

Ethics in Habitat

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Recently there has been heated debate among the Alpha-test community on the topic of moral and ethical standards in Habitat. While it does rather put us on the spot, we still appreciate everyone's concern and input. This sort of discussion is exactly the type of feedback we had hoped to get from the test phase. The testers' comments have been invaluable to us.

The issues that people have raised were not a complete surprise to us. We have been debating these questions among ourselves for some time now. What *was* a surprise was the strength of people's feelings on the matter. Since it is clear that this is an important subject to many, we feel it is time for us to share with the Habitat community our own position, as the creators and operators of Habitat.

In addition, as Habitat becomes operational, we must have clearly formulated policies, both as guidelines for the operational staff and as a way of responding to both the curious and the critical among the public and press. Furthermore, the resolutions to these issues that we adopt will have a profound impact on the nature of the Habitat world, reaching as they do to the core of the design. It is therefore important for us to settle on a coherent set of policies now, when it is still relatively easy to rearrange things if necessary.

There is raised here an important question of the agenda for Habitat. Several people have made statements which indicate that they have very definite notions of its purpose and intent. While all of these statements reflect part of the truth, none can be said to be totally accurate in that there is no *single* overriding purpose that drives the design. The feedback from the tester community is reminiscent of the old fable about the blind men and the elephant. To state the mission of Habitat in terms of a single principle, be it economic, social, moral, political, or educational is missing the point entirely. Habitat is intended to be a world unto itself. It thus incorporates all of these elements to the extent of what the players and the operators carry into the world with them.

Here are some statements of the *purpose* of Habitat, as different people have seen it during the debate:

- "Just a game"
- A fantasy role playing game
- "An interactive role playing game"
- A source of income for Quantum and Lucasfilm
- "Not a game but an environment"
- A sociological laboratory
- "An alternative to violence in computer games"
- A forum for moral and ethical education
- A place to learn about the realities of life and death
- A model of an ideal world
- A form of entertainment

Not only do these statements reflect a broad range of views, but some of them are relatively incompatible. It is clear that if any particular view were to prevail, then the Habitat world would have a very different character than if a different view won the day.

Several people have quite rightly raised the question of who is going to be the one to decide these questions. At the most basic level, of course, we at Quantum and Lucasfilm will decide. It is our system and so we are the ones who are responsible for what happens here. However, this does not mean that we should make our decision without regard to what anyone else thinks, but simply that we represent the final word in the matter. Any service such as this quite naturally depends on the continued support and goodwill of its subscribers, and thus their concerns and interests must and will be taken into account. We must recognize too, however, that we will not be able to please everyone; there will invariably be some who are disgruntled or alienated by our decisions. This is just a price we must pay to exist.

Let us then start with a few general statements of principle.

1) We can't forget that this is a business.

The system must remain profitable or we cannot continue to operate it. This means that we are not allowed to ignore the demands of the market simply because someone disapproves of what the market wants. This does not mean that we have to prostitute ourselves by grabbing for the biggest bucks. It simply means that we have to exercise reasonable business judgement and consider the costs and returns of anything we do.

2) We are not allowed to be dull.

We are primarily in business to be an entertainment medium. This does not mean that we must *always* be entertaining, but we must certainly at least try to be always compelling and interesting.

3) There can be no drama without conflict.

This is a principle that writers and storytellers have understood since the beginning of time. We cannot accede to any demand that the Habitat world be so sanitized that there is nothing that is disturbing or offensive to anyone at all. The result would be a dull and lifeless place. Remember that conflict need not always take the form of violent interpersonal combat to be compelling.

4) Habitat is *not* going to be a vehicle for the imposition of any particular person or group's moral or political agenda.

This does not mean that we will not have any standards of behavior. Some standards are necessary in order for the system to survive in the real world (given that there are laws and such that come from outside the system), and other standards may be necessary for functional reasons that we will discuss further below. We simply mean that we do not have any particular axe to grind and are going to stubbornly insist on not grinding it.

5) Pluralism is better than monism.

In other words, diversity is generally a good thing. In the face of legitimate conflicts over standards of behavior, our preferred solution should be to try to find ways of accommodating both sides, if possible. This can be accomplished, for example, by having different standards apply in different parts of the Habitat world.

6) We *do* want Habitat to be a powerful and effective educational medium.

However, we prefer that education derive from experience and demonstration rather than from authority and command. In other words, we are not going to tell people what they must be learning from an encounter with Habitat, but allow them to discover for themselves what lessons they will draw from it.

From these general principles, let us now consider some specific design issues that have raised questions.

It has long been recognized by philosophers that there is no life without at least the potential for death. In order for existence to be meaningful there needs to be a state of non-existence to contrast it to. Similarly, a piece of property only has value by virtue of the degree to which it is distinguishable from other pieces of property. In order for Habitat to model a world, persons and objects must have identities of their own. Thus the potential for loss is inherent in the very structure of our system. Once you have any

concept of value, there exists the potential for unethical usurpation of the basis for that value. Whether we allow this potential to be realized remains, of course, up to us.

We feel very strongly that it must be possible for one avatar to effect another in very immediate and concrete ways. We want people to be able to interact in ways that go beyond exchanging words and images (you can get words and images from the rest of Q-Link). It is for this reason that the potential for thievery and death is present in Habitat. Note that "death" in Habitat is a transitory thing, not the obliteration that death in the real world is. It does, however, give you cause to value your person and property. Indeed, we originally feared that the value that players would attach to their avatars and their avatars' property would be sufficiently weak that the modest manifestations of crime and violence that our software supports would have little effect. Clearly, experience has proven us wrong in this concern!

The notions of morality and ethics are brought into the Habitat world by the players themselves. Nevertheless, some of the testers are appealing to the Oracle to be the source of law and order. This, we think, is because people are accustomed to living in a society where there is an institutional framework that provides the rules and structure. Like a fish being unaware of the water it swims in, they have forgotten that the institutions of civilization are a part of the society itself, rather than coming from some external source. They sometimes tend to think of these institutions as external, even though some of the players are themselves a part of the institutional structure. They see the Oracle as the symbol of the system's power and authority and look to it as the source of control. However, the Oracle is simply a tool for us to interact with environment. Its primary purpose is to provide a communications channel between the players and ourselves. It is not an accident that we called it the "Oracle" and not the "Deity", "God", "Creator", "Master", or some other name more symbolic of power and control. The fact is that the system itself is fundamentally unable to enforce moral codes, even if we could all agree on what code should be the standard. (This very debate is evidence that we cannot.) While it can prevent certain specific infractions (e.g., taking something out of someone else's hands), ultimately there is no way to guard against all crimes. The moral standards must therefore be chosen and enforced by the community itself.

Instead of appealing to the Oracle to be the magical omnipotent lawgiver, policeman and judge, people might join together to form societies that are able to establish their own standards of conduct. Since Avatars can effect each another in numerous ways, of which "killing" is but one among many, communities of Avatars can enforce their standards with various sanctions, just as people do in the real world. Our design goal, then, is to devise ways to encourage and enable the formation of such communities, and to support them in their operation. We also advocate that there should always be some "lawless" territories, both to provide contrast and so that there is a place for the inevitable misfits to go.

In other words, we aren't going to let people get away with passing the buck for their own moral and ethical decisions. To the extent that they feel the need for rules, they must ask for them. To the extent that they wish to avoid rules, we will not impose them. We will provide assistance in the form of tools and information, subject to the general statement of principles given above.

For example, here are some of the tools, both existing and proposed, that we can provide for the maintenance of civilization in Habitat:

- *Weapons-free zones* — regions in which weapons do not work, thus rendering them "impotent and obsolete".
- *Theft-free zones* — regions in which goods cannot be snatched out of an avatar's hands, thus preventing the most common and blatant form of thievery.
- *Gates* — magical passageways that could be placed at the boundaries to towns and the like, which permit or exclude the passage of certain avatars. Thus it would be possible for a town to banish trouble makers.
- *Police* — we could establish a mechanism that would allow particular individuals (appointed by means of the community's choosing) to be immune to weapons-free zone restrictions. Less drastically, we could provide particular types of magic that appointed authorities could use to banish avatars, remove them to an area outside the village gates, teleport them home (useful for breaking up fights), turn them blue (since we can't render them in scarlet!), or otherwise impose some degree of community sanction.

- *Signs* — by providing information about what areas are enforcing what restrictions, avatars could move about with more assurance about what they are getting themselves into. Thus, for example, at the outskirts of town might be a sign saying “WARNING: weapons-free zone restrictions not enforced beyond this point” or “Avatars entering this area subject to banditry” or some such.

This list could go on, but to do so would be outside the scope of this document.

Obviously there will have to be some minimum standards which apply everywhere. Restrictions required by law or by the Q-Link Terms of Service (to the extent that they are applicable within Habitat) will have to be enforced. Also, a minimal set of “meta-rules” may be required to ensure, for example, that the pluralism of the above model may be maintained. We would advocate, for example, a right-of-passage rule that would prevent an area from imprisoning avatars within it or blocking major passageways from one area to another. The general principle here is that an area would have broad latitude in determining the rules that apply within it, but would be limited in the degree to which it could attempt to impose its rules on outside areas.

In summary then, here is our position: We want Habitat to be fun. We want Habitat to be successful. The best way to this is to encourage diversity, so that varying interests can each get what they want out of it without interfering with the others. This means that we cannot allow ourselves to be heavy handed with the rules. By the same token, rules are often required. To the extent that it is possible, we would prefer that the standards of conduct come from within rather than from without. We will do what we can to encourage this to happen, within a spirit of pluralism and tolerance of diversity.