

To: The rest of the Albia team (IS, MR, TH and MO (could you post a copy on to him please Natalie?)).

From: Steve Grand

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4 pages

Guys,

Talking to you all at the Christmas Do, and particularly hearing Martin's initial comments on the game, I started to wonder whether I've failed to communicate some of my ideas properly. This whole product is strange in the extreme, and it's only going to work if we all have a perfectly clear vision of what we're aiming at, and pull in the same direction. I've never tried to explain how the neural network works, or anything about the object-oriented nature of the code, but neither of these leave artists and writer quite so much in the dark as if I don't explain 'where I'm coming from' with all this mythological lark. So, this memo is an attempt to explain why I think we need a mythical element to the game, how it should manifest itself and why I picked the myths that I did. In practice, it'll probably illuminate none of those things, but here goes...

The central concept behind this product is to entertain people by simulating real, living creatures on a computer, using an extension of neural net theory. Quite what's entertaining about it is not so easy to identify, but the success of Little Computer People, and 'click-and-watch' games like Cosmic Osmo and Putt-Putt, plus people's drive to own domestic pets must explain something. The very first design was for a computer 'pet' (a mouse, in fact) that lived on the desktop of your PC, in amongst your other applications. I don't remember why, but this idea quite quickly changed into one where you involved yourself with a group of creatures who lived in a 'real' world, instead of inside your computer. Had the creatures remained simply 'pets', then the 'world' need only have been a cage, filled with toys, food bowls, etc., and the metaphors would have been obvious. However, people don't usually consider dumb animals to be very intelligent, so to make the neural net stuff a bit more impressive, I had to make them more human-like (capable of speech, etc.). Human beings have brains consisting of 10,000,000,000 neurones; even a rat has hundreds of millions, yet my creatures would have to make do with only a thousand or so. Consequently, the chances of fooling the user into thinking he was dealing with a real human are remote. For this reason, I compromised and ended up with a moderately anthropomorphic, but clearly non-human race of creatures — enter the Norns.

But what sort of world should these animals inhabit? Where have they come from? What drives them? What should the player do with them? They clearly had to have a *raison d'être*. I could, of course, simply invent the landscape, objects and behaviour from scratch, but this would be terribly arbitrary, and it would take a more creative person than me to invent a complete world out of nothing, let alone communicate it to the player. So, the best course was to draw the basic elements from pre-existing models that the user would be reasonably (but not too) familiar with. Real, everyday life doesn't provide much of an explanation for language-using, cuddly animals, so I turned instead to the world of myth, with its real-but-not-quite-real, understandable-yet-still-mysterious qualities.

The next question became: which myth? I didn't want to tie myself to any particular story, since this is supposed to be an 'experience' rather than an adventure, and anyway, a pre-determined storyline would completely negate the point of imbuing these creatures with free will. So, the best thing was

to pick a *corpus* of myth, and select from it suitable elements with which to concoct the necessary *raison d'être*.

Since most of the target audience for this 'game' belongs to the Indo-European races, an obvious corpus of myth was available. In fact, the original Indo-European mythology is lost, but there are two powerful and related strands that I could choose from: the southern, 'Celtic' tradition and the northern, 'Saxon' one. In fact I decided to use both — the Nornir are Saxon, and derive from English and Norse myth, while the *Síde* are (approximately) Celtic and have their roots in Irish stories. The great beauty of using these mythologies, as far as I can see, is that, even if your average games player doesn't *think* he knows anything about such things, his whole life is actually steeped in the traditions that derive their point from those stories. He may quite unashamedly erect and decorate a tree (Yggdrasil) at Christmas, dance round a maypole (also Yggdrasil) in Spring or celebrate Halloween (Lughnasad) with bonfires (the Gunpowder Plot was just an excuse to resume these previously outlawed celebrations). Even though he doesn't know it, he already understands about the White Goddess (whether he calls her Guinevere, Maid Marian or Mary) and the Green Man (whether Robin Hood or the name of his local pub)... I could go on for ages. The central point is that the Celtic and Saxon legends provide endless sources from which to create a believable, self-consistent world, complete with peoples, a past and a future. If they were good enough for Tolkein, they're good enough for me. In addition, most of our target users (English, American, German, Italian, French...) already understand these things, deep down in their psyches. An added bonus is that most European languages are heavily derived from those same cultures, so our Norns can speak Anglo-Saxon, our *Síde* Irish, and the player will be able to see at least some similarity with his own language.

So far, so good. I have a body of myths that I can draw from to create a believable world with a past, present and future. Unfortunately, trying to explain this to Martin the other day has shown me that there are two awkward associations that I haven't guarded sufficiently against: the first is Religion, the second is History. By the word "myth", I mean people's *explanations* for things: how the world came into being; why the fields should be ploughed in Autumn; where rivers spring from. One aspect of myth also deals with the question "who's in charge?", and is called Religion. I have absolutely no intention whatsoever of bringing Religion into this game any more than I have to — I don't want stick from atheists because I'm getting all mushy and spiritual, nor do I want stick from American fundamentalists because I'm blaspheming against Christian doctrine. Fear not. Mention of pilgrims, temples and so on seems to have put the wind up some of you, but remember that all this is for *our* consumption as a development team; it is vital that we come up with a coherent explanation for these things on Albia, just as we have to be able to explain the geology and the climate. From such completeness will come believability, but I've no intention of ramming Religion down people's throats, and anyway I certainly intend to be more sensitive than some games authors in this respect!

The other hanger-on that I never intended to be there is History, or rather historical cultures. I should never have mentioned the word "Norse" in the context of this game, nor have I been careful enough in my choice of names. I accept that "Norse", to most people, conjures up images of marauding Viking warriors, with horns on their helmets and icicles on their noses, and the conjunction between that image and cutish, furry creatures is, I agree, not helpful. Most Scandinavian people were actually relatively peace-loving farmers, but that's not the point. I only mention Norse myth because English myth, which I'm *really* interested in here, is almost lost, in literary terms, and the only direct sources are those of the Nordic cousins of the English. So banish from your mind any thoughts of Odin, Thor and Loki, and the Bifrost rainbow bridge to Asgard, well known meeting place between the Norse gods and Spiderman. I never intended such associations, and the mistake was only in a few of the proper nouns that I used. Outgard and Midgard are fine, but I should never have mentioned Asgard. The Mountains of the Ragnarok are perhaps a bit over-heroic, but otherwise harmless, although I suppose that now the *Síde* live under them, they ought to have a Celtic name — the logical choice might be Annwn.

As regards the other names, perhaps I ought to mention where I got them from, since they carry (at least in my mind) a lot of mythological baggage with them that ought to be used in any coherent history of Albia (whoever writes it). *Yggdrasil* is the name of the great World Tree that holds up the sky in Saxon/Norse myth, has survived in maypoles and Christmas trees and is related to the Omphalos and other cultures' sky-supporting pillars. Around Yggdrasil were three wells, representing Past, Present and Future (from whence comes my concept of the Journey). These wells were tended over by three women, who were variously called the Fates or Wyrdr or *Nornir*, and who have an extremely ancient lineage, turning up in Roman, Greek and other myths. One of the women was called *Urdr*, another Mimir and the third Skuld (probably), and their latest manifestation is in Macbeth, as the three Weird Sisters (where they speak of Macbeth's past, present and future). Interestingly (to me anyway), my town's coat of arms is a large tree, surrounded by three wells — the city of Wells is famous for its springs, but there aren't three and there's no tradition of a tree, so this looks like Yggdrasil again. The *Ragnarok* is the disaster at the end of the world, and is a bit Nordic, really. *Volund*, or Wayland, whom I've named a desert after, was a mythical smith. *Outgard*, *Midgard* and *Asgard* were the three levels of Earth, corresponding to the universal ideas of underworld, world and heaven. The *Grendel* was a huge and vicious monster from the heroic saga Beowulf. *Ettins* are a group of sub-human creatures related to Elves and Orcs (which I can't use because Tolkien got there first). *Niflheim* was the name of the region that Beowulf hailed from. *Albia* is derived from Albion, a likely Celtic or pre-celtic name for these islands. The *Side* are a musical, intellectual and highly regarded race of beings who lived under the bronze-age burial mounds in Ireland, and from whom we get a lot of our fairy stories. They were possibly a memory of the real Neolithic people who preceded the Celts.

This is the kind of stuff I want to use to build a consistent and believable landscape, into which my stupid furry creatures can fit. There is no mention of heroes or battles, and just about no mention of gods. They are just the elements of a story-teller's landscape that's so old that it is firmly entrenched in all our minds. Some of the names may not be well chosen, but all of them are real, and have a ring of truth that made-up names rarely carry. The coherence is already there, and all we have to do is twist it a little to fit Albia, and use it as our guide when we try to decide what a place or an object should look like, or how to phrase the intro narrative, or what puzzles and clues we can include, or what Side or Nornir language or art was like, or...

Without the myths, nothing in the game has any justification; all the decisions we take will be arbitrary; artists, programmer, writer and marketers will pull in different directions; and the final product will lack the coherence that makes it believable. If this thing is going to work at all, we have to aim to fool the player into forgetting that he's sitting at a computer, and get him to suspend disbelief. This emphasis on myth doesn't, however, mean that I see it as a 'myth game', like Heimdall or similar. The myths are there to provide explanations of past and present, and a guide to a possible future; *not* to make it into a proper game, with rules and a goal. I don't particularly want the user to be able to identify the sources of the names or myths, at least not without some effort (which is why "Asgard" was a mistake). All I want is to take advantage of several thousand years of carefully worked-out imagery.

Does that make any sense? If not, you wait till I try to explain how the Norns' brains work!

