LAB POLITICS
William Bricken
March 1991

From the Associate Director

For those who were not at today's "onsite/offsite," a major issue came up
regarding the Lab's "presentation" to the outside world. By this, the people
raising the issue meant that in the press and at our Symposium, the women who
work here have not been accorded the same attention as the men who work here.
(It was not raised at this morning's meeting, but also under-represented are
non-whites, on all scores.)

A related issue is the "masculine/military" style of talk that characterizes
some of our presentations. As a person who has been in struggle on these
issues, at past jobs and on the streets, I am exceedingly receptive to these
points of view...and quite vexed to find a solution. As the Lab's main point
of contact with the press and the public, I have been struggling with this
issue ever since we began opening up to the outside. I regret to report that
reporters, both men and women, have not respected my requests that they
broaden their own acquaintance with our Lab and who is in it. They want to
speak with the director, the scientist, and maybe someone from the
University. I consider us fortunate if we can get our point of view, let
alone our personnel, into the articles being written. Also, in terms of
public presentations, I have attempted to spread invitations that come my way
around, as liberally as possible.

Unfortunately, the results haven't been sufficient. I am sorry.

I won't reiterate the entire discussion today, but three "policies" that
emerged are worth restating:

(1) We -- collectively -- will try to showcase the work of our women and
non-white staff and students.

(2) We -- again collectively -- will attempt to recruit to the Lab more
women and non-whites with skill and enthusiasm.

(3) We -- again collectively -- will try to be aware of uses of language
which are sexist, racist, or otherwise incomplete statements of the total
work being contributed by everyone in the Lab and in our community,
generally.

We agreed at the meeting that we are bucking a long cultural history of
hierarchy and patriarchy, and our nation's own sad history with racism.
Those who remarked about our "white, male-dominated, military-industrial lab"
in fact work at institutions that are all of these things in spades, many
times more than ourselves. But the specific field in which we work is fluid

and our colleagues generally just. So we (collectively) pledged to do our best.

To implement these policies, I am suggesting that we have a meeting next week. At this meeting we can discuss specific ways of implementing these policies and the personal commitments people will make toward their attainment. Please let me know what day(s) appeal to you.

Thank you for an educational and stimulating morning, those who could attend. It's not often that organizations have the moxie to tackle such pervasive issues, especially to discuss their implications right at home.

Sincerely

PS One way to bring more people into the limelight would be to introduce those present to guests who come to call. It shows respect for each of us as individuals, provides a sense of connectedness for everyone, and may even allow those who are sometimes shut out of "privy" conversations to strike up their own chats. I hope this can become a Lab tradition.

From William

Some ideas about our presentation:

* Journalists always have a distinct agenda, like

> focus on a personality
> describe the work to a layperson
> take a particular twist (sarcastic, sensational, ...)

We could find out their agenda before inviting them in, or steer them to a person who meets their agenda.

* The only way to get the press to focus on secondary goals is to create a void. Saying "Here's what you want, and there's also..." will not work.

* It's the Director's job to be in front of the press. All the rest of us are equal secondary figures.

* Technical detail is *never* on the press agenda. That's the job of journal articles.

* Generally, it is impossible to get review rights to a reporter's work, cause of real deadlines and the fact that editors usually rewrite a reporter's work just before press. It is possible to say that if certain content/twists do not show up, we'll never deal with that organization again.

* Most reporters will be looking for help in getting a unique twist on their article. They will appreciate new stuff and new approaches, but only if it meets their agenda. They invariably will need educating. We need to be able to show them the album of previous published reports, and steer/teach them a new way of thinking about their story. This takes a lot of effort.

* The most successful way I have found to conduct a press policy is to select a few journalists, spend a lot of time with them, and get them thinking about the details of our work just like us. Then have them write a series of in depth articles which they can sell broadly for lots of money (going rate is $500-$5000 per article).

* The value of words written about VR and about us should not be ignored. What are our policies about selling our words?

* Have we initiated patent, trademark, and copyright protection mechanisms yet? Whose job is it?

* A press kit is mandatory. We also need to institute a press release mechanism, so that our announcements are coordinated and consistent. Everyone should review press releases and stick to them when talking about the Lab.

* We should be pro-active about press coverage. We need to target a few outlets and sell our words. What are our information dissemination policies, goals, and objectives?

* What are our professional expectations about access and exposure? What are the Lab's policies, goals, and objectives about exposure?

A student's contribution

Re: Unethical funding and laboratory policies

Dear colleagues,

This letter is in regard to a recent project funded by the U.S Navy, and with respect to establishing a general laboratory policy for accepting future projects.

There is much free talk and judgment about the funding this laboratory is getting from the Department of Defense. In the same way, there was unease with the potential funding of a credit card company. Some of us are justifiably concerned about the moral, practical and ethical implications of our association with these funders. Whether we work within the projects or not, just by being affiliated with the lab, we all consent to this funding.

Unfortunately, we don't really have a choice. We need the money. To make things worse, none of us escape being "dirtied" by these fundings by avoiding to participate directly in the projects. The mere fact that the lab accepts this funding implicates every one of us!

This is probably a good time to talk about the laboratory policy in general, and to remind ourselves of what we want to accomplish here.

It is my understanding that we wish to study those aspects pertinent to Virtual Technologies so that the field may advance. More generic tools, problems and solutions imply better use of our effort and time because our discoveries can be applied across many different forms of applications.

To make sure we are addressing pertinent issues, we need to work with real applications(projects) that give rise to real problems. At the same time, if these applications are too specific, then the solutions will be too specific and will not apply to other applications. So we need to distill or abstract the purest form of a problem from a particular application so that we can derive generic solutions to these problems that will be of use to many other applications.

More concretely, we can accept to work on any project, as long as we are free to abstract a more general problem from the specific problem. In that way, our research is pure gain for the laboratory and the field of Virtual Technologies.

Implementation:

With every new project, be it from the phone company or the Department of Defense, the staff and the students would confer and discuss the application. Together, we would abstract the core problem from its specific shell. There could be many interpretations, the more the better. Then we all agree on which new problem design suited us best in terms of what it could bring to the laboratory, to other applications and so on.

Then we would present our distilled problem definition to the funder, who would be free to use it and make it meet their more specific needs on their own.

The wonderful thing about this approach is that 1), we no longer have feel uncomfortable about the source of our funding, 2) the new project are enticing because they are pertinent and 3) the solutions are generic and applicable to many different types of uses. 4) we get lots of money to fund the projects of our liking.

William (not in response to the above)

Re humane computing:

The hierarchical model we talked about in last spring's class attempted to recognize that we *must* talk to the computer. (Or is the suggestion something akin to Scott Kim's dissertation which reworked the hardware architecture to be more humane?)

So the fundamental question is still: How can we be humane, given that the computational process (which is inhumane) is in the loop? The VEOS idea is to insulate designers with a hierarchy of languages, ending with natural behavior as the humane interface. Under this model, students' comments draw attention to two circumstances:

1. It takes time to develop hierarchical languages. Someone has to understand both languages on each side of an abstraction barrier. Right now, we are moving from SPEC -> LISP, then LISP -> HASL, then HASL -> software design tools. Humanizing SPEC is trivial, just write a macro expansion table which maps friendly syntax onto existing syntax. But are we saying that writing macro expansions is inhumane?

Who is working the other end of the process, providing specifications for design tools? Who is designing the humane language? Why is this not on the Lab's explicit *agenda*?

Which leads me to:

2. In my opinion, the Lab is substantially insensitive to designers. Look at our strategic objectives, our lab structure, our projects. Design is hardly mentioned, world building (which is the majority of our activity) is not a first class citizen.

Is the suggestion to align goals with activities, to align objectives with projects?

Hoorah!

A student in reply

A reply to William's response to my post:

> is the suggestion something akin to Scott Kim's dissertation which
> reworked the hardware architecture to be more humane?

Ultimately, yes. Recall (it *was* awhile ago, but..) the project we worked on for the VR Hardware class. It was an attempt (given the nature of homework projects) at a humane VR Deck. We took account of the human user at the

binary level. Sure, we proposed using a Motorola 680x0, perhaps a Moto DSP
96000, etc. Its not the actual VLSI that is the issue (although ultimately
of course it will be), but the consciousness of the designer. It seems to me
that we have the talent to design at this level, we just need the motivation
both from students and definitely from the staff.

  > So the fundamental question is still: How can we be humane, given that
  > the computational process (which is inhumane) is in the loop?

The question is a very difficult one, but I know one starts with a dialogue
such as this. Preferably, off the net and face-to-face.

  > But are we saying that writing macro expansions is inhumane?

Right. The macros to me are like a fixed trial of a political scandal
(Watergate). The problem that caused the scandal hasn't been taken care of
(still!).

  > Who is designing the humane language? Why is this not on the Lab's
  > explicit agenda?

Ah! This is so encouraging to hear from a Staff member! My focus here is to
do just this. My studies (although very much interdisciplinary) are meant to
educate myself in humane computer interface design and I'd like to devote all
of my energy here at the lab to applying what I have learned. Why is there
not a project explicitly designed for this given that we are an Interface
Design Laboratory?

  > Design is hardly mentioned, world building (which is the majority of our
  > activity) is not a first class citizen.

Agreed, fully. The Humanist has been a second class citizen since Post-
Renaissance. Why, it didn't surprise me when I was told the Art Department
budget was cut by 50% while the Engineering, Medical School, etc. budgets
continue to grow.

William continues the dialog

Hi:

I just took a close look at suggested project assignments.

There are two staff categories: Project Manager and Principal Investigator,

and one Student category.

First, some observations:

Only the Director and William are listed as PIs. The Director is PI for 21 separate projects (!), William for 7.

Nine staff members are listed as Project Managers.

And now the EDITORIAL:

Most important question: are our project assignment documents intended to be honest and realistic? Are they descriptive or political? Are they showing what we do or what we wish we were doing? Are projects really people, are people really supported by projects, yes indeed, are we prepared to really look at what we do?

Most important issue: are these documents intended to convey organization or insanity?

LOBBY: It is self-defeating for us to propose organizational structure that does not fit into standard models of space-time. No one should have more than 40 hours/week obligation to work (then the rest of the time can be used to actually do the technical stuff).

Re PI: it may just be terminology, but a PI cannot legitimately contribute to a project without some contact with that project. Nominally, let's say 4 hours a week (.1 allocation) is a minimal level of effort to make a contribution. That alone requires more than 80 hours a week from the Director. Or turn it around: with other obligations, we can expect about 1 hour per week attention per project from the project's PI. Thesis: that level of attention guarantees poor quality work.

The Future:

I believe we have a mandate. Our consortium members uniformly said it is time to approach the hard problems of industrial tools. The easy times of prototype and demo are just about done. The clients I work with have been completely clear that the next phases will throw VEOS and us up against the difficult problems they want solved.

The Navy is preparing to get us parallel supercomputers. Putting million dollar machines into our environment will change it dramatically. Fulltime operation, maintenance, resource sharing, new languages, new wiring, cooling, security, new skills, reliance on external expertise, hard computational problems, ...

We may be gearing up to productize VEOS. We have around fifty sites who want

to use it. Distribution, client support, debugging, substantive
documentation, version control, backward compatability, silicon models,
quality control, reintegration, third party development, updating,
incompatible extensions, proprietary modules, ...

We have used up the slack, here comes the wall.

Our mandate is to grow up, to get mature about research, organization, and
quality. This means

        RESOURCE MANAGEMENT
        ACCOUNTABILITY
        DELIGATION
        FOCUS

My personal plea: please, please, pretty please, let's build our
organization on what really, really exists, here and now. Let's look closely
at what we are doing and acknowledge that as our basis. This means:

        identifying what we like and what we don't like about our current
structure,
        changes to eliminate what we don't like,
        explicit strategic and tactical goals to move us from here to there,
        analysis of success and failure, and
        selective refinement of our project agenda.

Gee he does go on (William)

Hi again:

A small thing I forgot to say:

Our organizational proposal presents the lab from Director to internal
operations. It does not address the extensive multiple relations we all have
external to the lab. I believe we must look at ourselves in the *context* of
our extended contacts and obligations.

An organizational picture of the lab must include:

        visitor contacts
        potential students
        voluteers
        external joint projects (NSF)
        WTC
        State of Washington, federal contacts
        School of Engineering
        IE

School of Education, Technical Communications, CS
    classes, seminars, lectures, short courses
    software and hardware vendors
    potential clients
    media contacts
    education contacts
    phone, email, hardmail correspondence
    visiting speakers and scholars
    library and literature anchors
    consortium members and interaction
    support companies

I'll bet we spend more effort on the above than on all projects combined.
Our organizational chart should reflect this.

from the Associate Director (May 1991)

William,

I thought when we both started with this enterprise that we were a pretty
good team. I still do. And I think we have the same goals, ultimately.
Let's find a way to communicate better. We shouldn't have to spend time
(particularly through the long evenings) upset.

For a start, please consider that I don't do things to detract from you or
our mutual work for the Lab. You are too quick to assume that I do dumb
things (like run down the Lab's capabilities) or write odd articles. I don't
do those things. Next time, when something strange comes to your attention,
and you think I have something to do with it, please presume in my favor
until you find out otherwise. I'll 'fess up to my faults and correct them,
don't worry.

Re: Please advise (william)

Hi:

Well, re generally: I'm cutting back my commitments. I'm sure the
representative is a good guy. I personally don't have time to work with him.

There is a theme: I will not be adding to my commitments. Some things have
to go also. So I'm phasing out maintaining the computers (to the sysadmin)
and I'm eliminating conversational contacts. More to go later.

Basically, I'm done building programs, now it's time to use what we already
have.

Re strategic plans: Strawman seems like a hollow exercise unless it is
accompanied by a decision-making mechanism. Are we advising, or is it
majority rule, or consensus among staff, or just a game? What about input of
students, scholars, temp staff? Given our past cycling, in fact, the plan
itself is minor compared to the mechanism for making it actually happen.

Re Sweden: There are at least two dozen interesting builds. I'm
concentrating on a selection. We have at least six months of work to do
before it is time to talk more to anyone. You should work with them, since
that is your interest.

Again: My main goal right now is resource allocation. Nothing new, half of
the old.

Re my sourness: It is hurting me to withdraw from the aspects of the Lab I
care about, particularly because I am not secure that those things will not
degenerate and break. It hurts more that we set a crash course, closed our
eyes, and are in the process of crashing. There is a relativism here:
crashing to me (failure to support students, to conduct active research, to
manage resources, to act with quality) is less important to others.

Re my post-symbolism: behavior, not words, matters to me. It simply does
not count to *say* we care about students, or about research, or about
excellence. Look at the history of our actions.

Yes another criticism: It is shameful how most staff and all students have
been excluded from journalistic coverage. Just why is it that no press
mentions who actually built Virtual Seattle or 3D sound or the VEOS code?
Our press representative has done a lousy job of passing credit to the
workers. (Don't confuse intentions with what has actually happened.)

I'm beginning a campaign to credit and reward the students. Gee, I'm
beginning a campaign to take the time even to talk with them.

To william (March 1993)

Why do you keep making these bigoted statements about lowering our standards
if we try to get more women and minorities into the lab? Surely you don't
believe that there are no qualified people in these groups out there?!!
Whatever your motivation, I really don't appreciate hearing this kind of
demeaning drivel (although our Director's silence on the issue is equally, if
not even more, disturbing). The question had to do with getting the word out
and strategies for recruiting candidates, not with setting quotas. Your
response seems to reflect an outdated uninformed mindset. I'm shocked...This
doesn't jive with my image of William Bricken. What gives?

My reply

The issues we brought up yesterday are complex (and I have had considerable professional experience with them). Unfortunately, the content (bias) is difficult to discuss because the same bias filters folks interpretations of the issues.

My comments were probabilistic and realistic. It is a fact that 90% (yes approx) of folks who would qualify to work here are white males. This does not comment on capabilities, standards, etc.

Recognizing that fact demands a policy that recognizes it. I'm advocating policy based in reality (that's all).

Of course, one could look harder, one could provide more opportunity, one could reverse discriminate. As usual, I am not advocating a particular policy, I am advocating an *explicit honest policy*, so that folks coming into this environment are not mislead by our attempts to recruit them.

And I feel strongly that females must be *warned* about the Lab personality.

As for lowering our standards, we do not have them to lower.

Look at our selection criteria as we build. Look at the qualifications of the applicants and their demographics. Then let's address the issues in a real decision making context. I believe that you will then understand the essence of what I am trying to communicate: the culture of high tech computing is white male at its core. Inviting in those from different cultures *will* cause them pain.

The alternative is to change the Lab, change our culture, our values, our direction. Like US Education, we can choose homogenation (bussing) at the cost of performance, or...

Discussion continued

I find your argument somewhat distorted around a few grains of truth with which I agree. I, too, have had considerable experience with these issues (How could I not?...I'm right in the midst of it day to day), and I have had many many conversations with women in technical (or other male dominated) fields. I also directed a program aimed at recruiting women and minorities into engineering (One of my many hats in Montana), so this is more than a passing interest for me. I agree that we shouldn't whitewash the situation. It's bad. It's stressful. It's frustrating. But, in fact, it's like that in *any* field that the boys decide is sexy, fun, lucrative, high-status...If women want to break out of the pink collar ghetto we still have a high price to pay (higher than you can probably imagine)...This is a matter of access to

economic power, however, and I'll be damned if I'll let the segregation continue if I can do anything about it. Yes, it's a tough situation to make it in, but it's *much much* tougher when you are trying to do it alone... And it has been my experience that when there is a critical mass of women in an environment, things change...Not because the boys let it happen, but because women find strength and nurturance from other women...*just as men who have women in their lives do*!!!

Having been a graduate student in a mainstream CS department, by the way, I know firsthand that the proportion of women in that field is higher than 5%. I was there. I saw them. It's still nowhere near what it should be, but there *are* women there, and I want some of them *here*...And I'll push to make that happen, with or without your (or any other man's) permission.

And from William

One thing that would assist your objective of getting more women at the Lab is to identify the source of the problem, and direct your energies toward it. (I am not the problem. Well, I am creating a problem by encouraging you to fight for what you believe in.)

And

William -

The reason for my aloofness the past couple of days is that last Thursday I had the rather unpleasant experience of being chastised by the Director for (among other things) (1) arguing with you in front of other people [which I freely admit to doing, but, then again, we don't have any DOORS on our offices, do we???], (2) not being more understanding of your viewpoint in our exchange about recruiting more women to the Lab [which he was not a party to, and so could not have known what my position was unless you told him] and (3) saying mean and nasty things to you, like that "nobody wants you around here anymore" [which I did NOT say...I said you had a credibility problem because you seem to say contradictory things, perhaps because you don't take the time to explain yourself more clearly].

My assumption was that the Directtor was basing this on some conversation(s) he must have had with YOU. And my immediate reaction was anger at what seemed to be the boys banding together to beat up the big mean scary girl. I found this especially distasteful given how relentlessly critical you have been of the Director. Sure smacks of bullying to ME.

On the other hand, it is also quite possible that the Director is just projecting his own biases and discomfort with confrontation and critical feedback. And so I'm asking you - Did you complain to the Director about my

interactions with you? If so, you will only succeed in eliciting MORE of my wrath. If not, then I will direct it toward the more appropriate person.

It really astounds me that any man who lived through the 70s and 80s would expect me to just shut up and be a good girl. I don't want to go around hurting people, and I don't start arguments just for the sake of arguing. I'd much rather have fun! But I won't shrink from a debate if I feel strongly about the issues, and I won't tolerate attempts to bully me into silence.

If you DO have a problem with my frankness (or style - others can't handle my "intensity"), then let's discuss it. I can work on other ways of communicating what I need to say.