

Victoria Lodge of Education and Research  
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## HARNESSING TECHNOLOGY FOR FREEMASONRY

This paper was written by W.Bro. Seth Prokop of Glen Iris Lodge No.288. United Grand Lodge of Victoria (Australia) and originally delivered by W.Bro. Peter Verrall P.J.G.D. at the Western Australian Lodge of Research in Perth on 30 September 1999 and recently read by V.W.Bro. Art Scott, Camosun Lodge #60, B.C. & Y.R. at the 15 October Meeting of The Victoria Lodge of Education and Research.

WM and Brethren, I bring warm fraternal greetings to you from the Grand Lodge of Australia in the future. Our Grand Master has sent me back from the year 2020 to tell you all about Freemasonry, twenty one years from now. Brethren, you'd simply love it in the year 2020. And it's all thanks to you, the Freemasons of today, who had the foresight to preserve the landmarks of the order with modern technology that enabled the craft to continue into my day. But then, hasn't that always been the way with Freemasonry?

All the key figures in our ritual, the people on whom we look back with such awe and reverence, were people who used modern technology to improve the future. In his day, Hiram Abif used cutting edge technology to create the original temple for King Solomon - for example the casting of the pillars. In Europe, the operatives were continually striving to build bigger and better cathedrals using ground breaking technological advances.

But enough history - I want to tell you about the future. My Lodge is named Lodge Armstrong in honour of Neil Armstrong and the pioneering astronauts of the last century. Lodge Armstrong is one of the new Unity Lodges. Unity Lodges came about in the year 2001 when all the Grand Lodges combined to form the Grand Lodge of Australia - the year Grand Lodge ruled that no Lodge over five years old could have less than 200 members. You see, in 2001, the Grand Master finally put his foot down. He said, 'People join Freemasonry first - and an individual Lodge second'. Apparently in the 1990's there were candidates seeing the light for the first time in Lodges containing as few as ten or twenty members - providing a very unfavourable impression of Freemasonry. In those days, the whole administrative structure of these small lodges had fallen into decay - especially the committee system - because they simply didn't have enough members to run them effectively. Not to mention the fact that it was getting hard to find officers and ma-sters for the teams - and the sad state of ritual. So they brought in compulsory unification of Lodges - a bit like Jeffrey Kennett did in Victoria with inefficient local councils backinthe1990's.

Anyway, join me on an imaginary visit to my lodge. Lodge Armstrong is situated in a purpose designed four storied building with a four level underground car park. Level one contains a retail shopping arcade, level two professional suites and level three a fitness centre with a swimming pool. The temple is on the top floor. The Lodges that cohabit this building receive a substantial income from the commercial tenants, more than enough to subsidise Lodge activities

and charitable works. We drive our vehicle into the car park entrance and insert our Masonic Smart Card into the slot. We get out and watch as a parking robot automatically takes our car to its parking bay. We take the moving walkway towards the entrance marked "Masonic Lodge". At the entrance we insert our smart cards and the door opens.

An electronic voice welcomes us and greets us by name. Inside there's a number of lifts. We enter the lift and head for the fourth floor. As we ascend, the electronic voice tells us the program for the night - the ceremony (it's a first degree) - what to expect for entertainment in the South - and about a distinguished. A video monitor in the lift shows us a picture of the candidate and the visitor. The lift doors open to reveal a large vestibule. In the centre are several computer touch screens surrounded by Freemasons. Although they're not in dinner suits, we can tell that they are Brethren by the way they're dressed.

In 2020 the dress code is much more relaxed. Whilst there is a uniformity of general appearance, brethren dress in a wide variety of clothing - from casual jackets to sport shirts to more formal attire. The uniformity comes from a very clever clothing design company who manufactures special fabrics containing a Masonic pattern - then designed a range of smart casual and formal wear around the clothing - much like banks and airlines did with their staff back in the 90's. Those of you close by will see the small square and compasses pattern on my jacket and tie. The idea was to let people express their individuality - yet still comply to a dress code.

We walk up to the touch screens, swipe our smart cards in the slot alongside and log into the computer. The computer asks us to prove ourselves with a short quiz - a random series of questions given in multiple choice format. We simply touch the correct answers on the screen to prove ourselves. The electronic voice asks you if you're visiting with any particular member. You say "yes" and give my name - leaving it to the computer to ensure that seating in the Temple and in the South are properly organised for us.

We know that our seating will be allocated so that we'll be near a Brother with similar interests - based on the Grand Lodge database. The computer also ensures proper seating rotation in the South - ensuring that cliques are minimised and that the Brethren in the Lodge all get to know each other. All Australian Lodge computers are now linked to the Australian Grand Lodge Database. Detailed records of all members and their partners are available at any time - not just names, addresses and phone numbers but occupations, special skills, hobbies, interests, domicile, languages and children's names.

The database makes it easy for Freemasons to contact other Freemasons for the exchange of business services, to seek or offer employment opportunities, to arrange home swaps with other Freemasons at vacation time, to ask advice or to organise Task Force activities. It also makes it possible to maintain an active program of SIGs - special interest groups that add value to each Mason's mother Lodge. For instance, we have SIGs for Brethren interested in bush-walking, caravanning, motor racing, lapidary, photography, golf, swimming, martial arts - and hundreds more.

In the old days, people used to try to form whole Lodges around a special interest. Of course, it never really worked - the problem being geography and timing. If you happened to live in the East and the Lodge met in the West, or the only day you had free was Friday and they met on Tuesday, you couldn't join.

Nowadays, you join a Lodge that's close to you - on a night that suits you. Then, after you've joined, you get on your computer, and join a SIG so you can meet other Freemasons from Lodges all over Perth who share your own interests. It's a much smarter system. The database also makes it so much easier to arrange harmonious functions.

Take tonight for example. The computer knows that both of us are interested in the Theatre - that you're a teacher - and that this is your first visit to my Lodge. It also knows that today is your Masonic Birthday. So it will make sure that the seating arrangements in the South are compatible for you - that you'll be seated with people that share some of your interests. It will also tell the Director of Ceremonies so that he can make an announcement in the South about your birthday.

Still at the touch screen, we call up the dining menu for tonight. There's an excellent selection of entrees, hors-d'oeuvres, soups, main courses and desserts - plus a selection of over 200 wines in the cellar. Every item on the menu is priced - the computer will record our selection and post the bill to our account - which will be invoiced at the end of the month with our Lodge dues. In the year 2020, everyone who attends Lodge pays for their own meal in the South - although the price is heavily subsidised. That way we can eat more - or less - as appetite dictates - and select meals that appeal to our own individual taste and dietary requirements.

I choose the 'Tandoori Chicken' - you've keyed in the 'Garlic Prawns' and we agree to share a cheese platter and a very nicely aged 1999 Shiraz. We relax knowing that our requests will be emailed to one of Perth's top restaurants where each dish will be freshly prepared by a master chef and delivered to the Lodge just in time to be served in the South after the ceremony. After leaving the touch screens, we walk over to where the Worshipful Master is welcoming guests. I get permission to bring you in for the opening and we enter the Lodge Room. As we enter, we're struck with the high tech modern look of the interior. The designer has faithfully based the dimensions of the interior on a double cube, but at first glance, you'd never be able to tell. Everything is laid out in soft asymmetric curves with flowing lines and split levels, skillfully using a combination of textures, fabrics, metal, timber and plastics, to create a soft, soothing restful ambience.

The latest CAD-CAM software has allowed the designers to create an interior that is inspired by modern sculpture. If only the original operatives had such working tools who knows what great structures they may have created. As we gaze around, we notice that most of the items of the traditional Lodge layout remain - the pavement, the columns, the pedestals, the ashlars. Suspended above the centre of the pavement - turning slowly - there's a holographic image of the letter 'G' floating, ghostlike in the air, far more ephemeral than in the old days when they simply used to bung a bit of piano wire down from the ceiling and hang up a rusty old 'G'.

On one wall, there's a large video monitor that allows us to display the tracing boards electronically in 3D and to electronically highlight the items in the tracing board during a lecture. During the tracing board lectures, we can, if we choose, see video dramatisations of the lecture - just like a movie. The one covering the discovery of the remains of Hiram Abif is especially well done - although a little gruesome! Especially the part about the grips.

The chairs in the Lodge Room are luxuriously cushioned and extremely comfortable -

each one is air conditioned. To adjust the height and rake and to mould the chair to our body shape, we simply touch a couple of buttons. The computer remembers exactly how we had our chair at the last meeting. After all, when you've worked as hard as we do in 2020, you expect a little extra comfort when you come to Lodge.

In front of each chair there's a small video monitor. Each screen is flashing a personalised welcome message - we look for a screen with our name on it so we know where to sit. As we take our seat, a computer menu appears on the screen. It offers us the choice of Minutes, General Correspondence, Notices of Motion, Treasurer's Report, Grand Lodge Correspondence, email or print. We touch "Minutes" on the screen and choose the minutes of the last meeting to check through them. Then we check Grand Lodge Correspondence. There's a letter that you'd like to follow up - so we request a print out. We know it will be waiting for us outside when we leave. Looking around the room, we see that other members are checking their monitors, just like us - checking all the information they need before the meeting starts. Just then, the WM taps his gavel and says, "Have all the Brethren signed the Attendance Book?" There's a red light flashing on the ceiling - the WM repeats his request "Brethren have you all signed the Attendance Book?" I realise with a start that I haven't logged on, so I swipe my smart card in the slot by the monitor. The red light turns green. The meeting proceeds much as it did in the old days.

Of course, when it comes to voting for the Treasurer's Report or a Motion, we do it all on the touch screen - which records exactly how many voted for and how many voted against. The same happens with the ballot for a new candidate. Of course, to keep with tradition, we still use graphics of white cubes and black balls on the screen - you simply touch the black or white on the screen and your vote is automatically recorded. Instead of the whole voting procedure taking ten minutes, it's completed in thirty seconds.

In fact, the whole Lodge opening, to the admittance of visitors, takes only eight minutes - simply because all the boring bits - reading the minutes and the financials - can now be handled electronically. Of course, having the information on our monitor is really only a formality. All members have been sent copies of the documentation, via email to their homes or offices, weeks before. Speaking of saving time - and Bro.. Secretaries will be interested in this - every detail of the meeting - matters that are raised, who attended, who moved and seconded motions, every word of conversation is recorded electronically and automatically converted to text. Which means that Bro.. Secretary no longer has to write everything down by hand. After the meeting, he simply has to edit the text that's recorded in the computer. It's the same with summonses. Bro.. Secretary just compiles the information and the clicks on the "Summonses" button - all relevant information is automatically posted to the members by email. No more labels, envelopes, stamps or stuffing dozens of mailings. What a relief for Bro. Secretaries!!

We get holographic images with the reports from the Committees. Then there's apologies. Each apology is actually a short video segment made by the person apologising. If you can't get to Lodge in 2020, you simply log into the system from your video phone - whether its at home, the office or even in one of the many public video phone booths - and speak your message. The apology is then automatically compiled and played at the appropriate time on the video screen at Lodge.

Just as we're starting to relax, there's an alarm. We look closely at the monitor and activate the camera view control to show us the view outside the door of the Lodge. It's an idea they got from the TV sports programs in the 1990's - remember wicket cam? And those car races? Now they've refined the idea so that, instead of just flashing through different views, you can actually select the view you want on your screen - for example the view from the Senior Warden to the candidate - or the candidate to the Junior Warden. In fact, there's a choice of nearly forty camera angles - you just touch the little map on your screen to say which view you want to be shown.

Right now, we're watching the candidate and the Tyler outside the door - waiting. The candidate looks nervous. W.Bro. Tyler, being a bit of a showman, gives us all a little wave. The door swings open and the candidate comes in. We switch to 'Inner Guard view' and check out that part of the ceremony. As the candidate is brought in, we can follow him around the room to see the view from each position; so much better than the old days where you couldn't see what was going on down the other end of the room or hear the dialogue. Now, wherever the camera view happens to be, the conversation is picked up and amplified on your monitor.

We also notice subtle changes in room lighting as the ceremony proceeds. At each point, spot lights illuminate the activity that's important, whilst the other sections of the Lodge "dim" back a little. It's an idea from the theatre that increases the drama and keeps us focused on the ceremony. Now it's time for the secrets. It's W.Bro. Malcolm Hyde - he's a lovely old fella - well over forty now - and, although he's been a brilliant ritualist in his time, his memory does run a little loose nowadays. No worries with these secrets though. W.Bro. Hyde is wearing a pair of head up display spectacles - allowing the words of the ritual to be projected onto the lens inside his spectacles which make him word perfect. We can tell that because the words of each charge are also displayed on the monitor before us - just like the subtitles used to be on the old S.B.S. movies - before they had auto-translation technology.

We remark on the changes to the ritual. Whilst it's fundamentally unchanged from the 1990's version, the obvious errors and irrelevancies have been edited out so that candidates can accept our Masonic message more readily. In the next five years, the Grand Committee for Ritual hope to be releasing an updated Australian language version of the ritual that dispenses with some of the archaic eighteenth century English - replacing it with words and phrasing more generally in use - much as they did with the Bible.

Finally, the ceremony is over and the candidate leaves. The WM enquires for the first time. As he resumes his chair, a holographic image of the Grand Master appears in the centre of the room. The holographic Grand Master personally invites everybody to the next Communications and tells us a little about what is happening in Grand Lodge. He also reminds us to check the next issue of the Western Mason - it's an interactive CD disk that is being mailed to us. The CD has video segments of an operative lodge in the UK, video of the latest Quatuor Coronati Lodge lecture and photographs and details of activities from Lodges all round Australia.

As the Grand Master's image fades, the Master enquires for the second time. Our screens show what is scheduled to happen at other Lodges in our area and you are able to book in straight away so that a place is available for you at their meeting. The Master enquires for the third time. Greetings are given from a visiting Past Master from Germany and while he speaks, pictures of

his city and his Lodge Room appear on the screen. Our Worshipful Master invites us to the next meeting and advises that the Lodge of Research has arranged a live report from a Freemason in Iceland who has been on an expedition to uncover some ancient relics from the Pole that happen to be marked with Masonic symbols. This presentation is telecast live via satellite linkup. The lecturer's talk is automatically translated into English by the computer. The Lodge is closed and we all file out to the South.

By this time, we're both really looking forward to that aging bottle of '99 Shiraz, and not only the meal but also the entertainment. With over 300 members, Lodge Armstrong has enough musically inclined brethren to have formed a Baroque Music Special Interest Group - tonight we're going to hear some Purcell - played on the original wooden instruments. The recital is about ten minutes duration, and will be recorded and broadcast live to eighteen other Lodges around Australia.

Following the recital, we'll be holding our Masonic knowledge Trivia Quiz segment. It's a live video-link with four other Lodges - with a well known TV personality acting as moderator. Masonic Trivia is played just like one of those TV game shows - with a lot of prompting, cheering and shouting from each Lodge. Lodge Armstrong is currently in top position - our team is pretty good at Trivia - and there's no shortage of prompters. Finally, the Tyler's Toast - and home from another really entertaining night at Lodge.

Tomorrow night, I'm scheduled for a virtual Lodge meeting; there's nearly thirty of us from every corner of the globe who meet once every three months in a virtual Lodge Room on the Internet - thanks to my home computer. We're not there physically, but our voices and video images are. Virtual Lodge meetings are great - we get to find out what's happening all over the world - not to mention the fact that we make great connections when it comes to overseas holidays.

Brethren, to conclude, I'd like to bring you all down to earth again. As you may have suspected all along, the reality is that I am not really from the future. I have only visited the future in my imagination. However, it may surprise you to know, that while my talk may have seemed a fantasy, nothing I have described is impossible. In fact, the technology for every single item in my story is available off the shelf - right now. It is today's technology - available for Freemasonry to use as I speak. And I have just scratched the surface of the available technology that could make Freemasonry work better - and make it more enjoyable - for every member. So the question I'm going to leave with you tonight is - why aren't we using it? Why aren't we developing these opportunities? Remember Brethren, each of us took a pledge to preserve the landmarks of Freemasonry. Preserving the landmarks doesn't mean that we must stay rooted in the buildings, procedures, social activities, ambience and technology of the past. Unless of course, we want to become an anachronism like old world village on display. To me, preserving the landmarks means passing on all that's good about Freemasonry to the next generation.

But the generation we're talking about has been brought up on the excitement of visual images from Star Wars and Terminator 2. It's a generation who are computer literate, who utilise the internet - who expect education to also be entertainment. A generation that is telling us - by voting with their feet - that Freemasonry must lift its game if they are to be interested in it. How

can we realistically expect to pass the landmarks on to the next generation when they come in a package that was wrapped in the forties.

Brethren, I started out my presentation by pointing out that throughout history, Freemasonry has always been at the cutting edge of technological progress, from the building of the temple to the first moon landing where Neil Armstrong, a Freemason, left Masonic symbols on the moon's surface for posterity. But that cutting edge is not very evident in Australia today. Someway, somehow, somewhere, we must recover the zeal of Solomon.

We must push ourselves to stay at the cutting edge of technology - no matter how uneasy it may make us feel to leave our comfort zones. It is our duty - we have taken an obligation so to do. Tonight I set out to make you think - and hopefully, to stir those who lead the craft into considering how best to utilise available technology to enhance Freemasonry in Australia - with the special view of recruiting younger members in the future. WM, thank you for allowing me the freedom of the Lodge - I return it to you with gratitude.