some working out, and I'm not saying that it didn't disturb a number of players, but the ARB did eventually relieve the wizards of what had become an intolerable burden. From our standpoint, anyway, it worked very well.

A couple of months later, at the plaintive and repeated requests of the other wizards, I agreed to move the MOO to a "registration" basis, where new players were only created by people sending RL email to one of the wizards. This has also worked to reduce some of the burden on wizards, since it introduced a degree of accountability and a concomitant reduction in certain kinds of disputes and discipline problems. I had resisted registration for months, worried that, among other things, it might stifle the continued growth and evolution of the MOO society.

I needn't have been concerned. The growth has continued and continued, forcing us to come up with new mechanisms and experimental solutions to the inevitable growing pains. We created red-listing, black-listing, and grey-listing. We created the @newt and @toad commands. We tried to block out a lot of people who we thought were causing problems and then stopped trying because it's too hard to be effective at that game. We were even forced to pop the top off of the limit on the number of connections in order to meet the demands of LambdaMOO's growth.

Of course, during this whole time, we were fighting an increasingly losing battle, to control and accommodate and soothe a larger and larger, more and more complex community. We were trying to take responsibility for, now, the behavior and mores of over 800 people a week, connecting from almost 30 countries of the world. We were frustrated, many of the players were frustrated; the center could not hold.

You can probably see where this is leading.

I realize now that the LambdaMOO community has attained a level of complexity and diversity that I've actually been waiting and hoping for since four hackers and I first set out to build this place: this society has left the nest.

I believe that there is no longer a place here for wizard-mothers, guarding the nest and trying to discipline the chicks for their own good. It is time for the wizards to give up on the 'mother' role and to begin relating to this society as a group of adults with independent motivations and goals.

So, as the last social decision we make for you, and whether or not you independent adults wish it, the wizards are pulling out of the discipline/manners/arbitration business; we're handing the burden and freedom of that role to the society at large. We will no longer be the right people to run to with complaints about one another's behavior, etc. The wings of this community are still wet (as anyone can tell from reading *social-issues), but I think they're strong enough to fly with.

There are a number of very important unresolved questions concerning the transition to an out-of-the-nest society:

- What should happen to the ARB and the quota-granting process?
- Who should be making decisions about granting or refusing programmer bits?
- What do we do with the current "help manners"?

and almost certainly a bunch of other things I'm not thinking of right now.

My personal model is that the wizards should move into the role of systems programmers: our job is to keep the MOO running well and getting better in a purely technical sense. That implies, though, that we're responsible for keeping people from getting "unauthorized" access; in particular, we still have to try to keep others from getting wizard bits since the functional integrity of the entire MOO is clearly at risk otherwise.

There are lots of details to be worked out, and I couldn't possibly try to lay them all out here even if I were capable of thinking of all of them in advance, but I am committed to removing the wizards from the social sphere of the MOO *entirely* and *soon*. Haakon, Nosredna, Geust, Slartibartfast, etc. will become technicians who work for the society. Lambda, yduJ, JoeFeedback, Ford, etc. will much more clearly become just another set of players in this community with no more power or moral authority than anyone else.

It's a brave new world outside the nest, and I am very much looking forward to exploring it with the rest of you. To those who have noted that I have the ability to shut down the MOO at any moment, that my finger is, after all, the one on the boot button: you have nothing to fear on that score for the foreseeable future; only an utter fool would put an end to such an exciting social experiment at so crucial a time in its evolution.

I think we're going to have a lot of fun, here... :-)

Haakon the technician and Lambda the lazy proletarian slob