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PIMPS AND DRAGONS

How an online world survived a social breakdown.

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A **BSTRACT:** Maps of Britannia show a boomerang-shaped island with the cities of Minoc and Vesper at the northern end, Britain and Yew in the middle, and Trinsic in the south. The kingdom, which is stuck somewhere between the sixth and the twelfth centuries, has a single unit of currency, a gold piece that looks a little like a biscuit. A network of servers is supposed to keep track of all the gold, just as it keeps track of everything else on the island, but in late 1997 bands of counterfeiters found a bug that allowed them to reproduce gold pieces more or less at will. The fantastic wealth they produced for themselves was, of course, entirely

imaginary, and yet it led, in textbook fashion, to hyperinflation. At the worst point in the crisis, Britannia's monetary system virtually collapsed, and players all over the kingdom were reduced to bartering.

Ever since Pong, at once goofy and mesmerizing, reached the mass market, back in the mid-seventies, electronic gaming has moved ahead at an improbable speed. Now, between the sales of consoles and those of software, it is a business larger than Hollywood. Meanwhile, the games themselves have become faster, smarter, meaner, and, in the case of Ultima Online, more outlandish.

A "massively multi-player online role-playing game," or, only slightly less awkwardly, an M.M.P.O.R.P.G., Ultima Online is managed and operated by Origin Systems, a gaming company based in Austin, which charges subscribers nine ninety-five a month to maintain a character, or "avatar," in Britannia. Players manipulate tiny two-dimensional figures who move jerkily through a computer-generated landscape of spells and dragons and rideable ostriches. The game has no beginning and no end, and there is no way to win or lose, although it is possible to be killed. Nearly a quarter of a million people subscribe, and each player logs an average of thirteen hours a week, meaning that in the course of a year Ultima absorbs more than a hundred and sixty million man-hours.

Ultima's appeal is clearly that of an escapist fantasy, yet the most striking feature of the game's brief history is its perversely recurrent social realism. In its original design, the game gave players a choice of professions: they could train their avatars in any of some three dozen fields, ranging from archery and alchemy to animal taming. No sooner was U.O. up and running than a player introduced a new line of work by operating two characters, one named Jenny and the other Pimp Daddy. On top of hyperinflation, Britannia has suffered a wave of extinctions, paralyzing hoarding, and a crime problem so intractable that at one point the game was forced to, in effect, split itself in half.

Considered as an inadvertent and largely unsupervised experiment, U.O. raises questions about whether people can manage to coexist peacefully even when they don't really exist. After the counterfeiting bug was fixed, members of Origin's staff decided that they needed to shrink the money supply by retiring gold from the system. Among the various schemes that they tried was holding an auction for a special kind of red hair dye. Players—their characters, anyway—lined up for hours, partitions had to be built to keep the crowds in line, and eventually guards were summoned to prevent a riot. Apart from its attraction as a status symbol, the red hair dye had, even within the fiction of the game, no value whatever.

Lord British wears a silver crown and a gray tunic with a silver serpent emblazoned on the chest. As the ruler of Britannia, he has been a frequent target of protest; at one point, hundreds of disgruntled citizens stripped down to their underwear, broke into his castle, and stood around shouting (well, typing) profanities. Lord British has the power to make himself invulnerable; once, when he forgot to do so, he wound up dead.

Lord British is the handle of Richard Garriott, Origin's founder. Garriott sold the company to Electronic Arts, the computer-games giant, in 1992, for thirty million dollars, but he continued to work there until last spring, when, as a result of what could broadly be described as creative differences, he and Electronic Arts parted ways. I happened to visit him one morning just as his yearlong non-compete agreement with Electronic Arts was about to expire, and he was preparing to formally launch yet another computer-gaming company. His phone rang almost continuously.

Garriott, who is thirty-nine, is tall and lanky, with blondish hair and two very long, very thin braids that hang, like tails, down his back. He designed his own house, which sits high up on a hill not far from Origin's offices, in north Austin. It has a network of secret passageways, a rooftop observatory, a dungeon with a real human skeleton, and a scuba-diving pool

equipped with faucets that issue hot and cold running rain. Garriott collects old toys, and armor, and fossils, and models of the solar system, and a lot of other things that are not so easily categorized, like a lunar-soil collector called Lunakod 21, which is still on the moon and which the Russians sold him, several years ago, for sixty thousand dollars. It is his dream to make a space voyage himself one day—his father, Owen, is a retired astronaut—and, to this end, he has travelled to Moscow several times for weightlessness training. Next spring, he is planning a submarine trip to the ocean floor beneath the ice cap at the North Pole.

Ultima Online grew out of a series of computer games that Garriott began designing when he was a student at the University of Texas. The first, which he finished in 1980, was called Akalabeth; it came on a floppy disk and could be played only on an Apple II. Garriott was selling the game in Ziploc bags at a computer store he was working at when a software publisher from California happened upon it. They signed an agreement under which Garriott was to receive five dollars for every copy of the game that was sold. By the time he finished his freshman year, he had made a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. A year later, he dropped out of school.

Like many other computer-driven medieval-fantasy games, Akalabeth drew heavily on Dungeons & Dragons, which for its part had drawn on “The Lord of the Rings.” Garriott describes himself as deeply influenced by Tolkien, who, as he points out, took an extremely rigorous view of make-believe. “It’s incredibly important for me to know much more detail about my fictional worlds than ever comes out,” he told me, once we had settled in his office, which is appointed with a Japanese cosmonaut’s suit. “That’s the only way to give it internal consistency and integrity and build something that is believable.”

Nine successors to Akalabeth followed, called, collectively, the Ultima Series. In each of the games, a player navigates through various perils to help Lord British save the world from various

evils. In Ultima V, for example, subtitled “Warriors of Destiny,” the player encounters a tribe of nasty-looking aliens who turn out, in the end, to be trying to protect their kingdom from the destruction that the player himself has wrought. Finishing a game takes from fifty to a hundred hours, depending on a player’s experience and ability.

In keeping with Garriott’s Tolkienism, Ultima Online is also extraordinarily detailed, down to its most banal features.

Players can design clothes for their avatars; they can have pets and train them to do tricks; and they can construct elaborate houses, which, if they have the wherewithal, they can decorate with paintings and rugs and candelabra and tchotchkes. They “talk” to one another by typing—the words appear suspended above the characters’ heads—and they tend to use a combination of pseudo Middle English and computerese, slipping from “thee” and “thou” to “LOL” (Laughing out loud) and “WTF” (What the fuck?).

Many familiar elements of the Ultima Series, like Lord British, reappear in Ultima Online, but the logic of the enterprise is inverted. In place of the goal-driven narratives of the earlier games is an open-endedness that leaves the player free to do pretty much whatever he pleases—slay dragons, raise the dead, or make shirts. U.O. features a kind of fishing, which involves gripping a virtual pole and clicking on some virtual water. (Virtual fish bite according to a fixed algorithm.) The activity has proved extremely popular.

As Garriott pointed out to me, U.O. is one of the few unambiguously profitable uses of the Internet, other than pornography. Still, moving the game online has not been without its costs. In the original Ultima games, the player might have been all alone, but he did get to be the hero. In U.O., the player has to struggle for recognition. “Playing a virtual-world game takes some getting used to,” Garriott told me. “You have to realize that the world is what you make of it. Unfortunately, that means most likely you’re going to have a relatively mediocre life.”

Britannia has some thirty “game masters,” who work in round-the-clock shifts out of a large room on the third floor of Origin’s headquarters. The room has two rows of carrels, and each carrel is outfitted with two computers. Three-quarters of the game masters are young men, and they seem to subsist mainly on cigarettes and litre-sized cups of soda. One day, I spent several hours in the room, sitting next to the young man who plays Game Master Quinnly. Game Master Quinnly wears a red robe and tries to remain courtly even under difficult circumstances. “Hail, I’m GM Quinnly,” he told one young knight accused of killing a friend and then looting his corpse. “GMs suck ass,” the knight responded. Queries come into the game masters’ queue from all over the world—*“Ich sitze hier in Jail und weiss nicht weiter” was one that I saw—and on every conceivable topic. Often, players accuse each other of “macroing”—operating a character on an automatic program, which is against the rules—or of exploiting bugs in the programming to circumvent the game’s limitations. There were complaints of harassment and stealing and scamming and also several reports of foul language—for example, “A guy named Sebell called me a faggot,” and “Feodoric is continuing to call me a bedwetter”—which is another violation of game protocol.* Running the game masters’ room is a big expense for Origin and, to a large degree, an unanticipated one. Britannia was supposed to be self-policing, but instead it kept veering toward anarchy. Early on, more experienced players figured out how to identify new characters, or, as they are called, “newbies.” In addition to being unfamiliar with the landscape, newbies cannot defend themselves against older characters who have had more time to collect skill points. Some players were luring newbies out into the woods, beyond the protection of the town guards, and killing them; others were encouraging newbies to commit crimes, and then letting the guards kill them. The result

was a lot of players whose experience of the game consisted mostly of being dead, a condition that discouraged them from continuing to pay their monthly fees.

In response to the slaughter, U.O.'s designers introduced the "notoriety" system—a version of "Megan's law." The server was reprogrammed to note when one character killed another and to gradually turn a murderer's name—characters' names appear above their heads—from very blue to very red. The problem with the notoriety system was that player-killers, or PKs, soon figured out a way to foil it. Killing a player-killer was considered by the servers to be not a bad deed but a good one, so PKs paired up to do each other in. The more times they did this, the bluer their names became. "You'd see this person and you'd go, 'Hey, it's Mother Teresa,' and then he'd stab you in the back," one of the designers of the system told me. "Notoriety" was subsequently modified to "reputation," a system similar to that used on eBay, by which victims could rate their murderers. The problem with this system was that everyone handed out murder counts, no matter what the circumstances of the killing. (Dead characters can be resurrected by characters skilled in healing.) The counts eroded over time, so PKs were keeping their characters logged on, doing nothing, as a form of self-imposed jail time. Eventually, a bounty system was introduced, but this, too, proved vulnerable to manipulation: PKs would have their friends kill them and split the bounty.

Finally, last year, U.O. gave up on the notion of self-policing. Britannia these days exists in two parallel versions, or "facets"—Felucca, where killing other players is O.K., and Trammel, where, except under very limited circumstances, it is not. Four-fifths of all players choose Trammel.

The facet system has succeeded in reducing unwanted player-versus-player violence, but, if the time I spent with the game masters is any indication, it has certainly not eliminated it. One

complaint received by Game Master Quinnly concerned a character named Gaudemus, who, it was reported, was sicking his dragon on other characters. (Dragons can be tamed and kept as pets.) Quinnly hastened to the scene:

GAUDEMUS: WTF.

GM QUINNLY: Let's discuss your releasing dragons to kill other players.

GAUDEMUS: That's illegal.

GM QUINNLY: Quite.

GAUDEMUS: I released it because I don't want it. It was a crappy dragon.

GM QUINNLY: I am releasing you on this warning.

O*ne night in Austin, I went out to dinner with Raph Koster, U.O.'s former lead designer, and Rich Vogel, the game's former producer. Both now work for Verant, which is owned by Sony and produces EverQuest, U.O.'s main rival. The two are on the development team for a game based on the "Star Wars" fiction, which is scheduled to launch next year. Vogel, who is thirty-two, is tall and fair and reticent; Koster, who is twenty-nine, is short and dark and voluble. The restaurant that we went to served American cuisine, and was decorated, somewhat incongruously, as a ski lodge, with snowshoes on the wall and a fire roaring in the hearth.*

Austin these days is a major high-tech center—the direct flight between the city and San Jose, California, is referred to as the “nerd bird”—and it has become a hub of electronic gaming. The city's gaming world is a close one, whose inhabitants all seem to have one another's numbers programmed into their cell phones.

Like almost everyone else I met who had been associated with U.O., Vogel and Koster referred to themselves as “gamers,” by which they seemed to mean not just that they liked to play

computer games but that they didn't really see them as games. Koster was an aficionado of MUDs, or multi-user dungeons, while Vogel had been an early addict of a game called Dragon's Gate, which operated on the computer service Genie and was billed on a per-hour basis. When his habit was at its height, Vogel told me, he had run up bills of several hundred dollars a month.

U.O. took more than two years to design, and, according to Koster, who joined the development team in 1995, a great deal of that time went into trying to perfect what was known as the "resource system." Under this system, both natural and man-made objects were coded according to the imaginary resources that went into them—a sheep, for example, was a couple of units of meat and a couple of units of wool—and the total pool of each resource was fixed, so that there would always be a certain amount of meat in the world and a certain amount of wool. One of the goals of the system was to produce a naturalistic and therefore dynamic environment: the sheep would get eaten by wolves, and as the wolf population grew the sheep would decline.

The resource system had many features that participants in the early tests of the game found cool. "Players really liked seeing the wolves attack the sheep," Koster said. "If wolves stayed alive a long time, they got cannier and stronger and smarter and deadlier, so you'd run into these old grizzled wolves that had been around the block. These wolves would eat sheep even if there were no players nearby. They were actually living out their little artificial lives out there."

Even as experienced gamers, Koster and Vogel were taken aback by what happened next. U.O. went live in late September of 1997, and by early October Britannia was on the brink of environmental collapse. "The creatures had all gone extinct, because people had hunted them out completely," Koster recalled. "The land was completely deforested, so no more

wood was growing anywhere. And all the mines had been mined out.” Players even assembled teams to hunt down some particularly cunning wolves. “These wolves got to be so deadly that a single player had no chance against them, because we didn’t put an upper cap on how smart they could get,” Koster said.

Under the resource system, players could gather raw materials, like ore, and make them into finished goods, like armor, which, once used, would begin to break down and reënter the pool as raw materials. Players, it turned out, liked to make things—they were turning out hundreds, and even thousands, of swords and shields and gauntlets—but instead of using them, or throwing them out, which would have had the same effect, they hoarded them. One player reportedly had a collection of ten thousand identical shirts. The result was that there were hardly any materials available to replenish the pool, which deepened the environmental crisis.

At first, the design team tried to deal with the situation by funnelling in more resources, but these, too, were quickly grabbed and hoarded. No one could figure out how to keep the game going without giving up on the system: in the virtual world, as in the real one, economic growth and ecological stability can be tragically difficult to reconcile.

Now the game is programmed so that the servers continually add more ore and sheep and wolves to the landscape. This largesse has solved the mass-extinction problem, but not the hoarding, which continues, contributing to server lag. Why players hold on to so many essentially useless items remains a mystery. When I asked Koster about it, he said, “Why do you have all the junk you have?”

T*he first time I visited Britannia, I went as Gudrun, a young archer. Like all players, I got to choose many of my avatar’s features upon creating her. I gave her a*

peaches-and-cream complexion, blond pigtails, and a not very medieval miniskirt. Not long after Gudrun arrived in the kingdom, she met Dark Wolf.

Dark Wolf was wearing a red robe and carrying a long sword. He bought Gudrun some shoes, and also a suit of leather armor, which, when she put it on, turned out to be a tight-fitting affair halfway between a cuirass and a bustier. It was unclear to me whether Dark Wolf was expressing simple fellow-feeling for Gudrun or something harder to satisfy. Because Gudrun was an archer, she came equipped with a bow and a bunch of arrows. Being young, she was not a very good archer; nevertheless, with Dark Wolf's assistance she managed to kill some poor hapless hart. "U were great," Dark Wolf told her.

Britannia operates on the principle that doing is improving, and so the most skillful characters are, almost by definition, the ones who have been playing the longest. On the island of Moonglow, Gudrun met a knight named Roy, who seemed to have a lot of experience but claimed to have just started playing earlier that week. She asked him how he had been able to become so skilled in so short a time. "In the last couple of days, I've been sick, heh, heh, heh," he replied.

As Gudrun, I never managed to lose my newbie status, and I spent a lot of time wandering around, trying to figure out what I was supposed to be doing. Other characters were constantly offering to trade things with me—every character starts out with a thousand gold pieces—or inviting me home with them, or asking me to join their "party," which meant that I could communicate with them through special channels, and also, somewhat less appealingly, that they could loot my corpse if the opportunity arose. But being a member of a party often just seemed to mean not knowing what to do as a member of a group. I found the game at once mildly addictive and boring, like the dances I used to go to in high school.

Ever since electronic multi-player role-playing games first appeared, in the form of multi-user dungeons, back in the late seventies, there has been much speculation about what draws people to them. Richard Bartle, an Englishman who might be described as the Claude Lévi-Strauss of the MUD world, once proposed a four-part typology, dividing players into “socializers,” “achievers,” “explorers,” and “killers.” Even though U.O., with a quarter of a million subscribers, is two or three orders of magnitude larger than even the most populous MUD, Bartle’s scheme fits the game pretty well.

As time has passed, community-oriented players have introduced into Britannia a wide variety of ordinary, not to say humdrum, social rituals. They organize pet shows and comedy nights, put on amateur theatricals, and regularly hold disco parties in the dungeons. Marriages are commonplace in the game, and when a player dies in real life a funeral is usually held for his avatar; players leave virtual flowers on the virtual grave. In Austin, over and over again I was told stories of friends who meet in the taverns of Vesper and Trinsic to do nothing more remarkable than pretend to drink beer and pretend to play chess.

The game’s achievers, for their part, have managed to produce an overheated, almost Hamptons-esque real-estate market. Buildable lots are scarce—in some areas unobtainable—and such is the demand for mansionettes that it has spilled out of Britannia. On any given day, eBay has a couple of thousand auctions running of U.O. homes and other paraphernalia. Recently, I saw on the auction site an enormous castle for sale in Trammel that had received twenty-two bids and was going for eight hundred dollars.

The killers, meanwhile, have not confined themselves to killing. They’ve organized themselves into murderous factions and extortion rackets. Origin discourages those under thirteen from

playing the game, but one eight-year-old girl found a way in and, as the company learned later from her irate mother, took as a pet a cat, which another player skinned.

To the extent that Bartle's typology is clarifying about U.O., however, it reveals how peculiarly conflicted the enterprise is. If conventional games have an overarching ambition, it is to define the competition in such a way as to avoid the sort of messy, emotional uncertainties that characterize life on the outside. U.O. and other role-playing games have the reverse effect, forcing players to fight again and again over what the game is really about. "The hatred that some socializers bear for killers admits no bounds," Bartle once observed.

In this sense, U.O. is, for all its evident silliness, essentially serious: a game with inherent moral complexity. And it is this, perhaps, that keeps the socializers, the achievers, the explorers, and the killers all engaged. In U.O., you never know whether the other players you encounter are there for the fun of making friends or for the fun of murdering them.

***U.** O. has been in operation for nearly four years now, which makes it the oldest surviving game of its type. Its rivals were still in the production phase during its worst moments and, not surprisingly, profited from its mistakes. EverQuest, for example, which takes place in a similar ersatz-medieval setting, has clearer rules about violence, offers players a sharper sense of purpose, and now has a hundred thousand more subscribers.*

Certainly hyperinflation and mass extinction are not, while they are happening, a lot of fun, and U.O.'s designers acknowledge the commercial costs of the game's many crises. At the same time, they seem as a group proud, in a Jurassic Park sort of way, of what has gone wrong. Starr Long, the co-creator of U.O., remembered his own reaction when he learned prostitution had been introduced: "Awesome!"

On all Origin business cards and stationery appears the slogan “We Create Worlds.” One possible justification for this self-important claim is the way so many people live through their avatars, getting married and putting on pet shows and hanging out in bars online rather than in real life. But what makes the game’s social dysfunction so compelling is that it cannot be explained by anything as simple as the desire for a happier world. The mark of a true simulation is that it produces something unwanted, yet recognizable, which is why to lose control has to be, finally, the creative goal of any project like U.O.

On the last night that I was in Austin, Garriott held a party on an enormous piece of land that he owns just down the hill from his house, on the banks of the Colorado River. He is planning to build a new home on the property, which is going to be at least five times the size of the old one and will have a moat. By the time I got to the party, it was dark, and there was a sliver of a moon hanging over the river. Somebody had built a bonfire that was sending sparks in all directions.

The party was billed as a “wake” for Origin, which is not actually disappearing but is being absorbed ever more completely into Electronic Arts. Just a week earlier, the parent company had cancelled a game known informally at Origin as U.O.2, citing fears that the new game would end up competing with the original U.O. Electronic Arts had laid off U.O.2’s development staff, of more than fifty people, and most of them, it seemed, were at the party. I couldn’t tell whether the event was an expression of morbid fun or another reflection of the gaming world’s perverse optimism, but, whichever it was, the mood was upbeat. No one I spoke to appeared terribly concerned about finding a new job, and perhaps with good reason. I hung around for a while listening to Garriott theorize about the future of the gaming industry, and then I headed back

*up the hill to my rental car, past the bonfire, now cheerfully
consuming a seven-foot-high stack of useless U.O.2 documents.*



VIEW ARTICLE



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