The Mud Connector | Contents | Site Map | Listings | Contact | Discuss

January Mud of the Month
TerraFirmA

[**Connect to TerraFirmA** | **TerraFirmA Homepage**]

A Brief History of TerraFirmA

I first started mudding in the final year of my undergraduate degree, this being 1995. I was introduced to a MUD called Terradome by a friend, Neville, and this was where I learnt what MUDs were all about. Terradome was an Aber derivative, and as luck would have it one of the most innovative around. But I didn't know this at the time. As a runner I wasn't that vocal, just preferring to get on with the job and try to solve those damn quests! My course was quite hard so I didn't have that much time for mudding but finally I managed to make it to Apprentice after about six months.

It was at this point that my MUD career really took off. I got promoted to Counsel fairly quickly and was very keen to help out with Terradome and constantly pestered the admin, Boogie and Gly, who were running it at that time for a job. In the time I had to spare I proceeded to run up about 15 other wizards on the various Aber MUDs that were around and soon realised just how different Terradome actually was.

Eventually, Gly came up with the idea of an email newsletter and gave me the job of editor. I recruited a couple of people to work for me, founded the Ezine, calling it FreeWheeling, and published it on the Web. FreeWheeling went from strength to strength and I was getting more involved with the running of the game so eventually had to hand over the reins and concentrate on other tasks.

At this point we had a bit of bad luck. The server in the UK that Terradome was running on was taken down and we had to move the MUD to Denmark. Gohl and I worked very hard with the code to port it from BSD Unix to HP-UX, in fact I had to learn C from scratch!! We eventually re-opened and Terradome was back in business. I wrote and coded my first quest, Beilefeld, and started to get to grips with the beast that was the source code. From the time I was promoted to Counsel to the time Terradome reopened was about six months and in that time I had been promoted to Advisor for my hard work. It's still the most rapid ascent into the Court today =)

I continued to write code and put in new quests whilst working on the game engine, until eventually I made the rank of Emperor. By this time I was in sole charge of Terradome and things were going well. A new addition had been made to the code team, a certain Lady by the name of Cyn. I'd watched her run as a mortal and we had become quite close. Eventually we got mudmarried.

The legacy I had inherited from Boogie was an innovative MUD that was really buggy. When I took over the TerraCode at version 1.5 it was clear that although the innovation was there the stability was not. A crash per hour was considered normal, but I knew this wasn't acceptable. With the help of Cyn I began a programme to clean up the entire MUD source, one that was to take a period of two years! We began at the roots, and I had Cyn rewrite the back-end generation engine the MUD used to turn its zone files into the areas you see within TerraFirmA today. I concentrated on the in-game code and interactivity of the game, going through about 60% of the code to clean it up and remove all the crash bugs. This entailed rewriting and improving a lot of the player/mobile interaction, and most of the systems within the game such as the banks, the stores and the quests, whilst continually tracking down and eradicating crash bugs. At the same time I was busy adding new quests and features including the Toll system, degradable armour and weapons, the

Morphing system, and more.

About six months into this programme we had our second setback. Somewhere in Paris the Internet backbone was having major work done to it, and this resulted in a laggy connection for all of the UK players to Terradome. It was unplayable, and since the majority of our player base at the time was from the UK I was forced to find a new site within the UK. At this point in time I decided it was time I got my own MUD and TerraFirmA was born! We opened in April 1996, and have gone from strength to strength ever since. Most of the UK players found the connection much more agreeable, but we kept Terradome open for the overseas players. For over a year I was in charge of running both TD and TF! Stress!!

Whilst the code was coming along fine, I still felt that the playing experience could be improved significantly. One of the major complaints of the players at the time was that if they lost their connection, this meant that they effectively quit the game and dropped all their equipment. It wasn't due to the game but to the Internet and dodgy modems, but was still annoying. To solve this problem the Northern Lights LinkDeath code was put in, which allows players five minutes to reconnect before their character loses its place. This solved the connection problems - but what about those crashes? After a crash everyone was forced to start again, as if the MUD had reset with no warning. This was a painful lesson to learn but it became evident to me that we could never make the MUD 100% stable due to the very nature of its development. To solve this we put in a system that could catch the MUD when it crashed, save its current state and restart it with everyone in exactly the same place. Newer runners might not even realise when this happens now, but it was a major step forward in the development of TerraFirmA. With the addition of the LinkDeath and the Crash/Recovery code I had ensured that the players' connections could be maintained and that even if the MUD crashed they could just continue as if nothing had happened.

With that under our belts I took time to look at the overall picture of TerraFirmA, and found a game that had lots of really cool quests and zones in it but that had been sewn together in a mess. We were running out of logical places to add new areas and everything was pretty disjointed. The solution to this problem was a mammoth task, known as the TerraForming project. This involved taking the entire world apart at the zone level and sewing it all back together in a completely different way. From inception to completion this took about nine months and lots of painstaking work from the TerraForming team, but we got the project done and TerraFirmA was much the better for it.

This too was a major step forward in the evolution of TerraFirmA. We had managed to create a world that was consistent and had depth and history, continuity and room for ample expansion. It's also where our 'slogan' originated from, which, it turns out, now works on several levels!

When I took over Terradome we were running version 1.3 of the TerraCode. When I set up TerraFirmA it had progressed to version 1.5. At the time of writing we are running version 3.8 and we have undergone a major upheaval in the way we develop the MUD, encompassing projects such as TerraForming, several new levelling systems, a new Majick system, new quests, features galore and plenty more! We now have a code repository with bifocal code streams, teams for coding, publicity, zone writing, Web-site development, editing, testing and more, and with about twenty people being involved in contributing to the community it's a huge job just keeping track of everything! Work goes on apace though!

Interview with the Mud Administrators

1. What's it been like running and contributing to TerraFirmA?

Luckyspin It's been a mad ride from those early days, and sometimes I miss the innocence of being a mere mortal just worried about where that next bit of armour might come from, and how I might solve that blasted quest, but I thoroughly enjoy what I do, and the people who help me are all great. There have been many that have put in time and effort over the years but I must say thanks to my present Court who have all been tremendous and a special thanks to Cyn for being there.

As a code team, Cyn and I are almost unbeatable: with my attention to detail, constant pursuit of interactivity and stability, and overall understanding of how TerraFirmA the organism works, and her brilliant ability to effortlessly write huge back-end engines, we have just about every angle covered. Don't get me wrong, we can each do the other's job as well, it's just that I prefer writing and creating what the player actually sees and she prefers writing systems that underpin that. The contribution from the other members of the Code Team should not be forgotten either.

Looking back, I feel somewhat proud of how far we have come, and of what we have achieved. I think part of our success has been due to my having a well formed philosophy of what I believe a MUD should be and how it should be done.

Since I took over the development of the TerraCode engine and created TerraFirmA, my philosophy has always been to offer the slickest, most challenging and enjoyable mudding experience I can to the people who play my game. This includes not only the features of the MUD but the look and feel, something I've found lacking in a lot of other MUDs in which I've run from time to time. The key words along the way have been originality, stability and interactivity.

My goal in the creation of TerraFirmA has been to produce a consistent world that offers a challenge to anyone wanting to complete all the quests but that is superficially simple to those first starting to play it. And it is. You can play TerraFirmA for a few hours and enjoy it, but as you play it more, its depths are gradually revealed. This has been achieved through the efforts of my awesome Zone and Code Teams. As you progress further in the game you should hopefully become more aware of the systems that are available and of their intricacies and how they interlink.

Along the way I have made some tough decisions about the direction of TerraFirmA, and instituted some unpopular projects, but I feel these have all been of benefit in the long run. I remember the outcry when I first proposed the TerraForming project; all the mortals claimed they would never be able to learn the new layout and that it would ruin the game. But the result speaks for itself. The placement of Hamelin in the centre of the world centred the player community in a bustling, thriving city, which has a store, bank and hospital, and a tavern with free beer! Equally, Terradome was saddled by a badly thought-out levelling system, and there were attempts to resist changes to it, but we now have a dynamic, fluid system that rewards effort and above all is fair.

Cyn Working with Luckyspin has been an interesting challenge over the years. I respect his vision for what he wants from the game, and I guess thats why I continue. Nowadays you could describe me as his right-hand person, although I should point out what he does with his right-hand normally is nothing to do with me ;) Although I've written and implemented quite a few systems I must say that from a technical point of few the internal game timers represent the one system I think that has altered the game the most. This is a compact, generic and flexible bit of code! How else could we have all those duration-based spells, the flying dragons and vampires, and of course the very cool and very deadly Ancient Trap?

BabyGirl I enjoy the people I work with on TF. Despite our differences, we make a great team, we have strong leadership, an awesome coding team and we're all dedicated as hell to this game. Terra is hands down one of the most original MUDs you'll find out there. In the past I've gone and tried this or that MUD "for a change", but nothing has ever compared to the experience I've found on TD/TF.

My first big administrative experience after I made Untouchable was taking charge of our zone-writing manual and zone administration. I learned a lot about zones from editing and updating the manual (it sort of stuck in my head after trickling in I guess!). Perhaps this is why I was eventually asked to be team leader for the mammoth TerraForming project, where we ripped apart every zone in the game and placed them back together in a more logical arrangement. It was a lot of work (to use an understatement) but when we finished, oh what a sense of accomplishment! We'd reformed this world of TerraFirmA into what we always knew it could be.

Luckyspin's Ezine FreeWheeling eventually fell into my lap, and I've been working on it as an editor for over two years now. It allows me to combine my English/Lit background with my passion for Web pages, and though I often struggle with getting an issue out on time, I love the challenge it provides me. Administration of the TF Web site also fell to me after Terradome closed (I'd been in charge of its Web site). I've hopefully made some improvements in the way the site gets information across to our players and admins both, and in its ease of use. It's a constant task, of course, to keep it updated, fresh and useful. But since I write HTML in my sleep nowadays, this is the sort of thing I live for!

Over the years I've learned a lot from the others around me, and I only hope I've somehow helped them out in the same way.

Firefly I think that what has kept me involved in TerraFirmA (since nearly three years ago when I too came to it after nearly a year on the Terradome) is the general philosophy of the game, which is that no detail is too small to be worth getting right, and no good idea is too ambitious to be worth trying to implement. Cyn and Luckyspin as chief coders are both excellent at what they do and farseeing in their vision for the game, something that I as a noncoder dependent on their skills value extremely highly. Knowing that everyone working on the game shares a common commitment to doing the best job they can makes being involved a very rewarding experience! Above all, the atmosphere is generally friendly, creative and professional, with new ideas always bubbling up and, more importantly, being followed through, often surprisingly quickly, and always with plenty of consideration being given to the stability and long-term direction of the game. The work is shared out well between many people with complementary skills, working in teams, and there are plenty of opportunities for new wizards (called Untouchables on TF) to get involved.

Most importantly, it's fun - and the new features that are always being added to the game mean that running can still be full of surprises! The game is quite simply excellent, with all aspects of gameplay constantly being reviewed and improved upon. I can't count the number of times I've seen a simple 'What if...' or 'Why don't we...', thought aloud (or atype!) by an Untouchable one day, later developed into a new game feature, to add a new dimension and completeness to players' running experiences (and sometimes new depths of despair, too, as they face yet more fiendish situations ;)). In the near future I'm particularly looking forward to the implementation of TerraScripting, which will give non-C-coders like me the chance to get further into the creation of quests in the game - another very positive step forward!

2. What advice can you offer new players to help them get started?

BabyGirl Starting out in a MUD can quickly get confusing. We've tried to offer information and design that initially leads a new player into the world of TerraFirmA without overwhelming them all at once.

Our Web site offers a "Beginner's Guide" (http://www.terrafirma.ohl.dk/guide/begin.html), which attempts to explain possibly confusing points. On the game itself, the file INFO NEWBIE offers files to read for more information or commands that will help get someone started. Our system of HELP, INFO and QINFO files for explaining game commands, concepts and quests is extensive.

We also have a custom-written, self regenerating "newbie zone" that will introduce the player to

common concepts and commands, and also offers them several puzzles or "mini quests" to complete if they choose. In this safe, nonthreatening environment a new player can earn several levels just by having fun and solving the puzzles!

Firefly Get out there and explore! There is plenty of help available within the game and on our Web site, and some excellent features especially designed for newbies, all of which should make things easier for even the most inexperienced mudder. Experienced mudders should head straight for the info files and help files (particularly 'info basics'). In general, look for good weapons and armour, learn to use Majick as soon as you can, and don't be too afraid of dying - it's nothing a bit of toast won't put right ;).

3. How does the website support the mud?

BabyGirl The TerraFirmA Web site offers Web versions of some of the information you could find on the game (such as INFO files or maps) but it also goes beyond that by offering resources we just couldn't offer with the MUD alone. The Web enables us to expand Terra in the visual medium with depictions of places, people and things found in the game itself.

The GUIDE section of our Web site has online versions of some game information files, but also contains such things as a "Beginner's Guide", a "Tourist Guide" and software links. You can get acquainted with some of the real-life people you'll find on Terra (both players and admins) in our MEET area, stay updated with the latest game news, or be entertained by reading our beloved three-year-old Ezine, FreeWheeling! There's also a resource area exclusively for our admins. And so that you don't get lost in all of this, you can easily find any topic of interest using our search engine.

I've got lots of plans for the TerraFirmA Web site in the future. I hope to continue to make it an informative and entertaining resource for everybody on the game.

4. What, in your opinions, keeps your players coming back?

BabyGirl The comment I hear the most is that it's "the friendly people" that they find on our game! Many players enjoy the friendly atmosphere, whether they chat or quest, and MUD friendships have quite often turned into real life ones! The administrators are responsive to player requests both for help and for new features to the game itself. We usually release a new version every month.

Firefly We are always working on the game, adding new features whenever we can, and that makes for a lively and stimulating atmosphere, which we hope comes through to the players. The game is very welcoming to new players, who are greeted by Untouchables as a matter of course and have a lot of help and special features available especially for them. The atmosphere is also friendly and sociable. In terms of gameplay, players can progress in a variety of ways, from questing to gathering treasures, which means that whether they have three hours or thirty minutes to mud in there is always something they can be trying. Also, a lot of time has been spent on the details that together add up to make a MUD easy to play. These include such things as a system of stores for keeping objects in play, innovative ways of getting weapons and armour, the help and information files that explain all the commands and concepts behind the game and, on the social side, things like the taverns that are the social centres of the game where many players choose to meet or rest if they aren't actually questing. Other features that are popular with players are the regular tournaments held and our regularly published Ezine, FreeWheeling.

5. What are the features that distinguish TerraFirmA from its peers/

Cyn The Majick system I think stands out from others I've seen. From a player's perspective we try to give a good range of spells with more available as they gain experience and levels. The spells currently available allow everything from sealing doorways to the good old favourite fireball.

The main features of this system lie behind the scenes. All of the majick on TF is flexible and can be changed almost instantly. Everything from the power of the spell to what it does and how it does it can be simply changed much like a mobile or object characteristics. All our spells fall into four 'sphere's, which all have slightly different characteristics. There are some very cool backfire scenarios for when it all goes horribly wrong! Future enhancements planned include on-line creation of spells and potions, so you can create your very own and personal effects!

BabyGirl Our stores system is really innovative, or at least it was when it was the only one of its kind out there ;) The stores started out as places to merely sell or buy equipment, but they've been expanded over time to include equipment repair, trading and even buying yourself some magically charged objects. Along with the store system goes the banking system, and, with that, credits. Credits, the currency of TerraFirmA, have brought a better sense of realism to the game and have enabled us to increase mobile interaction with things such as Tollkeepers, bribery, and buying of quest clues.

I have to mention the absolutely fabulous colors on the game! When I ran up as a player I was unfortunately stuck in black and white. But once I got a better computer and saw the game's consistent, tasteful use of color in the text, I was pretty much bowled over! I'm proof that you CAN run up without needing color, but it adds so much to the game that I have to say you're missing out on something if you don't have it.

6. Who would TerraFirmA appeal to?

Luckyspin Our player base is drawn from an international cross section. We have purely social members, diehard runners and all increments in between. TF will appeal to those who want to enter a complete world in which they can play a full, interactive role. Our mobiles our pretty damn intelligent, often surprising even the admins in what they get up to. Things are never the same and surprises are always around the corner!

To succeed in TF you have to complete quests, and these are one of our strongest features. To remain true to our roots we still feature some of the original Aber quests, which, although they have been significantly revamped, are predominantly hack and slash. However, since I've been in control, we have pursued a course of installing quests that are true tests of problem-solving ability. The range encompasses quests and zones that are timed, distributed in space and time, one-room, hack and slash etc. Throughout, they are aimed at a variety of player levels and as a player you shouldn't be surprised if you come back to an area and find a long-forgotten clue to a new quest you are attempting. In fact, the central city of Hamelin, where everyone starts, is also the scene of the largest and most difficult quest. When you reach the right level, all the pieces fall into place.

7. What is the running experience within TF like?

Luckyspin Running in TerraFirmA is a journey, not only across the different continents and regions, but also through a learning process of how the world actually works. As previously mentioned, the game works on several levels, and the deeper you dig the more you learn. Ultimately, all the systems mesh into an immersive reality, but only if you work at it ;). The goal is to become a Mage, and in doing so you will have to journey across the entire world, learn spells, tackle intractable problems and create your own running style. Whilst you can progress solely through getting armed to the teeth, the incredibly flexible Majick system also allows you to concentrate on using the many spells to augment this style. Ultimately there is no set route to Mage: you define your own path.

8. What is the future for TerraFirmA?

Luckyspin After much thought we are radically changing the way TerraFirmA will be developed. The

motivation for this was originally influenced by Martin Keegan's paper on MUD classification, but more recently has been reaffirmed by Eric Raymond's papers about the Open Source model. We are trying to dismantle the Cathedral and build a Bazaar, or to shift the creation of new quests out from being the sole domain of the Code Team to the actual player base of the game.

Although it has always been possible for people outside of the administration to submit new zones to be included within the game (we provide tools for all major OSs) the actual coding of new quests has fallen to the coders. In other MUD genres where OLC is the norm this doubtless seems a major failing, but it is an unfortunate legacy of our MUD family.

1999 will see the addition to TerraFirmA of a scripting language, known as TerraScript. I designed the language, whilst Cyn has designed and implemented the interpreter and compiler. This will allow people to submit not only zone areas, but fully coded quests that can be easily validated and added to the game, thus removing the burden of coding quests from the coders. In one swift move the development of the MUD will be changed completely, to the advantage of both the game and the players, who will hopefully be able to contribute to a greater extent.

BabyGirl The Terra code has now been around for five years - what will its next five years hold? We're constantly improving the game by fixing and adding features, and this expansion will no doubt continue indefinitely since we feel we can always "be better" than we were before. Our dedicated admins have always provided a strong base for TF to rest upon, and our players complete the game, making it what it is today. We hope to continue to provide an enjoyable online experience for players and admins alike.

Firefly In five years time TerraFirmA will we hope still be thriving as a challenging and rewarding game for the enjoyment of old and new players alike - as well as continuing to be a fulfilling and interesting creative project for those working behind the scenes! Ideally, it will exploit the potential of the Internet of the day to the full, whilst remaining as accessible as it is today. There is no reason why we should not continue to grow and to improve as long as there are people who enjoy creating, developing and playing multiplayer adventure games over the Internet.

9. Where is TerraFirmA lacking?

Luckyspin We have always been very bad at publicity!

Part of this comes from standing somewhat alone in the Aber world. The norm for an Aber has usually been to include quests, areas and systems featured in other muds. We have shied away from this and all our quests are unique, as are most of our systems and features. (This is not to say that we have ignored the best developments seen in our genre; in fact our Morphing system is heavily influenced by the Fluid Mortality of Asylum and our LinkDeath code is based on the Nothern Lights distribution, but it is quite rare.)

The reorganisation that was the TerraForming project made us unique in our layout. This had the effect of limiting the cross fertilisation of runners most Abers enjoy. Some just didn't want to have to learn a new layout, or work at unique quests. Understandable of course, but this led to TF being slightly isolated. We are hoping to remedy this with the introduction of a Tourist system in the near future.

On the flipside we were once featured on TV!

What the players are saying!

Galena:

I found TerraFirmA through a MUDlist, where I was looking for British MUDs with limited playerkilling. I logged on, and within about 30 seconds, an UnTouchable (Immortal) had come to check that I was ok. This is an aspect of the game I have found very enjoyable - the way that all the UTs are helpful, and support you in your quests. I have found other players to be helpful as well, and on the whole very friendly. The questing aspect of TF is another big plus point for me - rather than just hacking and slashing your way through the levels, most of your Exp Points are made up through quests. These tax the brain as well as the strength, and are well graded as you go up through the levels.

Rewind:

Well... Let's see.. Why do I play TerraFirma... heh.. Call it plain stubbornness.. Before I was in the accident, I played Terradome.. *Laughs* It was always fun to go around and kill mobiles... Great stress reliever.. It was also the first real online game that I had ever played... Before Diablo and the like.. The people were always great to be around, and it was fun to think that I could make it all the way up the ladder... *Shrugs* So, after the accident, subsequent recouperation, and getting my life in order, I came back to finish what I had started... Back on TD if I had made UT, I would have become Jester sooner or later.. So I came to TF to finish the job.. =) The best thing about TF is the quests... They really make you think, although sometimes you do wish to just smash the computer, cuz it won't take the command that you aren't typing just right..

Favorite feature of TF would have to be the actions.. It's great to be able to whip out a ray gun and say, "Take me to your leader..." heh

Lost:

I was originally introduced to Terrafirma by a couple of friends. I had tried playing other muds but just couldn't get into them. I started running on Terrafirma on and off initially, but have recently been playing a lot more. I find Terrafirma to be quite a friendly and sociable place. There seems to be quite a happy medium - social areas where players can talk and relax, and a growing number of quests to keep them busy. There are also a large number of features in Terrafirma, including an excellent majick system. Much credit and thanx has to be given for the hard work of the coding teams and Untouchables. Finally, in my opinion the most valuable thing I have found in Terrafirma are some very good friends - This i what I consider to be Terrafirma's best feature!

Emily:

I play Terrafirma mainly to chat with mud-friends; I like the friendly community there and the chatty, eager-to-help immortals. The large number of players is also a bonus ;) The only thing I dislike is the tendency for mobiles to attack me in the bar. [Bar brawls are just an everyday occurrence ;) - Luckyspin]

Ravenfyre:

I just wanted to thank everyone here. Y'all are just so nice. I just discovered MUD's last week and this is my first one. Y'all have made it very easy and are very helpful. Thanks for being there. Keep up the good work!

URLS for resources mentioned above:

TerraFirmA: http://www.terrafirma.ohl.dk/
TerraFirmA, as seen on TV: http://www.meridian.tv.co.uk/cyber/s2prog25.html
Martin Keegan's paper: http://journal.tinymush.org/~jomr/v2n2/keegan.html
Eric Raymond's home page: http://www.tuxedo.org/~esr/
The Open Source Org: http://www.opensource.org/
Asylum: http://www.asylum-mud.org/
Northern Lights: http://www.ludd.luth.se/mud/aber/northern_lights.html

TerraFirmA was chosen as the January MotM based on several factors, the most prominent being the quality of the community I found during my visit, and the exceptional use of its website to supplement the mud's documentation. I found the TF community to be extremely friendly and closeknit from the start, and I felt welcome immediately. I found the TF website to be exremely detailed and an incredible help in getting started on TF, and for getting acquianted with the atmosphere.

[Connect to TerraFirmA | TerraFirmA Homepage]

MotM Archives

The Mud Connector | Contents | Site Map | Listings | Contact | Discuss