

To: Ian Saunter, Mark Rafter, Tony Heap
From: Steve Grand
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I've had another idea ("Oh no", I hear you say)!

First of all, I'm convinced now that we'll have most success if we go wholeheartedly for the stance that Albia is NOT A GAME BUT AN EXPERIENCE. We shouldn't let ourselves be lured into squeezing it to fit existing pigeonholes. Albia is different and new, and reviewers will like it for that reason (as they did with Robin). It's not a whole new genre or anything like that (although the technology has a big future), it's just a one-off. However, I'm sure it can sell in good numbers on curiosity value alone (particularly in the PC market, where people are fairly disillusioned with 'conventional' game formats). The important thing is that all elements of the package (including marketing & box-work) should be consistent in their approach. Like Ian said, let's make it "art for art's sake" and be proud of it.

So why have I spent so much time worrying about plot lines, goals & progression, when I don't want it to be an adventure? I think the reason is this:

Albia is a planet with pre-existing technology, architecture, etc., yet is only populated by a very small number of stupid creatures. In order to justify this odd state of affairs, we were forced to explain that the entire population had been wiped out by some catastrophe. This did fine as an explanation of the past, but it obliged us to construct an equally momentous future too! We couldn't just say "well, there's been this terrible disaster and everyone is dead, but never mind all that, just go off and have a good time playing with your norms". We had to invent the idea that the norms somehow had to put everything back to rights, which ought therefore to involve some serious and dramatic adventures. And so the word "plot" (if you'll forgive my French) reared its ugly head.

HOWEVER, supposing we could find a different explanation for why we've got a ready-made civilisation with hardly anybody in it? If we could, and it wasn't such a moody and dramatic explanation as before, then the users could just go off and explore, like we want them to, without some 'goal' to justify the weighty intro.

At some point in the meeting, Ian said something about how we should just be saying "This is Artificial Life. This is what it's like. Enjoy.", and I now think that that is where I've been going wrong. I felt obliged in the original plan to describe Albia as a *real* world, somewhere *out there*, and explain that the A.I. aspects were just a means to make it more believable. However, as the project has developed, I've found myself focusing more on the A.I. as an end in itself (brain monitors and such). Other people seem to find that interesting too. So maybe we should drop the pretence and just be honest about it!

Then (about 2.30 a.m., on the M4) I thought of a way we could do this. It's a bit convoluted in places, but it doesn't require ANY significant graphical, coding or gameplay changes. All you have to do is forget all the old ideas for a moment, then look at them again in a new way.

The only tricky thing to explain is why Albia is the way it is (full of buildings and objects that couldn't have been made by our two norms). I think the best way to explain it to *you* is the way one might choose to explain it to the *punter*, so I've mocked up the start of an hypothetical User Manual to set the scene. Have a read of the following, and see what you think. There are a few problems with it, but on the whole it works for me.

(Note: ignore the terminology and style, etc. This is only written as a way of getting the idea across to you lot)



to the fascinating world of vanimal-keeping. If you have never kept vanimals before, please read the following two sections before installation, to help you get the most out of this new and absorbing hobby.

What is a vanimal?

Vanimals are a product of the most recent research into Artificial Intelligence. They are virtual animals; that is to say they are real, living creatures who exist in a virtual world generated and maintained by your computer.



Unlike normal life-forms, such as you and I, vanimals are not constructed of Carbon compounds but of *information*. With help from the robotics industry, these creatures could be given hard, physical bodies and could live in our world. However, there is really no need: given a sophisticated enough virtual world to live in, these fascinating creatures can survive inside soft, 'informational' bodies, where they can be made accessible to anyone with a sufficiently powerful computer.

Keeping a vanimal is much the same as keeping a domestic pet, and they can be a source of amusement, delight and companionship. However, vanimals are more intelligent than many Carbon-based domestic creatures, and also somewhat more delicate, requiring careful rearing. They are also a completely new phenomenon, and very little is currently known about them. Thanks to the ability of information to be duplicated rather more readily than skin and bone, vanimals have quickly been made available to the general public, and active research into Artificial Life has moved from the laboratory into the home.

Where do they live?

Vanimals can't be left to fend for themselves in the world outside, like a dog or cat can. Nor can they be left to roam freely inside your computer, where they could cause untold havoc. Vanimals need a 'cage' to live in. However, they are much more intelligent and sensitive than, say, a hamster or rabbit, and their cage must contain a much richer environment than a food bowl and a few basic toys.



Another issue is the impossibility of passing objects through from our physical world into their virtual world. We can't simply feed them through the bars; we must give them their own supply of virtual food, and perhaps even the ability to grow more for themselves when that runs out. A vanimal's environment must therefore be far larger, richer and more self-contained than that for a conventional captive animal, and the 'cage' we have provided in this package amounts to an entire world, complete with weather, plant life,

technology and many other resources.

Programming such a complex world by hand would be very difficult, so we have modified the *Biomimetic* process that we use to generate vanimal life-forms, and have used that technology to create the world for us (see “More about Biomimetics” in a later chapter). The Biomimetic system uses its Biomorphing facilities to create your vanimal or vanimals, and then its Terramorphing functions to create a world in which they may live. The disadvantage of this method is that we at Millennium have little control over exactly what sort of world the system produces. We can guarantee that it contains at least one vanimal for you to look after, and enough food and resources to support it for a reasonable length of time. However, beyond that we can say very little, and the geography and technology of the vanimal world are as unexplored and unknown as the vanimals themselves. See the disclaimer below for more information.

What little we have been able to find out about the vanimal world and the biology and psychology of its inhabitants is discussed in more detail in later chapters. However, you now know enough to be able to start the Biomimetic process and say hello to your new-born creature or creatures. The following section describes the control and monitoring facilities available to you. Read this to discover how to interact with your creatures, then read the rest of this manual at your leisure, to learn how to get the best out of your new friends. Enjoy.

Disclaimer: The Biomimetic process used to generate the virtual world and its life-forms is not 100% reliable in its actions. We guarantee that there will be at least one new-born vanimal and enough resources to keep it alive without major human interference for a moderate time. However, we do not accept responsibility for any loss caused by negligence, mis-conduct or insufficient care on your part, and we emphasise that maintaining a suitable environment for these creatures requires effort and thought. Also, during the research and development phase for this product, it is possible that certain test ‘species’ of vanimal became lost somewhere inside the virtual world. We accept no responsibility for any damage to livestock or property that any such life-forms may cause.

User Interface

Blah, blah, blah...

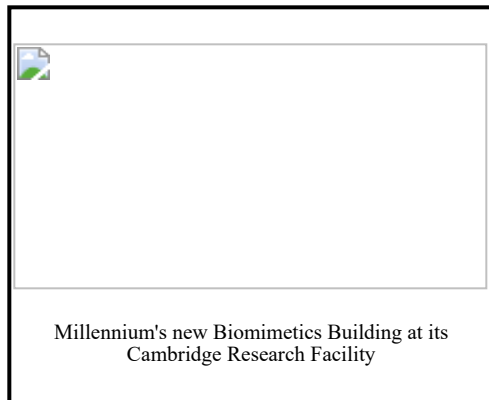
More about Biomimetics

Located at Millennium’s research facility in Cambridge, England, is the huge Biomimetics system, known as Darwin.

Darwin is a massively parallel computing device developed for the creation of virtual life-forms and environments. It is roughly divided into two sections: the biomorphing layer, where synthetic life-forms (vanimals) are created, and the terramorphing layer that has been used to generate the environment in which these vanimals live.

The terramorphing equipment includes a huge CD-ROM-based database, comprising information on physical laws, chemistry, geology, botany, human cultures, architecture and many other subjects. From this mass of data, Darwin has created a life-support system for vanimals; a large virtual world which Millennium’s research technicians have named *Albia*. The Albian landscape is fairly strange, and its largely unexplored regions contain a selection of living and non-living objects which Darwin

has judged necessary for sustainable life and intellectual and cultural development. We're not entirely sure that Darwin has got it right, and its interpretation of suitable architectural, technological and biological styles seems to us a little bizarre, but who are we to argue? The important point is that intelligent life needs noise, complexity and subtlety around it if it is to thrive, and Darwin has done its best to provide us with it.



Unlike terramorphing, the biomorphing aspects of the Darwin system are much more within our direct control, but that's not to say we've found it easy to develop suitable life-forms. In fact, there have been a number of earlier prototype vanimal 'species', most of which were unsuccessful for one reason or another and have been abandoned (although there are rumours that one or two examples slipped the net, and even now are roaming around the more unexplored regions of Albia).

These various vanimal breeds have all been given names by their creators, taken in traditional fashion from

mythology. The first creatures we developed were known as *Ettins*, and were just too stupid to justify releasing to the vanimal-keeping hobbyists. One or two of them are probably still hanging around somewhere in Albia, but they won't give you any bother. This isn't true however, of the Mark II creatures, which we called *Grendels*, after a vicious monster in the Beowulf saga. Grendels turned out to be true to their name and had an excess of bellicosity which made it very difficult for research to continue for some time, as the aggressive and unfortunately rather mindless creatures would destroy, kill and usually eat anything that got in their way. Any raggedness and dilapidation you notice around Albia are probably down to the ravagings of Grendels, but we are absolutely certain, well, fairly sure anyway, that all Grendels have now been destroyed.

A much more pleasant personality was characteristic of the Mark III vanimals, which we call *Norns*, and it is these creatures that we have decided to release to the general public, and with which, we hope, you will enjoy interacting. Norns are fairly gentle, unaggressive creatures, whose only vice seems to be a penchant for impishness. In fact they behave remarkably like mischievous human infants. They are not very bright, it has to be said, and they need a good deal of running around after. However, we believe that they are intelligent enough to learn the rudiments of a spoken language, and should therefore be fairly easy to control and interact with, given a little patience.

The only other prototype species yet researched is a much more sophisticated race, known officially as Mark IV, but unofficially named *Side* (pronounced "shee"), after an ancient mythical Irish race, famous for its magic, intellect and wit. Unfortunately, the Side seem to consider themselves intellectually more capable than our research team and tend to drift off into the more sophisticated regions of Albia, where we can't find them and they feel free to meditate in peace. This has made it rather difficult for us to make much progress with the Mark IV types, and so at the moment we are restricting ourselves to working with the Mark III Norns, who aren't so snobbish. You probably won't come across a Side creature in Albia, but if you do, can we have it back, please?

Other chapters...

What we know about Albia so far

Vanimal physiology / Vanimal neurosystems

common questions: (Can I breed them? How long do they live?...)

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etc....



This is me speaking again...

As you can see, the idea is to be (essentially) truthful about what it is we're selling, and lose all pretence that Albia existed before we found it. The only tricky bit is explaining why the world has cities and so on, and why we aren't going to give the user explicit information about what's there (so he can enjoy exploring) - hence all the rigmarole about 'biomimetics'. I imagine this huge computer putting together various bits it knows about real worlds (maybe it picked up some of its architectural styles from books on various cultures etc.) and stirring it all up to create a new, synthetic world.

The only thing we lose is the sense that Albia has a past history and culture. This was supposed to be a key element originally, to give the thing believability. However it can be dropped OK if the world is openly synthetic. The only casualty seems to be books, though maybe we can think of some other reason to have them.

If we take up this idea, the game style should continue along the present lines and provide toys to play with, potential challenges like growing food and curing illnesses, and so on. There is no need for an end goal (or even an end point), nor need the challenges be sequential or related to any overall plot. All the objects we've got now (airships, etc.) are just as much fun, and don't have to be restricted for fear of upsetting the puzzles.

The Journey is not now compulsory, or even hinted at, but I think it'll be inevitable anyway. People will want to see what's round the corner without us egging them on, and certain gamey elements (avoiding grendels, running out of turnips, etc.) can still serve as sources of pressure to move on.

The existence of all the brain monitors & utilities is now much more explicable, since we're being honest about the A.I. stuff. I don't think people (esp. PC'ers) will get put off by the techie stuff, as the LCP elements are sufficient entertainment in themselves.

The style is a bit more jokey, but it's all good, clean fun. The 'Sim'-like feel might even cheer MX up a bit.

Your comments, please (on a postcard, until we've got workgrouping).

