PART V

This Is Not a Game

Twenty-Seven *"We Were Not in Control"*

Rewind a bit now to the early 1990s, back to the point when id Software's *Doom* and *Quake* were first beginning to sweep across the gaming landscape. Freed from immediate financial worries, Richard Garriott was unhappily watching his work eclipsed by these new styles of games and gaming. *Ultima* and Origin Systems were still drawing fans, but Richard had been inside the Electronic Arts corporate machine for several years, and felt that he was spinning his wheels.

Nowhere was this more in evidence than in the office of EA CEO Larry Probst's office, where Richard now sat listening to the older man explain why online worlds weren't a good investment.

This conversation, in late 1994, was the third time Richard had been there making the same pitch. Feeling blocked at every turn, he was getting ready to call it quits not only with the proposal to put *Ultima*'s Britannia online, but with EA as a whole. He'd been down this road before, with California Pacific and then with Sierra On-Line. The more he'd tried to fit into the corporate game development world, the less satisfied he'd felt.

That Probst didn't immediately believe in the idea was hardly surprising. Richard was pitching a relatively new, commercially unproven concept that would link tens of thousands of gamers together in a virtual world with its own economy, ecology, and political system. It promised to be a massive undertaking, never before attempted on the scale Richard and his team had conceived.

To be sure, they'd tried hacking together networked, multiplayer versions of their games before, in their New England offices and elsewhere. But the technology simply hadn't been ready. Now, the emergence of the

Internet as a commercial medium was changing that. In just a few short years, virtually everyone would have access to online communities in some form, Richard believed. Although *Ultima* had always been a single-player game, its roots were in the face-to-face multiplayer experience of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The idea of creating a communal world was a natural next step.

Indeed, the more he'd thought about it, the more Richard had become convinced this was the logical next step for mainstream gaming as a whole. People had been playing networked games almost since the first computers were unleashed on university campuses in the sixties. Persistent virtual worlds like Bartle's *MUD* were now commonplace, if still largely text-based. Why shouldn't Britannia too be a place that gamers could explore together, where they could meet actual people instead of the stilted computer-generated characters that populated single-player games? The world of Lord British had always lacked this social aspect, and that had always rankled Richard.

Unfortunately, the logic wasn't as obvious to Probst. EA was a company rapidly building a marketing empire based on uncomplicated mega-hit titles, and consequently had little appetite for risk. Twice before, he'd shot down Richard's idea, always with a different justification—too expensive, too untested, or too weird. Yet, for whatever reason, the third pitch finally convinced the CEO to take a chance on Richard's idea.

"How much would you need?" he asked.

Richard and his team had kicked around estimates, but the truth was he had no solid idea. Nobody had ever done a project like this before, at least not the way he was imagining it. By this point in time, a sophisticated single-player game might cost millions of dollars to create once the talents of all the programmers, artists, and designers had been brought to bear. Development teams were dozens strong now. The days of building a hit game solo with an Apple II were long past. "A quarter million dollars," Richard suggested. "We could build a prototype for a quarter million."

Probst said the magic words. "Okay. See what you can do. But you can't screw up the next real *Ultima* for it."

Even as Probst gave the project a tentative green light, few outside the Origin Systems group believed online games of this scale would be part of gaming's immediate future. Some of the team's members too had their doubts. There was good reason for the skepticism. The world Richard was

imagining was considerably different from what Carmack, Romero, and other multiplayer game developers were doing with their online play. Id's games and the other shooters that had kicked off the online-play craze were networked together in virtual spaces, but these were worlds in only the simplest sense of the word. A *Doom* playing field existed only so long as there were people playing in it. Each multiplayer game effectively spawned a different little bubble-universe that would disappear when the players were done.

Ultima Online was conceived as a persistent world like Bartle's *MUD*, present whether players were there or not, but this time created as a fully graphical experience. To sustain this universe, Electronic Arts would have to maintain a massive computer server farm that kept the world operating around the clock. Those computers would have to support hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of players acting in the same world at the same time. From the player's perspective, too, much would have to change. No more simply flipping a switch to pick up a game where it had been left off. Here, every gaming session would involve rejoining a world that had gone on without the player, and trying to figure out what had changed in the interim.

This wouldn't be the first persistent graphical world. But the scale and ambition of Richard's project would in the years to come set a benchmark by which later massively multiplayer online (MMO) games would be measured. The game would feature some predesigned adventures for players, but one of the most exciting aspects would be that *Ultima Online* would allow players—and indeed, encourage them—to create their own stories using the world as a backdrop. Players would have the ability to recreate *D&D*–like adventures in Britannia, bringing the idea of the dungeon master into a graphically rich virtual world.

As a result, the game would be radically different than previous versions of *Ultima*. Richard's storytelling prowess would no longer be the backbone of the game. It would lack the kind of focused, linear story that had grounded the previous titles. As a result, it would in the end be an experiment both in player psychology and in expanding the boundaries of what a game could be.

Game makers had toyed with giving players an increasing existential independence for years. The all-text *MUD*s that Richard Bartle created in Britain in the late 1970s and early 1980s had provided a first look at what persistent online worlds could be, allowing players to wander and act with a high level of freedom. That strain of development had been picked up by game makers around the world throughout the 1980s, and by the early 1990s, thousands of different text MUD–style games had emerged. Many had retained Bartle's swords-and-sorcery theme, but there were plenty devoted to other themes—from science fiction worlds to flat-out sexual simulations—all allowing dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of people to interact.

A few well-funded designers had even tried to create graphically rich online experiences. Lucasfilm Games, a division of George Lucas's LucasArts Entertainment, created a cartoon–like online game world called *Habitat* beginning as far back as 1985. Released in 1987 as a trial project on Quantum Link, the online service that later evolved into America Online, the game let players chat, spend money, go on treasure hunts, and run businesses.

As the MUDs had before, *Habitat* demonstrated that game psychology was as tricky to navigate as the technology itself. Developers Chip Morningstar and Randy Farmer found that managing an online world with real people as citizens was far more difficult than they had imagined, so much so that they wrote a series of case studies in the 1990s describing their experience, hoping to guide other developers around the landmines they'd faced. Players would consistently cheat or game the system (a trait that persists in game worlds to this day, spawning an entire business sector, called "punkbusting," focused on stopping cheaters), exploiting bugs or inconsistencies to their own advantage. An early economic system in *Habitat* was nearly shattered when players learned how to take advantage of varying in-game vending-machine and pawn-shop prices to buy items, pawn them at a higher price, and become rich in just a few hours of play. In another episode, a game staffer playing the character of Death was unexpectedly killed, and his special kill-in-one-shot gun fell into the hands of a player, a potential catastrophe that was wholly unplanned for by developers.

"Again and again we found that activities based on often unconscious assumptions about player behavior had completely unexpected outcomes (when they were not simply outright failures)," Farmer and Morningstar

wrote in their 1991 paper about the project. "It was clear that we were not in control. The more people we involved in something, the less in control we were. We could influence things, we could set up interesting situations, we could provide opportunities for things to happen, but we could not dictate the outcome." [47]

The *Habitat* game world went on to mild success in various incarnations. By 1990, about fifteen thousand people had subscribed to a new version of the game called *Club Caribe*. [48] The game was successful enough that Fujitsu took over the project and extended it on an online service in Japan. Eventually, the resources it took to maintain the game led to the world's end, which was exactly the problem Probst was concerned about even as he approved work on Richard's new game.

Writers and academics too were discovering virtual communities by the early 1990s, in large part because of the success of MUDs, online services such as CompuServe, and bulletin board systems (BBS). The events taking place inside these virtual spaces were being dissected and studied by an increasingly large population as they took on both positive and negative features of the real world, often with twists unique to the online realm. In 1993, author Howard Rheingold published *The Virtual Community*, the first popular book about these communities, as a follow-up to an earlier book on virtual reality technologies. That same year, a virtual-reality rape inside the *LambdaMOO* world, a text-based MUD–like system dedicated to social interaction rather than adventuring, was written up in the *Village Voice* newspaper, providing a window into the mysterious online culture for another popular audience. [49]

With the World Wide Web exploding into the national consciousness in 1995, the technological pieces for the massively multiplayer online (MMO) game era were falling into place. Nor was Richard the only developer leading the charge. Dr. Cat, the former Origin programmer, launched his own graphic MUD called *DragonSpires* in early 1995. Sierra's Ken Williams began beta testing *The Realm*, a cartoony medieval-themed online multiplayer game. A small development house called Archetype Interactive started work on a graphic multiplayer MUD called *Meridian 59*, which was launched by game giant 3DO in 1996 with a few minor tweaks to accommodate the burgeoning popularity of the Web.

The new model would ultimately transform the game industry,

changing the way development houses created and sold their products, and changing fans' relationships with the games. Millions of players around the world would eventually pay monthly access fees for these titles, attracted as much by the community of people they played with as by the games' actual content. The game creator's traditional role as a god figure who determined the course of the story and the history of a world would diminish and in some cases vanish altogether. To an extent previously seen only in the underground text MUDs, these would be the worlds of the players' revolution.

Twenty-Eight   *A God Deposed*

Although Larry Probst gave Richard the go-ahead to develop *Ultima Online*, he made it clear that he viewed the game as a personal project rather than a serious element of EA's corporate strategy. Whatever the potential of these graphical MUDs might be, single-player games were still the primary economic driver at EA. Complicating matters, Richard also wanted to do justice to the ninth and final *Ultima*, the end of his trilogy of trilogies. The poor market performance of *Ultima VIII*, which Richard attributed to corporate pressure forcing the release of a buggy, unfinished game, meant Electronic Arts' dedication to releasing another single-player *Ultima* had waned. Conscious of this danger, Richard felt a paternal desire to finish his long-running series on a high note.

The pressure to now create two games put Richard in a difficult position. He didn't have the resources to hire the industry's top graphics programmers for *Ultima Online*, and he wasn't allowed to raid his own *Ultima IX* team. Instead, Richard and Starr Long, one of his top lieutenants, turned to the MUD community to find programmers who knew how to create online worlds. This development circle was made up almost entirely of hobbyists, students, and companies that never expected to make the kind of money that Origin had. These programmers were smart, they came cheap, and they understood how online gaming worked. Richard hired some of the best for *Ultima Online*, including the project's lead designer, Raph Koster.

If the new programmers had any delusions of grandeur regarding their staff positions at Electronic Arts, those were quickly dispelled. The team's office quarters showed clearly where they stood on the corporate totem pole. The Origin Systems offices off the Capital of Texas Highway in

Austin were being renovated throughout much of *UO*'s development. The three-story complex was in disarray as builders knocked out the entire inside of sections of the campus, rebuilding them to accommodate a THX sound studio, server farms, and office space. As a result, the ragtag *Ultima Online* team was constantly shuffled in and out of half-finished rooms. In the middle of development, the team found itself set up in a hallway with walls literally falling around them.

Ensconced in *Ultima IX* development, Richard turned much of the *UO* team's operations over to Starr Long. He gave them the graphics code from *Ultima VI*, technology that may have been outdated for single-player games but certainly sufficed for the online experiments, and let them go to work. Within a few months, they'd created a prototype that allowed four players to chat and kill each other. It was small and much simpler than their goal of a world that would support tens of thousands of players, but it was a start.

Since *UO* was largely an afterthought within EA, the team turned to its community—or what they hoped would be its community—to get feedback on the project even during early development in 1996. The company posted a message on its Web site and sent news through online newsgroups that it would conduct a "pre-alpha" test. This was a fairly radical step within the industry: While beta tests had long been used to flesh out early versions of games, using players as guinea pigs to search out bugs and give feedback to developers, the pre-alpha test meant a handful of lucky players would get an extraordinarily early look under the hood of *Ultima Online*, literally playing the game as it was being made. News of the tests spread quickly through an online fan club known as the *Ultima* Dragons and other aficionado communities. Three thousand people, roughly twice the number of people playing most large text-based MUDs, were accepted into the trial. "Well done, my friend," read the email successful applicants received. "By applying to test the pre-alpha version of *Ultima Online*, you not only get to experience an exciting new world, but also help us make the world more stable and enjoyable for all." Only 250 people would be allowed online at any one time in this initial stage, and the game would be limited to a single virtual city, but the world would expand dramatically later on, the company promised.

The test got off to a clunky start in March of 1996. "At that time

they were still just working out how they wanted the world to function," remembered Robert Gregg, a student and *Ultima* Dragon club member who joined the pre-alpha test. "Needless to say, there were a lot of basic programming issues to work out, and at first, things didn't work so well. I logged on to the system for the first time, and here's what I saw: fifteen people standing naked on top of a table, frozen solid, all saying 'Why can't I move?' over and over again. It was so funny I just about busted a gut laughing."

By summer, the *UO* team was close to launching a larger, beta test when a much more serious problem appeared. Most of the game's seed money had been spent in creating the first iteration of *Ultima Online*, which meant the team couldn't ship and manufacture enough beta-testing CDs to players. Richard believed if he went back to Probst to request more money, he'd only feed the CEO's fears about the cost of game. Instead Garriott decided to roll the dice. He posted an advertisement on the Origin Systems Web site, asking players who wanted to be involved in the beta to send a two-dollar check to the company to cover shipping and production of the CD. The developers expected a reasonable response, but kept their expectations low. Asking people to pay to be part of a beta test wasn't just an imposition; it was a clear sign of desperation.

The response was surprising, and a gratifying sign that the fan base he'd developed with the *Ultima* series remained vibrant. Presented with the prospect of experiencing an online Brittania populated by other real, thinking humans, players eagerly sent in their checks. Within two weeks, Long's team was knee-deep in money. By October the company had received more than thirty-two thousand checks, and by the end of the beta-testing period, more than fifty thousand had requested CDs. "We were stunned. Fifty thousand people signed up and started sending us cash," Richard said. "Our total projection was that twenty or twenty-five thousand would ever be playing the game, and all of a sudden we had fifty thousand people paying money for testing. That was a huge turning point."

The response shocked Probst as well. Everyone began to understand just how powerful and profitable a persistent world built around a sustainable community might be. If fifty thousand people agreed to pay to play an unfinished version of the game, who knew how many would pay the monthly subscription fee over time? *Ultima Online* might after all be an incredible, wholly unexpected success. Probst immediately ordered resources shifted

to the project and approached Richard with an ultimatum: Work either on *Ultima IX* or *Ultima Online*, but not both. The choice tore at Richard. He wanted to finish his trilogy of trilogies—as much for himself as for the loyal fan base that had stuck with him over the last two decades—but the new challenges presented by *Ultima Online* were enticing.

In some measure to satisfy his internal storyteller, as well as to reward his loyal fans, Garriott chose *Ultima IX*, fearful that Probst would kill the final game if Richard left that project so early in its development. He turned responsibility for development of *UO* over to Starr Long, with Koster leading the design team. A lifelong gamer and former actor, Long slipped easily into his own game persona of Lord Blackthorn, a counterpoint to Richard's Lord British, taking on the role of intermediary with the player community. "Role-playing games by their very nature are a kind of theater," Long said later. "Understanding that they are both a form of entertainment, just with a different medium, was important for me."

Outside the company, anticipation built—and built, and built. Players were anxious to dive into this persistent world, to see *Dungeons & Dragons* come to life, and to find a new realm of friends and fellow adventurers. But time continued to pass without signs that the beta test was arriving. Players had been promised an *Ultima Online* beta in late fall or early winter of 1996. That deadline passed. Spring 1997 came and went as the Origin team feverishly tried to get the world ready. Garriott, sensing the pressure, pulled much of the development team from *Ultima IX* and reassigned its members to *Ultima Online*, leaving the single-player game with little more than a skeleton crew.

A full year after the beta test was announced, in June 1997, Origin finally began shipping CDs. In typical Garriott fashion, the opening wouldn't be conducted in private, where the team could assess its faults and flaws. Instead, the team and an initial group of two thousand people were allowed into the world for a test displayed live at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) computer and console game show in Atlanta. E3 wasn't just any trade show. It was the largest, most important event for developers. It was the place where fortunes could be made—or lost—depending on the reaction of fans and the media. Now Richard's group descended to the showroom floor with a game so rough that Origin staffers were secretly playing the roles of non-player characters because the code wasn't yet finished. [50] Fortunately for the

UO team, the excitement people felt while playing in the persistent world distracted from the game's initial faults in terms of playability. The reviews were mixed after E3, but the team had received no fatal critique. Long sent a letter to the anxious community, thanking them and telling them to wait another two to three weeks while issues raised by the test were fixed.

"On a personal note," Long added, trying to quell rumors of disarray in the development process, "I would like to take this opportunity to remind the loyal citizens of Britannia to pay no heed to idle rumor or malicious gossip, even that which purports to come from the very highest levels of society." The note only helped spur more rumors and speculation online.

The test had been less than stellar from a public relations standpoint, but it did provide a treasure trove of data allowing the team to fix the most glaring flaws. A few weeks after E3, in July 1997, *Ultima Online* went live with its big beta test. It had been a torturous wait, but from the designers' point of view, the time had been well spent, even if they were aware of massive debugging yet to be done. Despite its unfinished state, *Ultima Online* represented the most ambitious attempt yet to simulate aspects of the real world in an online game environment.

The playable space itself was huge, requiring considerable travel time to reach one side from the other. Players could take on all kinds of roles, from aggressive warrior to peaceful baker. The programmers had built in a market economy, in which the value of goods such as weapons and magical items would fluctuate based on supply and demand. They had even programmed an ecosystem replicating aspects of the real-world environment. Herbivores would gravitate toward plant life. Carnivores would follow them, eating the herbivores. If players killed too many herbivores, the ecosystem would respond, sending carnivores into human towns in search of food.

As carefully crafted as they were, these aspects of simulated reality in fact represented a considerable expansion of freedom for players. Game writers had for years been giving players increasing ability to customize play, providing level- or map-building tools or even, as Carmack had for *Quake*, allowing code to be modded into altogether new games. Yet designers and developers had, for the most part, retained control of *how* a game would be played. Single-player games mostly had a right way to win. Multiplayer titles like id's allowed considerable creativity, but within a constrained set of rules. *Ultima Online* would essentially allow players to invent their own games

within the game.

The *UO* designers wanted a complex simulation of the world precisely in order to give players this creative freedom. Richard spoke of creating a world in which players could use everything that existed. In other words, if a player came across a tree, she should have the option of cutting the tree down, burning it, climbing it, or sitting under it. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, a skilled dungeon master could accomplish this simply through improvisatory storytelling. In virtual spaces, teams of programmers, by contrast, had to anticipate every possible move that players might make.

This was and remains an impossibility. No matter how much planning had been done, Richard and his team had no real idea what would happen when *Ultima Online*'s doors swung open for the first time.

As it turned out, *UO*'s opening was marked by chaos. Unleashed and unencumbered by a strict set of rules, players almost immediately began tearing the world apart. Accustomed to games that required players to level up by engaging in combat, the players started killing everything they found. The ecosystem—plants, herbivores, carnivores, monsters, and anything else that moved—was decimated too quickly for any of the subtle balancing effects to show up at all. Thousands of programming hours was wiped clean at the hilts of the beta testers' swords.

As thousands of people streamed into Brittania, the world turned bloody. New players were dispensed with almost immediately after logging on, and should a relative amateur track down some valuable magic sword or expensive treasure, the unlucky character would almost certainly be murdered and robbed in the space of hours. Even Richard's supposedly invulnerable Lord British, neglecting to turn on his invulnerability mechanism, was killed as he addressed his subjects near the end of the beta test.

If Garriott hoped to create a thoughtful, ethically minded community of game players within his carefully crafted world, he failed. Rather than being a medieval pastoral, this world was distinctly reminiscent of *Doom*. Life in Brittania was nasty, brutish, and often short, at least during the first days of the beta test. In some ways this was to be expected. The dominant zeitgeist in role-playing games was that players went unpunished for all

their deeds, an issue Richard had tried to address years before by instilling a hidden ethical system into his games. In this new world, players had been given near free reign. There was no ethical system guiding player actions, and so players fell back on familiar behavior.

Over time, however, the world began to take on some semblance of order. Players themselves did their best to police their world in whatever creative ways were available to them, taking lessons from their days in text MUDs. One early character proved particularly troublesome, showing up at in-game weddings or picnics and killing anyone around. In response, a group of angry players decided to retaliate with their own form of virtual justice. They created a female character who befriended the killer and spent several weeks gathering information about him: his ICQ (instant-messenger chat) number, his name, his home address—even his sexual predilections. Once they'd garnered enough information, they launched a Web site with every piece of dirt they had and posted the link on every *Ultima Online* fan Web site they could find. The player was humiliated, and eventually left the game.

Much of that self-policing happened because players routinely created meeting places outside the game world. Many groups set up Web sites, chat rooms, or message boards where in-game friends could meet to discuss strategy, in-game problems, or sometimes just life. As *UO* teetered on the edge of anarchy, some of these groups acted as stabilizing forces, joining together to battle their more murderous peers. Many others simply established self-help societies, working to start businesses and buy buildings or land together.

In the single-player *Ultima* series, it had been Richard, the creator, who had established a rigid ethical system. Here, the players found themselves responsible for the health and growth of the world, in both the physical and moral sense. Because of that, the guiding principle for game play was untrammeled creativity, just as it had been during the early years of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The old-school gamers understood that even negative actions could be forgiven as long as they happened in character and within the parameters of the world. Even virtual murder wasn't always a bad thing if you were honestly playing the nature of your character.

One player, known as The Highwayman, became legendary for killing players with a stunning regularity. The roadside bandit would chat

up his victims—sometimes leaving the scene and returning in disguise—dropping periodic hints that he was actually The Highwayman and would soon be dispatching his victims. He gave wily travelers a chance to leave, to end the interaction before he took their life (and property). Few did, though, because the role he was playing was so interesting, and even fewer complained of his player-killing ways.

As players sought to navigate this chaotic and dangerous world, the design team was facing the problem Probst had accurately predicted: the cost of building and maintaining an always-on, virtual space that needed around-the-clock care. Players weren't just pushing the bounds of reason with constant bloodshed; their sheer numbers almost immediately pushed the infrastructure to its limits. It was as if Electronic Arts had created a city a quarter the size of Austin, and moved in a population of a hundred thousand overnight. That produced very serious issues—long lag times and server crashes among them—about which the citizens of Britannia bitterly complained.

"In the real Austin, there is a mechanism for change," Richard said later. "If you don't like the potholes on your street, or you think the city is taking too long to fix them, your neighborhood group can lobby the city council. You can call the utility company if you think your bill is too high. There is a government infrastructure that reaches down to the individuals. In our world, there was no structure of any kind, but everyone still had their opinions. We were flooded with personal emails, phone calls, people coming to the buildings."

The players' response to these problems proved to be a powerful endorsement of the game's sense of internal reality, despite its myriad flaws. Rather than leaving the world in disgust, many sought in-game solutions. Indeed, one of the most telling demonstrations of the game's community-driven nature occurred when a group of players angry about lag time (in this context, the time it took for servers to process individual characters' movements in a crowded room) decided to mount a protest.

On a Friday afternoon, several hundred gamers logged on and marched together to Lord British's castle, situated just outside of the main town. Aware of the protest, the design team gathered in their newly refurbished digs at Origin, opened the in-game castle gates, and sat back to watch the action unfold on their computer screens. The protestors poured

into the Great Hall, bringing game play to a near halt. With so many people in one area, it took several minutes of punching a command on the keyboard before a character would actually move. The players began disrobing. Within thirty minutes, hundreds of naked protestors stood in the room. The protest soon took on a party–like atmosphere, and the virtual drinking started. When characters had too much to drink in *Ultima Online*, they got drunk— just as you would in real life. Keyboard commands became scrambled, characters wobbled, and eventually they threw up. Soon hundreds of naked avatars, puking in slow motion, filled the room. Richard loved it.

"We were all watching and thinking it was a grand statement about the project," he remembered later, laughing. "As unhappy as they were about the game, they voiced their unhappiness in the context of the game."

While many of the game's most ardent early players understood the attraction of role playing, the success of *UO* guaranteed that new players would often have different playing styles. This made for a more diverse society, but the corresponding drop in role-playing skills drove away some early *Ultima* players.

"It just didn't have a strong *Ultima* feel to it," said Rich De Francesco, a longtime *Ultima* fan who later managed the World of Ultima fan site. "It doesn't take much to wrench you out of the role-playing frame of mind, especially when other real people are involved—people who may not have the same idea of what's fun, or of role-playing. For example, I jump into the game, new to the world, and within one minute, I see folks bopping around saying things like, 'Dats SO phat!' or 'Look at all the n00bs!' It's hard to suspend reality in an environment like that."

Nevertheless, the launch of *Ultima Online* was a watershed moment, a turning point in the development and character of game worlds. It was a surprising in-game interaction that ultimately illustrated for Richard just how much independence the players had gained..

Walking through the streets of his world one evening, he heard a woman screaming. Feeling benevolent, Richard's Lord British decided to go help her. When he asked her what happened, she said somebody had come running by her and stolen all her possessions, moving so quickly that the thief had barely been perceptible. Bemused, Richard explained that stealing was part of the game, but that he'd help the woman get her property back. The thief had programmed a series of automatic commands into his computer,

running and stealing with a single keyboard click that made him almost impossible to guard against, Richard surmised. He transported himself immediately to the thief's side, stuck him with a freeze spell, and told him not to steal from the woman anymore.

"Yes sir," came the reply from the thief, who returned the goods he had stolen.

Richard teleported back to the woman and returned her belongings. While he was wishing her well, a blur came by and took her things a second time. Stunned, Richard froze the thief again.

"Hey, I just told you not to do that," Richard said. "What are you doing?"

"Sorry, I won't do it again," the player said sheepishly, once again returning the woman's things.

"If you do that again, I'm going to ban you from the game."

"No problem."

Richard blinked back to where the woman was standing, once again returning her belongings.

"No problem. You won't have any more trouble with . . . "

Zip. A blur flashed across the screen, and again the woman's possessions were gone.

Damn it, Richard thought, leaping to the thief and freezing him. "I said I was going to ban you, and now I have to," he said. "What's wrong with you? I told you not to steal from that woman." He was furious, and ready to throw this player out of the game. He was Lord British, after all, and this guy was breaking the rules.

"Listen," the thief said, breaking character for the first time. "You created this world, and I'm a thief. I steal. That's what I do, and now you're going to ban me from the game for playing the role I'm supposed to play? I lied to you before because I'm a thief. The king caught me and told me not to steal. What am I going to do, tell you that as soon as you turn around, I'm going to steal again? No. I'm going to lie."

Richard was taken aback. The thief was right. *Ultima* wasn't his anymore, and it wasn't right for him to try to control its population. To a large extent, players in earlier games had been puppets playing roles programmed in by Richard as the designer. But those rules no longer applied. Here the players had free will; they had control over their own environment and

destiny. The puppets had cut their strings and taken over their world.
A deposed god, Richard let the thief go.

Twenty-Nine *Knights of the Guilded Realm*

Ultima Online became the fastest-selling computer game in Electronic Arts' history. Two months after its retail release in September 1997, it had sold more than sixty-five thousand copies, topping the computer role-playing game charts in the month of its release. This was an unambiguous success, particularly for a new category of game, though it remained modest by industry-wide standards. Blizzard's *Diablo*, for example, a simpler role-playing game that allowed groups of up to four people to play together online for free, had sold more than five hundred thousand copies just a few months after its own release in January 1997. By the time of *UO*'s release, more than a million people had signed on to Blizzard's free Battle.net service, largely to play *Diablo*—far more people than would ever populate *Ultima Online* at any given time.

The impact of the new game would reach far beyond its numbers, however, in much the same way that the impact of *Dungeons & Dragons* continued to resonate in so many game development studios even three decades after its release. If not the first of its kind, *Ultima Online* nevertheless created a standard against which MMO role-playing games would be compared for years. The game also changed the way people discussed in-game communities and dedicated game players. Feature articles on the game's social dynamics periodically found their way even into the biggest newspapers in the United States. An October 1997 *New York Times* article, offering a by-the-numbers comparison to *Quake*, offered a snapshot of how the game was operating differently than its predecessors.

	Game Released Online	Cost of Game	Number of Units Sold	Maximum Players in a Game	Average Number of Players in a Game	Average Time Spent Online	Players Who Are Male
Ultima	September 24, 1997	$64.95	40,000	15,000 (across six servers)	5,000 (across six servers)	6 hours a day	96%
Quake	June 21, 1996	$44.95	700,000	32	10	2 hours a day	98%

Even if *Ultima Online*'s initial player demographic wasn't terribly different than that of *Quake*, it was clear from the outset that players were creating a new type of online experience. Thousands of people were playing together in the same world, producing a kind of evolving communitarian experiment. Moreover, as time went on, the open-ended, social game increasingly attracted the kind of people who normally steered clear of complex PC games.

Christine Gilbreath was one of those early players. A programmer and former elementary school teacher, she had worked long years selling software in the mid-1980s, taking classes on many of the products that came through her store. She'd play the odd game of solitaire or blackjack that came packaged on her PC, but more ambitious gaming had never interested her.

When *Ultima Online* was released in 1997, other programmers in the health insurance office where she worked began talking about the game incessantly. Four of her friends said they needed another player who could cast healing spells so their team wouldn't be easy prey for bands of roving marauders. While Gilbreath had little interest in the *Dungeons & Dragons*–inspired world of Britannia itself, she joined the game as a cleric, hooked up with another friend who had just started the game, and set out to find her co-workers. At the very least, she would better understand what her friends were talking about if she spent some time wandering around the game.

Ultima Online wasn't set up to make it easy for people to find each other. It was a huge place, and players all began in the main city. Her friends had already been traveling for days, and were no longer close by. This introduced two game-specific problems: First, she'd been dropped in

the virtual equivalent of Kansas, and her friends were already in California. Second, the moment she stepped out of the safety of the city, marauders looking to take advantage of newbies (game lingo for new players) would kill her. This was hardly the social experience she wanted. Undaunted, she surmised that if she wanted to succeed, she needed to accumulate enough experience to defend herself.

To gain skills in *Ultima Online*, players needed to study and then practice to keep them sharp. Swordsmen needed to practice against other fighters. Silversmiths needed to go through an apprentice period. If players neglected that practice in favor of socializing, their characters risked becoming easy prey for killers who'd honed their assassination skills.

Unless, of course, they weren't alone. Another way of preparing oneself for *UO*'s dangerous hunting grounds was to make friends, gaining safety in numbers. Gilbreath found her way to the port city's waterfront, which was teeming with mariners, merchants, fishermen, and plenty of other newbie players like herself. She joined the others fishing lazily by the water's edge (an activity conferring experience points), and began chatting with anyone who would talk with her.

Sitting on the docks talking, Gilbreath ultimately persuaded ten others to go traveling with her. After a week, they set out across the open lands to meet her co-workers, along the way picking up other stragglers who'd left the relative security of the city. By now an official guild called the Platinum Sphere, the group continued to grow even after they found her friends, and within a year its ranks had swelled to forty-six people.

The composition of this group shifted over time. Real-life issues sometimes forced players to cut back their role-playing, or the release of new games pulled players away. *EverQuest* launched, taking its toll on the group, and *Dark Age of Camelot* accounted for a few more. But the bonds forged within the group stuck despite their changing interests, and the Internet allowed them to maintain their relationships. To keep the relationships fresh, the leaders of the Platinum Sphere built a password-protected message board where members could keep up-to-date on everyone's latest adventures, both in real life and online. In the past, when a player left a regular *Dungeons & Dragons* game, or if somebody moved, people often lost touch with one other. Now, players' gaming communities were far less constrained by geographic distance or travel time.

Eventually Gilbreath stopped playing *Ultima Online*, but the guild message boards provided a connection that enabled the players to stay in touch. Years later she was still keeping up with her guild mates. "We're all friends outside the game, and most of us talk about real-life stuff when we get together," she said. "We have our own friendships that have formed because of the guild."

Stories like Gilbreath's grew more common as *UO* became a social as well as an adventuring environment. Players formed guilds around an increasing variety of interests: killing, socializing, fishing, and even acting. Unusually for a mass-market computer game, the diversity of social activity matched or even exceeded that found at *D&D* tables. Players were drawn to Britannia for a wide variety of reasons, but spent an average of six hours a day playing once there. They couldn't help but make friends.

By late 1997, twenty-seven-year-old Heather Pierce had seen her husband work his way through years of PC games. In the interest of domestic harmony she'd watched him shoot his way through *Duke Nukem*, and scheme to take over the world playing the strategy game *Command & Conquer*. Then came *Ultima Online*. Assuming it was just another killing-focused game, she found herself unexpectedly absorbed as he built a character, chose its clothes and appearance, and selected a profession. By the time he started roaming around town trying to master the fine art of swordsmanship, she was transfixed, taking her own turns playing instead of just watching.

With no in-game money, and no way for their character to get food, they decided to take up fishing. Like Gilbreath before them, they wandered to the docks, encountering there another group of new players. For Pierce, this was far more engaging than the first-person shooters or strategy games she'd seen before. It was clear that the way to learn this game was by talking to other people figuring it out for themselves. They ended up chatting with people from around the United States while passing the time—several days, in fact—fishing and selling their bounty to local merchants.

"This was the first game that I thought was cool," Pierce said later. "Here we were playing this character, and you were trying to help this little guy figure out how to be a swordsman. It was really challenging."

It also caused mild strife in the household. The couple had made just a single character, and they both wanted to play. They started fighting over screen time. Eventually, Pierce bought herself a computer, her own phone line, and a copy of the game. She created her own character and once again trudged down to the dock to make money fishing. She made friends with another group of players, and this time decided to form a guild, The Anchor of Light. The group gathered every day to fish, chatting about what was going on in their personal lives while passing the time.

Once Pierce and her husband made enough money to start their own business, they moved from the docks to an in-game home they purchased just outside of town, where they could sell weapons to adventurers. Just as they'd done with the fishermen, Pierce found friends among the merchants, and before long she'd put together the Cove Merchants Guild. At its height, the guild had a hundred players at its monthly meetings. Eventually they would join with sixty other guilds to form the Great Lakes Regulators, creating a huge society inside the game.

Like in many other such groups, the Great Lakes Regulators players formed such strong bonds with one another that their meetings began to spill offline. In 1998, Merchants Guild players who lived in Austin started meeting every other month for lunch. While the lunches were originally meant for discussion of in-game activities, they eventually evolved into proper social occasions, with the group gathering four times a year for lunch or dinner. By 1999, people grew more ambitious, and rented a boat for an evening of revelry. Word of the outings spread through the *Ultima Online* message boards, and soon players from around the Southwest were showing up at the Austin events. More than a hundred players registered for the *Ultima Online* outing in 2000, when Austin played host to the Texas Renaissance Festival, the same event that Richard had experienced with the Society for Creative Anachronism nearly two decades before.

"Word spread through the message boards and the game itself, and before we knew it, there were people from all over the place registering and flying down," Pierce said later. "At first, I was surprised by the types of people who showed up. I was always expecting this to be a bunch of weirdos who showed up; but you know, these folks that we play with are really pretty normal."

In just a few short years, those guild members became more than

just in-game friends. When Pierce's marriage broke up, leaving her a single mother with two children, she found the game gave her a valuable community of support. Her best friend, Gwen, whom she'd met in the game, finally made the trip down to Austin in 2001. The two bonded as quickly in real life as they did in the game

"I hang out with other people who play," Pierce said. "The guy who I'm dating is an *Ultima Online* player. I'm not tied to the new people so much, but I'm bonded to the people who I used to play with. I met a lot of people who had common interests."

Baking, fishing, or setting up as a merchant thus all turned out to be viable game activities, even if more people were interested in adventuring. As the game went on, players began to use the virtual space for social activities that even Richard and his developers hadn't anticipated.

Joshua Rowan, a thirty-four-year-old gamer, had been an *Ultima* player for nearly two decades when he found *Ultima Online*. He'd played *Dungeons & Dragons* briefly in the early 1980s, but when *Ultima III* came out, he quickly ditched the tabletop gaming scene for the world of Britannia. When *Ultima Online* was announced, he was ecstatic, and with a group of friends put together a guild called the Golden Knights. They would play as law-abiding paladins, they decided, roaming the countryside in search of people in trouble to help.

"We joined on day two," Rowan said later. "I'd been really disappointed that I couldn't get into the beta test, but when the real game came along, I was so excited I could barely contain myself."

There were just five Golden Knights in the beginning, spending their playing hours looking for bad guys. It wasn't a difficult search. The game's early days were dominated by player-killing as people tried to accumulate experience points and build strong characters. Yet the constant fight against evildoers turned out to be less fun than the group had expected. In practice, they spent much of their time being overwhelmed by stronger players who took a distinct pleasure in eviscerating self-declared good guys. Taking a break, the group decided to retire to the local tavern to rethink their strategy. Drinking and chatting seemed like a better use of their time, so much so that they decided one night in 1998 to pool their money and buy the tavern outright.

"We really just wanted to have a place to hang out, because we were

all into the social aspect of the game," Rowan remembered. "So the Golden Knights became the Golden Brew."

It proved a successful plan. Safe within the city limits, they didn't have to worry about fighting desperados. They could relax and chat with the steady stream of players making their way to the bar, just like real bartenders. Others followed their lead, and their numbers also began to grow. Many people wanted to kick back and relax instead of wandering into the dangerous hinterlands, and the Brew's membership swelled to forty-eight in the space of months.

Like good hosts, they wanted to provide their patrons with something more to do than just sit around and chat. Brainstorming finally led to an idea: *Ultima* was a role-playing game, and many players seemed to like pretending to be someone else. Why shouldn't they form an *Ultima* acting troupe? The idea met with cheers from the other Brew members, and just before Thanksgiving, they formed the Golden Brew Players, a theatrical troupe that would stage plays in the back of the tavern.

With Christmas just two months away, the troupe decided to put on Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol.* The fifteen-person company split up their activities. Some worked on building sets and making costumes, others hunted down the script and pared it down to two hours, and others worked on promotions. They scheduled rehearsals and worked on their parts. On opening night, Christmas Eve, fifty gamers crowded the little bar to its maximum capacity, quietly took their seats, and watched the first-ever theatrical performance in *Ultima Online.* The play went off without a hitch. Richard, who'd heard about the play through the *Ultima* message boards now sprouting by the hundreds on the Internet, attended one of the early performances and was amazed at the players' ingenuity.

"The biggest problem we had was timing the dialogue to make sure people weren't talking over each other," Rowan said later. "As you'd paste your dialogue into the box you used to communicate, it would pop up over your character's head, in a little bubble. We had to make sure we weren't talking over each other, and it'd usually take us about a month of rehearsals to get that down."

Over the next two years, the company would stage a half-dozen other plays, packing the house for each performance and gaining quite a bit of notoriety throughout the online world. "All we ever wanted was a social

place to hang out," Rowan said. "But it's turned into more than that."

The *UO* community was coalescing around the game, but back in the Origin Systems' offices, Richard was struggling to finish *Ultima IX*. The success of *Ultima Online* and the surge of media attention had derailed that project almost completely. He'd spent a great deal of his time helping shape his newly launched virtual world. With dwindling resources and a skeleton development team, *Ultima IX* languished. Its code was completely outdated, and EA executives were hardly enthusiastic about restarting the project from scratch. When he finally pushed the game out the door in late 1999, he found that gamers preferred Britannia's online home. Sales were disappointing, and *Ultima IX* failed to crack the top-ten list of best-selling games even in the few weeks after its release.

Worse, Richard's relationship with Probst and Electronic Arts had deteriorated beyond repair. When the company decided to launch production of *Ultima Online 2*, a game Richard felt was entirely unnecessary given the first *Ultima Online*'s adaptability, he knew it was time to go. In March 2000, Richard gave notice. Once again he found himself a developer without a company.

This time he was leaving more behind. Much of the team he'd spent years with stayed at EA. His former employers would own the *Ultima* series and would continue to run *Ultima Online*, a world that was thriving even as its population dwindled. Other massively multiplayer games were fast appearing on the market, showing clearly that this new genre of world-making was gaining hold. By leaving his own series behind, Richard put himself on the outside of this trend.

Yet even in his absence, *Ultima Online* continued to show just how diverse the gaming community and gaming activities had become. EA's developers regularly released new add-ons that featured new monsters, new adventures, new story lines, and new geographies to explore. But decidedly non-swashbuckling activities had become some of the world's most popular attractions. The game, if that was still the right word, was no longer being driven solely by the designers. The players had been enfranchised and had shown their interests to be far more diverse than the conventional game

industry imagined.

      While nobody was quite sure what that meant for game-play, most people were now convinced that players wanted to live and act in virtual spaces that *they* helped shape.

Thirty   *Proliferating Worlds*

Nin the bard wanted something exotic for lunch. Something even the fabulous land of Norrath, with its owlbear steaks and toasted fearstalker toes, couldn't offer. After examining the food-court's alternatives, she decided on tacos.

Milling around the other tables were warriors and wizards, barbarians and gnomes, even a few scowling drakkin. Some were in full costume, wearing jerkins or beribboned corsets, swords or bows stashed under their tables as they ate. Nin, herself a wood elf, appeared by contrast somewhat mundane, lacking pointed ears or even the musical instrument that might have revealed her in-world calling. Yet over the course of a leisurely meal, she made it clear just how completely she identified with the more colorful members of the crowd flowing through the San Francisco mall. This was the *EverQuest* Fan Faire, the biggest real-world gathering for players of one of the most populous online worlds yet made, and this was where her friends were.

In everyday life, Nin was Bridget Goldstein, a slender, energetic, forty-five-year-old mom from Pasadena, and part owner of a bagel business she operated with her husband, a former stockbroker. Though she was a longtime game player, no game had ever appealed to her as deeply as *EverQuest* had. It was the people that made the difference, she said. Even *Myst*, her previous favorite, felt empty by comparison.

Articulate and extroverted—even downright flirty while in character—Goldstein was far from the popular media's conception of the typical hardcore gamer. She took this philosophically, saying outsiders would inevitably have difficulty grasping the appeal of these increasingly

rich online communities. An *EverQuest* player for three years, she had forged deep in-game friendships reinforced by offline meetings like this one. Those types of relationships could be hard to understand, she said, unless you spent substantial time in those virtual spaces. The strangest thing about it, was how ordinary this now seemed.

"My kids now take for granted that mommy has these friends that appear as magical things on the computer, but that I'll fly to visit them, and they might show up at our house," she said.

Welcome, was her subtext, to the new normal.

Released two years after *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest* was the first massively multiplayer game to break through solidly into public consciousness in the United States, in the process showing that *UO*'s success had been anything but a fluke. It would peak at about twice the maximum number of active subscribers reached by *UO*—about 550,000 as compared to 250,000 — and help kick off a gold rush of imitators. The game was simpler in concept than its immediate predecessor, and more focused on traditional adventure-gaming activities. What made it so addictive was a social structure that allowed— and, at times, forced—players to meet, work together, and build friendships. These communal structures created strong ties that often, as in Goldstein's case, stretched outside the game. To leave *EverQuest* meant to leave friends, a fact that proved very successful in persuading players to continue paying subscription fees .

This link between the commercial and communal was no accident.

The genesis of the idea had come from a game developer at a Sony-owned game studio called 989 Studios. While the group primarily focused on games for the Sony PlayStation game console, one of the company's developers, John Smedley, pitched the idea of doing an online version of a *Dungeons & Dragons*–like game for PC computers. A succession of senior executives rejected the proposal. Like Larry Probst at Electronic Arts, the executives were unconvinced that the emerging commercial Web in 1996 was ubiquitous enough to support a business. Moreover, the market for PC games was miniscule compared to the PlayStation's potential. Smedley persisted, convinced that the smaller online-community-based games he'd

played were ultimately going to become a commercial force in the game industry. Eventually the Sony executives acquiesced. He was given a small budget and the task of building a new type of game.

With permission secured, Smedley turned over game development to Brad McQuaid and Steve Clover, two producers at his 989 Studios. They in turn brought in artist Bill Trost, who was given nearly full responsibility for developing the world. As with so many developers, Trost's vision was heavily influenced by his experience as a *D&D* dungeon master, which meant the world of Norrath would be populated by a mix of elves, dwarves, and humans, and would focus on exploration, teamwork, and socializing. Trost also followed a pattern that would be made familiar by *Ultima Online*, allowing characters to focus on nontraditional role-playing game skills such as fishing or pottery. However, the production crew believed that combat and collaborative exploration were the driving forces behind good games, so they created a structure that gently encouraged those actions.

"Our game was based upon player cooperation," Trost said later. "In order to be successful, you need other players. No one player can do everything in the game. The more friends you have, the more fun you will have."

In a maddeningly familiar story for those early game-world developers, Sony's executives weren't terribly excited about the game. Development costs rose to nearly $5 million as the team of programmers and artists swelled to dozens of people. The small project turned into a massive undertaking, with development costs considerably higher than those for the average PlayStation game of the time. The team justified the time and cost to Sony's executives by arguing that they had to make the action and the community elements work together, a difficult task. In order to protect the game, Smedley ultimately decided to create a spin-off company, Verant Interactive, which would focus on developing MMOs and other online games.

The years of effort bore fruit quickly once the team starting letting people into the world, however.

"Once we got into public testing, our popularity actually hurt some of our productivity, as well as the productivity of some other development teams around the industry. No one was getting any work done because everyone was playing *EverQuest*," Trost said. "I remember specifically being in a meeting, four months after launch, where we were being cautioned we should not feel bad when our numbers started to decline. But they never did."

Indeed, the concerns of Sony executives faded when nearly twelve thousand people signed up the first day, and Norrath's population passed the fifty thousand mark after the first week. In just seven days, the game garnered as many paying players as *Ultima Online* had gathered for its public beta. In the succeeding weeks, players streamed into Norrath, and the flow wouldn't stop for years. While some critics had harsh words for the game play—which often consisting of waiting in a spot until a particular monster reappeared, then hacking it to death as a team—the bonding effect of the team play and the associated online social interaction largely trumped those weaknesses.

Goldstein was just one of the many casual gamers captured by this world. She'd started playing *Myst* and *SimCity* and a few other nontraditional games after her kids had grown old enough to give her a few hours of free time a day. Those games each created a world allowing her to escape the mundanity of everyday life, but they were lonely places, she found. Single-player worlds were missing something for her. When a game-store clerk recommended *EverQuest*, telling her, "Prepare to forget your kid's names," she was intrigued enough to give it a try. What she and many others found was entrancing.

As with *UO* before it, the game's communities spread across the Web and offline, giving players the chance to connect outside the game in forums and real-life guild meetings. Corporate game-community managers no longer tried to centralize these player networks, instead working with the largest guilds to provide players with important in-game information while relaying player concerns back to the developers. While this sprawling, increasingly decentralized landscape made it difficult for executives to gauge interest in their new worlds before a launch, *EverQuest*'s success made it impossible for developers to dismiss the potential held by these virtual worlds.

The surge of media attention that followed *EverQuest*'s surprising popularity proved a very mixed blessing, prompting a response reminiscent of the periodic waves of hysteria over violence in games. Alarmist headlines warned of *EverQuest* addiction, with stories of people slowly losing touch with their real lives surfacing as early as 2000. A Florida man's nine-month-old son died in 2000 while he played the game, and the local media picked up on prosecutors' claims that he had fatally injured the boy trying to keep him quiet while he played. A Wisconsin man obsessed with the game killed

himself in 2002, and his mother threatened to sue Sony.

This media-driven picture didn't correspond to what most players experienced in Norrath. Cindy Bowens, the Colorado player who created the Fan Faire as an outgrowth of a Web site called Women of *EverQuest*, conceded that some players did lose perspective on their regular lives. But they were a tiny exception. "Occasionally you'll meet someone who plays an ungodly amount of hours," she said. "But the average person plays about twenty hours a week. They don't watch TV. This has become their main form of entertainment."

That time commitment—comparable to what nongamers spent watching television [51] — also helped explained why people outside the game world had such a difficult time explaining its draw. In order to understand the internal experience of community and mutual support, you had to dive beneath the surface and interact with people over the course of weeks. Anyone who simply dipped in and left would miss the most compelling parts of the game experience.

A part of numerous social networks developing both inside the game and around its margins, Bowens saw first-hand how often these replicated the relationships that might develop in a recreational sports league, church, or any other communal group. One guild collected money to buy a new computer for a guild member whose computer had died, and who couldn't otherwise afford another. Another group paid Fan Faire registration fees and travel costs for one of its members who was ill and had just gotten a divorce. One eighteen-year-old boy emailed Bowens to tell her his best friend had died of cancer a few weeks before a Fan Faire. He had almost canceled his trip, had decided to go at the last minute, and had met an older man who played the game on the same server and lived locally. The older player became a kind of mentor, helping the boy work through his grief, Bowens said.

"That's what this is all about, the human interaction," she said. "I think it's as valid as a face-to-face relationship."

EverQuest captured the feeling of *Dungeons & Dragons*–style community-centered play to an extent that many other games before and after failed to do. In the process, it became the most successful of a generation of massively

multiplayer games that followed in the wake of Richard's *Ultima Online*. But other games too drew hundreds of thousands of players, helping to expand the palette of virtual-world possibilities and introducing ever more people to the attractions of communal play.

Asheron's Call, published by Microsoft in 1999, broke from the traditional Tolkien-derived archetypes to create its own richly detailed backstory, but never grew far above the hundred-thousand-subscriber mark. In 2001, the player-vs.-player-focused *Dark Age of Camelot* and the science-fiction-themed *Anarchy Online* each made a splash. That same year, Electronic Arts shuttered development of *Ultima Online 2*, focusing instead on building out the existing *UO* community, just as Richard had urged before leaving the company. Raph Koster, Richard's lead designer for *UO*, jumped ship to lead Sony Online Entertainment's *Star Wars Galaxies* game in 2003.

While other developers worked to broaden the appeal of these massively multiplayer online (MMO) worlds, Richard himself was in a sense returning to his roots. After leaving Electronic Arts in 2000, he essentially recreated Origin Systems in a new office with his brother and a few other members of the original team, calling the new company Destination Games. Following a 2001 merger of this new company with NCSOFT, the Korean publisher of the hugely popular *Lineage: The Bloodpledge*, which Richard agreed to translate for the American market, he began work on *Tabula Rasa*, his first non-*Ultima* game in years and one he believed would take the MMO genre to a new level.

For Richard, this was yet another career reboot, a now-familiar story. His career had taken a cyclical form: He'd created *Akalabeth* and the earliest *Ultima* titles, joined Sierra On-Line, and left. He'd created his second, more ambitious *Ultima* trilogy, joined Electronic Arts, and left. Now he had his sights set on the creation of *Tabula Rasa*, and had joined NCSOFT to make it happen. At each junction, it seemed as though he needed to leave everything behind in order to relight his creative spark.

Watching the MMO gaming worlds unfold around him, he was certainly inspired in a back-to-basics way he hadn't felt for years. He'd helped shape single-player PC games, had helped pioneer the community-based worlds now taking off, and was confident now that he knew how to merge the strengths of both. Sitting in his book-strewn office in 2003, he eagerly showed off aspects of his new, unfinished game, including a sophisticated

rune–like language he was inventing for the world, tentative in-game images developed by the artists, and diagrams that depicted almost architecturally how story arcs starring individual players could be nested inside a larger world's developing history. The idea, he said, was to recover the solo game's promise to make every player an epic hero, while still retaining the community aspects of *Ultima Online*.

"Single-player games are great, and I love them," he said in a 2003 interview, as the game's development was still underway. "They have a great feature: Your life is very special. You are *the* hero and you get to save the *whole* world. You live a truly charmed existence, and around every corner, you are finding new things. You're blissfully unaware of your neighbor who is also playing the game."

The drawback, he said, was that you were alone. "Massively multiplayer online worlds solved that, but there was a problem. The activities you do aren't very heroic. You're hunting rats to get money to buy a sword to go fight a deer and then, when you have enough experience, you fight an orc. It's a treadmill."

In the end, his experience with NCSOFT would be as turbulent as that with Electronic Arts. *Tabula Rasa* development was upended after two years of work, following conflicts between the U.S. and Korean development teams. Twenty percent of the staff was cut, key developers quit, and seventy-five percent of the code was scrapped. [52] The game ultimately released in 2007 was a stripped-down version of Richard's initial vision, and he left the company shortly after its appearance.

This misfire was hardly an exception in this high-stakes new genre, in which other high-profile games and developers struggled to find their footing. Even properties with as much presumable built-in appeal as *Star Wars Galaxies* and *Uru: Ages beyond Myst* had buggy launches or (in the latter case) were scrapped altogether.

But even the successful games were ultimately overshadowed by the radical achievements of a single game that drove the communal play of MMOs fully into the cultural mainstream.

When Scott Andrews walked into the *World of Warcraft* as a Tauren hunter—a huge, bull–like humanoid warrior—he found it a distinctly hostile place. In this new game, Taurens were part of a coalition of races called the Horde, who were

generally opposed by another coalition called the Alliance. On the server where he was playing, Alliance forces vastly outnumbered his natural allies. He was killed, often and bloodily.

But adversity breeds creativity. While not previously an MMO player, Andrews saw the potential in this game. He played strategically, long enough to get a feeling for the world and his character. His character and its allies were used essentially as target practice by largerear or stronger groups of Alliance forces, but he didn't get discouraged. He persuaded a group of friends to play with him, and together they formed a guild, growing stronger and smarter. "Everything was new and mysterious," he remembered later. "Everyone was super friendly and excited about the game. It was really easy to meet people."

One day, they decided they'd had enough of being the server's second-class citizens. Andrews and his guild rallied a huge group of Horde players, more than two hundred strong, and swept down on a small group of far more powerful Alliance players who had given them particular trouble. The high-level Alliance characters were shocked—they were used to winning battles, and these were clearly low-level players who had no business attacking their superiors. But the strategy worked.

"We drove them into the sea," Andrews remembered with pleasure. It was then, he said, having tapped diverse social networks to accomplish something that many thought impossible, that he saw this game would be a very difficult place to leave.

On the face of it, *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) wasn't terribly different from *Ultima Online* or *EverQuest*. Humans, orcs, elves, dwarves, and other races fought monsters and each other, gained experience and skills and treasure, assembled guilds and went raiding in the virtual wilderness. Yet the difference—in players' smooth progression from newbie to mid-level warrior, in the quick immersion in meaningful game-world tasks, in quests that could be played alone or with others—was evident almost from the moment of launch. While breaking no radical new ground, this world worked seamlessly in a way its predecessors hadn't.

Like *Ultima Online*, *WoW* had a built-in fan base at launch, derived from an earlier series of single-player games that had taken place in roughly the same game world. Blizzard Entertainment had released the first of these, *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, in 1994, with hugely popular sequels following in 1995 and 2002. Unlike Richard's *Ultima* series, these were real-time strategy

(RTS) games, a genre that had long drawn an equally fanatic fan base. Rather than being solo adventures that set players on an epic journey, RTS games put players in charge of husbanding and deploying resources such as whole armies, supplies, and weapons, generally while fighting other armies. If the *D&D* experience enabled a player to be a hero, the RTS experience allowed her to be a situation-room general. RTS games like *Command & Conquer*, *Age of Empires*, and Blizzard's other hit title, *Starcraft*, had typically focused on large-scale stories or military conflicts rather than individual characters. *Warcraft* titles, by contrast, had always been richer in personality than many of their genre rivals, and were supported by a complex narrative arc that helped justify the inclusion of character-driven elements from role-playing games.

The team Blizzard assembled to develop *World of Warcraft* had substantial experience building and playing in virtual spaces. Rob Pardo, one of the lead designers, had played as a *D&D* dungeon master before becoming a professional game developer. When *EverQuest* came out, he rose to lead Legacy of Steel, one of the game's most prominent raiding guilds (guilds that brought high-achieving players together for advanced game content). He eventually made his way to Blizzard, became a co-lead designer on *Warcraft III*, and took on the same role on the *WoW* development team.

Looking for people who could bring a critical eye to the MMO genre, Pardo reached out to the new leader of his former *EverQuest* guild, Jeffrey "Tigole" Kaplan, who had made a name for himself online as an outspoken critic of *EverQuest*'s shortcomings. Kaplan had spent a great deal of time and energy detailing elements of that game that didn't work well, and had offered countless suggestions for change. Pardo also convinced Tom Chilton, lead designer for the final *Ultima Online* expansion pack, and Alex Afrasiabi, another prominent *EverQuest* guild leader, to help round out the team.

The group spent considerable time analyzing other games on the market. One consistent flaw, they decided, was that previous titles had been designed in large part to appeal to experienced gamers, without enough early and relatively simple incentives to keep casual players interested. New players found it difficult to reach the most thrilling high-level content, often quitting out of frustration as a result. To address this, the *WoW* developers built in a system of small, successive quests that would lead players smoothly to high levels. Players would have to band together to fight the most powerful

monsters and opponents, but until that point, it was perfectly possible to play alone.

Their analysis proved shrewd. *World of Warcraft* garnered more than 240,000 subscribers within twenty-four hours of its December 2004 release, and reached 1.5 million by the following March. Three years later it was still growing, with more than 11.5 million subscribers. Even *EverQuest* had never done more than scratch the surface of the mainstream by comparison. The game became so ubiquitous that an Emmy-winning *South Park* episode focused entirely on *WoW*'s addictive nature and broad-based appeal. Even Toyota made a pickup truck commercial ostensibly taking place inside the game—surely a sign that the cultural ghettoization of gaming was breaking down at last.

Scott Andrews's progress inside the game was inexorable once his group of Horde players had proved its collective power. As leader of the guild he'd originally formed from friends, he found himself in a position of considerable responsibility. The guild grew quickly—perhaps too quickly, he said later—with more than two hundred people in the group at one point. But the sense of having close friends and allies always at hand with whom to go on epic quests, mount raids against adversaries requiring dozens of players to kill, or just hang out online was gratifying.

People in his group fell in to natural roles, both inside and outside the game. A woman in her fifties or sixties was the psychologist, managing tension inside the group. Another young man was the expert on game mechanics, helping guild members master the intricacies of play. Another was the inventory manager—a bit like James Bond's Q—keeping track of the guild's high-powered weaponry and magic items, and figuring out what would be needed for upcoming events.

Andrews himself was a leader and organizer. Earlier in his life he'd been a Boy Scout senior patrol leader, managing a troop of twenty-five kids, and he now found that experience to be invaluable. "Being guild leader is a lot of very demanding work," he said. "If I hadn't had that previous experience, I would have been overwhelmed."

Like members of other gaming groups before them, the guild started

meeting offline at people's houses up and down the East Coast. "It was a real bonding experience," Andrews said. "Between the in-game events we did and the parties, it really felt like more of a family than the typical guild."

To be sure, much of the media attention on the game focused on the more obvious elements—the battles, the cartoonish monsters, the near-addictive nature of play—rather than the kind of communal experience Andrews described. But *WoW*'s explosion into mainstream culture also helped expand the body of researchers that took these game worlds seriously as a social phenomena. Some of those studying how communities and in-game social networks were formed and maintained argued that *WoW* and other such games were creating a valuable new social space in an America where suburbanization, television, and other media were "steadily displacing and degrading civic life." [53]

Researchers noted that small guilds tended to be composed of friends or family members, and were often used as a means of keeping in touch with geographically distant individuals. "Since we can't golf, we *WoW*," a respondent to one survey told researchers. [54] Larger guilds tended to form when these core members needed help to reach more difficult levels of the game, and often at this point became more formal, with rules and attendance policies. Researchers found that non-game-related social interaction was very common even inside the game, particularly among core group members.

However, research on the density of social interactions also found somewhat surprising results. While the vast majority of people surveyed cited *WoW*'s community features as being among the game's main attractions, at least one study found that large numbers of people tended to play on a solo basis as long as possible, joining guilds only when it became necessary for practical reasons. The study called this "playing alone together," and speculated that players liked having other people around primarily to serve as a live audience for their games—like a pinball player thriving on a crowd of onlookers—rather than because they sought deep or lasting social interactions in this context. [55]

To a large extent, these patterns of social interaction reflected the *WoW* designers' goals. Much more than in the case of *Ultima Online*'s flexible world, for example, Pardo's group had created a kind of moving walkway that whisked players through the game's content with comparative ease. The team then continued to release new content—quests, zones to explore, high-level

adversaries, and narrative developments—on a regular basis. In one sense, it was, to-date, the most highly realized digital version of the collective *D&D*–like experience Richard had imagined so many years ago; and yet its very success at keeping players engaged also precluded some of the free-ranging player-driven creativity of previous worlds from *MUD* to *Ultima Online*. The game world became an ever-evolving march toward achievement, with creative socialization taking a somewhat lesser role. These elements certainly helped push the game to ever-greater heights, but they also constrained what the players *might* do. [56]

Of course, many players did invent their own activities, utilizing the capabilities created by Blizzard in initially unexpected ways. Many guilds sponsored events that helped their members bond with one another. "Running" events were common, with many people simply walking or running from one part of the world to another as a kind of digital flash mob, often stripped down to their digital skin. Some guilds held public storytelling events, where characters sat around digital campfires and told tales of in-game adventures. Weddings, long a popular event for role-players, found their way into *WoW* as well (although simulated in-game sex was possible only for those with very good imaginations, and Blizzard strictly policed chat servers for sexual harassment). But compared to *Ultima Online*, the range of player-initiated activities that fell outside regular game-play was comparatively narrow. It seemed that Blizzard's rich and evolving story, constant updates, and well-designed incentive structure encouraged players to engage consistently with the official game rather than split off to create their own activities.

This may also have been an accident of history. At the same time *WoW* was gaining popularity, the most open-ended graphical worlds yet to reach the Internet were also gaining prominence, blurring the distinction between games and simple virtual worlds. Many ardent game players were attracted by this promise of absolute freedom rather than by the enticements of story and a clear achievement structure. They wanted their digital worlds to be as malleable—or, better, even more malleable—than the real world.

In at least a few corners of the Internet, they got their wish.

Thirty-One   *Worlds Without Ends*

I n late 2002, well into the industry feeding frenzy prompted by the successes of *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest*, one massively multiplayer online game in particular drew the attention of a mainstream pop-culture media that still treated magic and monsters with a certain degree of condescension.

Well before its official release, *The Sims Online* was being touted as a breakthrough—a game or virtual world that would be explicitly focused on activities more true to real life than were killing goblins or collecting gold pieces, and that might thus even transcend the category of play. In it, players would gather in small suburban–like neighborhoods, buy houses, work at jobs, and (chastely) romance their virtual neighbors. In a preview, *Time* magazine called it "a daring collective social experiment that could tell us some interesting things about who we are as a country."

To those who had played Richard's *Ultima Online* or any of the myriad of MUDs, MOOs, and other free-ranging social environments that had populated the Net for two decades or more, this description may have sounded more than a little breathless. But at least in theory, this new virtual dollhouse (as some dubbed it) did carry the potential to expand online multiplayer gaming to a vast new audience while putting the social innovations that had evolved in *UO* and elsewhere squarely front and center.

Much of this anticipation had to do with its designer, the forty-two-year-old Will Wright. Even in a game industry richly peopled by creative eccentrics, Wright was viewed as an iconoclast with a golden touch. The game that first brought him to the industry's attention, *SimCity*, had been one of the most surprising breakout hits of the 1980s. His subsequent single-player title, *The Sims*, had risen to become the best-selling computer game of

all time after its release in 2000.

The Sims had been profoundly weird by traditional gaming standards, precisely in its focus on reenacting the lives of ordinary people. There were no dragons in the game, no undead monsters, no flaming swords, and certainly no Big Fucking Guns. Instead, players passed the time by eating, chatting with their friends, shopping, doing chores, or going out at night. Despite this lack of apparent thrills, it had become a smash hit, in the process transforming the industry's conception of its own consumer base.

Unexpected stories had flowed in almost immediately after its release: Male gamers had bought it, but their girlfriends and spouses were playing it and *loving* it. Even better, they were buying copies themselves and recommending it to friends. For a gaming industry that had always struggled to attract women, this was a revelation.

"Everyone has that first game that got them fired up, and that they remember playing nonstop. Well, for a lot of people, this was the first game they ever played, and they were extremely effective at spreading their excitement by word of mouth," Wright said in a later interview. "It was like a lot of fuel had piled up, and then we threw a match on it."

The Sims Online was meant to take its predecessor's money-minting mundanity online for the first time, letting people interact with each other as ordinary characters in an ordinary world. This is what would move MMOs from the realm of hard-core gamers and into the mainstream, Wright believed.

"You look at the games that are out there, and most of them are military titles, or sports, or fantasy, or science fiction," he said, shortly before the game's release. "But that's not what fills 95 percent of the shelves at a bookstore, or what dominates primetime slots on television. There is so much more interesting possibility for interaction and drama reflected in ordinary reality."

Even as late as 2002, this remained a controversial idea in the game business, at least taken as expansively as Wright intended. Of course, simulation games—more typically flight or driving simulators, pinball or board games, or construction games (especially Lego-themed) — occasionally reached the bestseller list. But for most of the industry's history, and certainly since *Ultima* and its peers had begun crystallizing genres in the late 1970s, developers had found it difficult to create hit titles that didn't

fall back on fighting, fantasy, sports, or science fiction themes.

Still, Wright was used to skepticism, both from inside and outside his own companies. In 1987, people had told him that a game that essentially put players in the role of a city planner had no chance of going mainstream. Turned down by big game firms, he and partner Jeff Braun had launched Maxis, an independent game development studio, and in 1989 released *SimCity*. The title was an unexpected critical and commercial success, validating Wright's early intuition that an open-ended game experience, without specific goals, would prove welcome to nontraditional game players.

Even within Maxis, Wright had met similar doubts after proposing the single-player *The Sims* in the mid 1990s. Company managers didn't see the point. Why would gamers want to play characters that fixed meals, bought clothes, went to work, and performed exactly the activities people ordinarily played games to escape? It was only after Maxis's sale to Electronic Arts in 1997 that Wright had found champions for the game, enabling its completion and unprecedented success.

As Wright and his team crafted *The Sims Online*, they were faced with a new twist on the ideas he'd worked with in his previous titles. Like those others, this new game would be open-ended, without winners and losers. But the others had had a kind of limited linearity: Cities could be built, developed, and destroyed. Sims families could get rich, buy houses and have career or romantic successes, and see their dreams collapse. Narrative, or something like it, emerged from the interaction of player choices and the games' underlying models.

The Sims Online would be something else entirely. The development of social interactions and networks would be both means and end, a primary goal to the extent there was any goal at all. But how to ensure the creation of these social frames from scratch? In games such as *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest*, the multiperson quests, guilds, and other fantasy elements gave players a gentle push into social experiences. *The Sims Online* would lack these narrative elements; thus, if the game were going to succeed, its appeal would have to come from the players themselves.

This problem wasn't without precedent. Open-ended text MUDs dedicated solely to social interaction, such as *LambdaMOO*, [57] had thrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Of course, Richard's *Ultima Online* had long been home to social activities invented by the players that weren't

technically part of the core game. Left to their own devices, players had increasingly taken control of their in-game experiences, creating mods, building in-game social structures, resisting game changes they didn't like, and pushing worlds beyond what designers had originally imagined.

Even *The Sims* had given Wright a clue to how socialization within games might evolve, despite that game's single-player nature. After its release, communities dedicated to customizing their games had emerged online, arranging themselves in pyramid–like social or economic structures. In these, a small number of people created tools that others could use to create their own customized Sims. A greater number used these tools to create new "skins" for their characters. A still larger number of people made and operated the fan Web pages that the skins were distributed though, and far more people visited the Web pages to download the customized graphics.

The same kinds of hierarchies of engagement were likely to develop in the virtual world, Wright reasoned, with a comparatively small share of hard-core players inspiring and entertaining others. This core group of leaders—social entrepreneurs in a world where entertainment was one kind of currency—would serve as a magnet for other players if he could figure out how to gently nudge enough players to take positions of leadership within the community.

"I think we're really at the tip of the iceberg here," Wright said in an interview shortly after the game's release. "We have an opportunity to make fans co-designers and co-creators now."

In this particular case, however, the iceberg in sight was more reminiscent of the one struck by the *Titanic*. When *The Sims Online* was released, it failed to live up to its hype. Too many players and reviewers said it simply wasn't enough fun. Wright's hoped-for critical mass of spontaneous leaders failed to develop, and without this, casual players dropping in for a look too often found themselves uninspired.

From the first moments of play, gamers found themselves spending hours playing chess or sculpting garden gnomes in order to gain skills and money, which would in turn allow them to buy houses or other items. But these tasks weren't actually fun in themselves. Thus, players often set their characters working automatically while they left the computer, leaving a drone–like character in the world unable to respond to conversations or change their activity (a state known even in early text-based games as "away

from keyboard," or just AFK). Too often, newcomers seeking the vibrant social experience Wright had imagined discovered only a world full of unresponsive zombies. Those who stuck around found themselves engaged in the "drudgery," as one memorable review put it, of a city "in which nearly every house is a sweatshop." [58]

The world's population peaked at just above a hundred thousand subscribers, but a bit more than a year later, the population had fallen by nearly half. By almost every measure *The Sims Online* was a deep disappointment. In hopes of saving it, the company ultimately relaunched and rebranded the world as *EA-Land* in early 2008, but shuttered it completely shortly thereafter.

The spectacular fall of *The Sims Online* surprised those outside the game industry. If any online game was going to make the leap into mainstream consciousness, this had seemed like the franchise to do it. Not long after the game's release, Garriott said he thought he recognized the symptoms of a game pushed out of EA's corporate doors before it was ready—a phenomenon he said had badly harmed the launch of his own *Ultima VIII* and *Ultima Online* titles. "*The Sims Online* should have been, could have been great," he said. "My own uneducated assumption is that it received a little too much help."

The effort to combine unscripted social interaction and hard-nosed economic incentives as play motivators had proven a difficult task. To be sure, Wright was correct about the online world's readiness to take on the mantle of co-creator. He was right about the excitement that could be generated by a virtual world wholly without story. But *The Sims Online* didn't turn out to be that world.

At the same time Wright was struggling to complete *The Sims Online*, a San Francisco start-up called Linden Lab was experimenting with a messy public beta test of a world it had just named *Second Life*. This online world was radically different than anything Garriott, Carmack, or even Wright had envisioned. Rather than a world of detailed environments or urban settings, it was in essence little more than an animated 3D sandbox, equipped with rudimentary landscapes and an easy-to-use tool set allowing people to create

virtually anything out of thin air. This, in the spectrum of player freedoms, was as open-ended as it got. Not just the events of the world, not just the character of social interactions, but even the shape of the environment itself would here be dependent on the whims of those with enough patience and creativity to share the task of world creation.

Second Life was the brainchild of Philip Rosedale, a technology entrepreneur who first made his name by selling a video conferencing startup to RealNetworks, had subsequently spent a few frustrating months inside a prominent venture capitalist firm, and had finally decided again to strike out on his own. Later, as described in *The Making of Second Life*, Wagner James Au's canonical history of the world, Rosedale would say he had been dreaming of an immersive, wholly open virtual world for years. While aspects of that freedom had already emerged in most successful game communities, the business of game-making had previously led developers to prioritize the growth of a paying audience rather than existential freedoms.

Rosedale, however, considered the natural endpoint of the previous decade's gaming advances to be a world in which people could literally construct their own reality. While not a game designer himself, he had been influenced by time playing *Ultima Underworld*, the first major 3D game on the commercial market. He'd also found inspiration reading Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, the novel in which Stephenson introduced the virtual-reality environment called the Metaverse. Somewhere within that swirl of ideas, Rosedale believed, lay the key to the next evolution in virtual worlds.

It took some time for Rosedale and his team to turn this vision into something concrete and usable. Early in the development process, they focused on a hardware product, developing a prototype for a haptic virtual-reality interface that they imagined would enable full-body interaction with new digital worlds. Needing a world to go along with this, they created a landscape featuring realistic oceans and air-currents, snakes, and rock-eating birds, and even toyed with the idea of setting robot wars in a kind of digital Eden. Human–like avatars, which became the hallmark of the eventual product, were a comparatively late arrival on the scene.

By the time *The Sims Online* went live in late 2002, *Second Life*'s much lower-profile public beta test was a world in which players could create their own pieces of the landscape, build houses, walk, talk, and fly. It was simpler,

comparatively poorly funded, and in a radical state of flux, but *Second Life* offered something *The Sims Online* never did: a near-total creative freedom.

The Sims games had been dubbed "god games," with players in charge of shaping their characters' lives. *Second Life* took the god ideal a step further back, to the moments of the creation. Players—here called residents—were given the power to shape the fabric of the landscape, creating buildings, objects, vehicles, clothes, limbs, or virtually anything else imaginable from bits of unformed matter called "primitives." This near-unlimited creative power was enhanced by a complete lack of traditional game motivators such as levels, skill-development tracks, or preset tasks. Residents shaped the world, and in the process shaped the stories that developed within it.

"I'm not building a game," Rosedale told *Wired* magazine in early 2004. "I'm building a new country."

Slowly, out of the public eye, a world whose appeal was almost entirely predicated on its residents' social and creative powers took shape. In terms of social structure, it was much as Wright had described his hopes for *The Sims Online.* But without corporate restraints, things got much stranger, much more quickly. As MUD communities and even *Ultima Online* had shown, it was precisely this cultivation of the weird that allowed social bonds to cement themselves with real strength.

Early in the world's evolution, group chat channels allowed the formation of tight, guild–like communities, the members of which pushed the boundaries of imagination, creating wonders such as the wild, dream–like Nexus Prime city, a collective work of art and architecture created by the Tyrell Corporation group (itself named after the shadowy entity responsible for the replicants in Ridley Scott's movie *Blade Runner*). For many early residents, the community became a second home. Catherine Winters, a young tech-savvy woman who was living in a rent-free squat in Vancouver, British Columbia, for a short period during this early evolution, later remembered it as a literal life-saver. Outside, in real life, she was homeless and nearly hopeless; as Catherine Omega in-world, she was a crack creator, one of Tyrell's sharpest coders.

"Imagine the emotional impact of being in this situation, where your

real experience is so much less vivid and so much shittier than your online experience," she said. "I spent years living like that, where virtual space was so much more appealing. Who wouldn't want to have superpowers? I still dream that I can fly."

Yet for all this freedom, Rosedale's disavowal of game-making led to puzzling questions. If not a game, then was *Second Life* no more than a fancy chat room? Many of the early residents felt they were living the answer simply through their community and creations. But as a venture-capital-funded, (ideally) profit-making company, Linden Lab needed to show a path for expansion and growth, which led to a call for greater clarity.

Over time, the company experimented with some mechanisms of control and hierarchy. One aborted attempt early in the world's development allowed residents to rate one other in various categories such as appearance or building ability. The system was widely abused, and ultimately shut down, though the desire to improve informal reputations and acquire respect remained a strong driver for creative work.

The most common motivators inside games, whether single-player or online, had virtually always been either power (in the form of skills or experience) or money. By the time *Second Life* staked its place in this history of virtual-world economics, bleed between in-world gold-piece currencies and real-life money had become commonplace, as players—or increasingly, organized entrepreneurs—found ways to sell in-world items or high-level characters through forums such as eBay. Most game companies frowned on this kind of activity. Regarding in-game items as their own intellectual property, many companies tried to stop the practice altogether, in some cases shutting down Web auctions of items from *EverQuest* or other titles. Thus, convertibility between in-game and real-world currencies remained a chancy thing at best.

Linden took a very different tack. Just as Carmack gambled that opening up his *Doom* and *Quake* code would encourage players to modify and deepen their relationship with his games, Rosedale offered his residents full legal property rights to the items they created in hopes that true ownership would promote innovation. Creating the Linden dollar as a currency, Linden Lab set up or supported currency exchanges in which Linden dollars could be swapped for U.S. dollars. The effect was to create a genuine economy where the sale of in-game creations—clothes, houses,

even sexually explicit animations that could let avatars engage in virtual sex—could be used to support a resident's real life.

For the most creative of the world's residents, this was a godsend. Many developed small-business sidelines. Others parlayed their own scripting skills into consulting or the equivalent of in-world construction companies, building virtual headquarters for the real-world companies that started trickling into the world. For many others, the desire for cash led to an influx of something like *The Sims*' population of AFK zombies. Initially, for example, Linden offered rewards to property owners who attracted high numbers of visitors. This encouraged the creation of dance clubs, sex clubs, and casinos. Over time, these and other property owners began paying visitors just for sticking around, competing for bodies. Residents complied by leaving their avatars unattended, present but empty of signs of life (here called "camping").

As the practice spread, dance clubs and other areas filled with unresponsive avatars, planted by players looking to make a few bucks. Even after Linden cut off its incentives, property owners noted that new players tended to come to the most crowded spaces, so they continued to pay campers in order to attract foot traffic.

Thus, even before *Second Life* broke into the mainstream, the world's economic focus began leading to an emergent cultural divide.

"Early on, they settled on the dollar as a unit of one's ability to express oneself within the space," Winters recalled. "I think that later, it became very much you were either there for the money or you were there spending money, and people not doing either were kind of this weird outlier."

To some extent, the explosion of the game into the mainstream eye masked this incipient gulf. *Second Life* made the cover of *BusinessWeek* in early 2006, with a feature on a Germany-based resident who was making hundreds of thousands of real-world dollars by buying land from Linden, subdividing it, developing it with floating cities and sprawling mansions, and reselling it. A few months later she became the first person to have made $1 million in real money through in-game activities. By late 2006, *Second Life*'s gross domestic product—the amount of annual economic activity going on inside the world—was estimated at $64 million, based on the conversion of Linden dollars to U.S. dollars at going rates.

Drawn by the publicity, real-world businesses moved in en masse.

Nike, Coca-Cola, the NBA, Microsoft, and Mazda all established presences. Reuters and a number of other media companies opened news bureaus. Presidential candidate John Edwards opened an office, and the Department of Homeland Security financed in-game terrorist-attack simulations. Nor was it just, or even primarily, the corporate world that was interested. Educators were fascinated by the prospects of virtual classrooms and student interactions. Science-fiction fans dazzled by Stephenson's Metaverse were convinced that this, at last, was something close to the real thing.

"Logging into *Second Life* was like mainlining a drug, everywhere you teleported, you might just bump into someone brilliant, thoughtful, someone as excited about the possibilities as you were," blogged Chris Collins, a University of Cincinnati IT analyst, recalling those days. "Everywhere you looked were fascinating projects . . . that made even the most isolated innovator in some corner of the physical world feel like they had finally found the colleagues and collaborators of their dreams." [59]

By the middle of 2007, user numbers were skyrocketing. To be sure, the corporate-sponsored islands and mansions and in-game stores were very often empty, but that didn't slow the land rush in the new world. This was the frontier, and nobody wanted to be left behind. Soon, cried the optimists, everyone would have a virtual presence, an avatar in the 3D, scrollable, malleable, and virtual world.

But even at the peak of the *Second Life* buzz, warning signals were sounding. The tension between the world's unguided freedom and the incentives offered by the economy was coming to a head. The influx of new users created a swirling, ever-changing culture, where the assumption that a given resident would be a content creator no longer held. Many members of the oldest generation of residents—Winters among them—stopped hanging out or creating content for themselves, and parlayed their skills instead into building headquarters or doing social-world consulting for companies trying to figure out the new space. A large proportion of new users drawn by the publicity wandered in, explored, bought a new hairstyle or outfit, maybe made a little money dancing, and then vanished.

Linden Lab contributed to the drift. Technical problems, particularly lag time, were endemic as usage soared. Growth within the system and communication with residents had been somewhat chaotic, introducing more confusion than clarity. As media attention to *Second Life* intensified,

development became even more haphazard.

The company struggled to find a sustainable business model beyond selling in-game land parcels. In 2008, Rosedale stepped down as CEO, and the mainstream media began losing interest, turning to rising giants Twitter and Facebook as social networking's new future.

To be sure, the death-watch media narrative that rose to swallow *Second Life*'s Next Big Thing status was as overwrought as the previous hype. Users continued to sign up by the millions, and if overall usage and average in-game hours declined over time, these metrics remained quite respectable.

But the post-boom-and-bust *Second Life* had become a different place. The radical optimism was gone. Linden and many of its *SL* residents had become focused on eking out as many dollars in as many ways as possible. While red-light districts and a few shops remained populated, visitors found much of the world increasingly deserted.

Winters logged in for the first time in years in early 2013. "What felt weird was that it was empty," she said. "It was like going to an abandoned playground in the woods. Whereas even in the early days, when not a lot of people logged in, it always felt full."

In the end, even if it wasn't a traditional game, *Second Life* proved sufficiently game–like to succumb to the same tensions that broke *The Sims Online*. People inevitably came to the world with expectations influenced by games, and looked for something to *do*. Some found pure creation enough, and some were diverted by social interaction, the freedom of having a new identity, or simply the promise of virtual sex. But the economy ultimately wound up filling the gap left by the absence of rules or story, leaving non-commercially minded residents less than satisfied.

Not quite a game, and not quite a success, *Second Life* represented one natural end point of the years in which games had progressively shed their game–like features. The most open high-traffic world yet created, it had demonstrated both freedom's ephemeral, community-driven beauty and its collapse into banality.

As such, the lessons drawn from its rise and fall were mixed. It had flown, it had been beautiful. But it had shown that a world with minimal rules, and without story or other traditional game structures, was difficult to maintain. Pure freedom, while certainly more like real life, was no longer a game.

Epilogue: The Adventure's End

On March 4, 2008, Gary Gygax passed away in Lake Geneva, the same Wisconsin city where the seeds of *Dungeons & Dragons* had been planted thirty-six years before. Just over a year later, in April 2009, *D&D*'s co-creator, Dave Arneson, succumbed to cancer in his home of St. Paul, Minnesota.

Though both were involved in game development and game communities through the end of their lives, it had been years since either had been central to the development of online or virtual worlds. Gygax in particular had been publically dismissive of hack-and-slash RPG computer games, which, he argued, had little to do with the infinitely variable character-, story-, and adventure-driven play he associated with role-playing. Nevertheless, in the course of the preceding decades, the activities of online game players, world builders, and social networkers had evolved into something very much like what Gygax, Arneson, and colleague Dave Megarry had experienced during the course of that long weekend in 1972: an improvisatory, endlessly creative, and—above all—deeply social pastime.

Games, in Gygax and Arneson's view, had never been meant to be played alone. It was an accident of technological history that so much of the fertile post-*D&D* game development had resulted in solitary experiences. By the late 2000s, technology and people's level of comfort with a networked existence had long since caught up with that original basement-room vision.

At the same time, an era in computer gaming was drawing to an end. Richard Garriott and John Carmack had turned their energies toward civilian, private-sector space exploration projects. After the lukewarm reception given his multiplayer *The Sims Online*, Will Wright's next project

had been a kind of logical Sims endpoint, a game called *Spore*, released in 2008, that allowed players to simulate the development of life itself, from single-cell organism to technologically super-advanced beings. Critically praised, the game posted disappointing sales, and Wright—much like Garriott—soon afterward left Electronic Arts.

In some sense, these gaming pioneers' original visions were coming to mass-market maturity without them. The 11-million-plus players of *World of Warcraft*, the rush of mainstream computer users and even staid corporations into the wide-open virtual world of *Second Life*, and the myriad high-profile shooter games and MMOs that followed the pioneers all brought the community elements of *Ultima*, MUDs, and *Quake* clans to vast new audiences.

But this maturity came with a price. Development costs for the biggest computer and video games today have ballooned, easily reaching the $15 million to $25 million mark for graphics-intensive home console games. It has become increasingly difficult for a single person to stamp his or her vision on a work that might require years and teams of several hundred people to create. The result has been a turn toward the safety of sequels as companies seek to build on pre-existing player bases.

This might have been inevitable. All creative movements lose energy, becoming dominated by tradition instead of innovation, while their underlying driving forces—in this case, the potent mixture of technology, storytelling, and the instinct for play—find new outlets. It is far from clear what this will mean for the future of community-driven game worlds.

Nevertheless, the lessons learned in the first era of computer gaming are already shaping the next. One of the most fundamental, as we have tried to illustrate in this book, is that the development of community is inevitable even in seemingly solitary pastimes. We are social creatures, and our games reflect this. Moreover, the way this community develops will in turn be dependent on its technological environment. The limitations of Richard Garriott's Apple II or Richard Bartle's text-only ARPANET connection helped shape early computer gaming experiences. Faster processors, 3D modeling, and broadband Net connections later turned what had once been solitary text or rudimentary graphics into full-fledged, well-populated 3D worlds as richly social as Gygax's tabletop.

The rise of smartphones and tablet computers has represented a first

wave of truly handheld mobile computing. This in turn is helping to drive a new shift, both in the way people form social networks and the way they use them to game. A first generation of simple social games hosted on Facebook and other sites enabled huge numbers to play backgammon or word games, or work together to build farms in social circles faintly reminiscent both of Wright's Sims worlds and *Ultima Online*'s guild structures. Millions of these people were casual gamers, spending a few minutes playing while commuting or during a coffee break, thus changing social practices offline as well as on. The continued spread of mobile devices is today providing opportunities for creative, quick developers who often even work alone, just as the first wave of personal-computer programmers did.

It seems unlikely too that computer games can ever fall back to being regarded as the sole province of socially maladjusted teenage boys. They have been used as military training tools and as educational adjuncts from preschool to universities, have been held up as models for corporate organization, and have even been employed to seek solutions to collective problems as serious as climate change. If we are social animals, then harnessing the social instinct in new ways represents a powerful unexploited resource. Some of the figures with the most experience in creative game design thus see new forms of games as potential tools of economic or intellectual production, not simply as entertainment.

"Playing a game together actually builds up bonds and trust and cooperation," said game developer and Institute for the Future researcher Jane McGonigal, speaking at the 2010 TED conference. McGonigal has done pioneering work with the World Bank Institute and PBS in creating games such as *World without Oil* and *EVOKE*, directing game play toward the accomplishment of specific social ends. "We know that we are optimized, as human beings, to do hard meaningful work. And gamers are willing to work hard all the time, if they're given the right work."

Indeed, what even the most cutting-edge game developers today are doing is as old as folk tales being retold and re-improvised around a fire. The development of a story extends beyond the teller to become a collective experience, thus strengthening the ties of community. Even if there is no story *in* the game, players inevitably create the story *of* the game as they go. These several factors—communal activity, play, storytelling—seem to be basic human activities, inevitably emerging once our most basic needs have

been met. This serves as a reservoir of creative potential with each new wave of technological advancement.

"The id cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality," Gygax said in an interview several years before his death. "For that reason, games tend to answer a lot of deep instinctive things. There are a number of deeply rooted reasons people play games, (and) they haven't changed that much. I don't think it will change at all, because I believe it's hard-wired."

Coda: Would You Like to Play Again?

O kay. The credits have rolled. Even the song titles and the logos for
Panavision or Dolby Digital or whatever else have come and gone. Of
course we have something more for those left in the building. Nobody
in this industry stops before hinting at a sequel.

In 2013, Richard Garriott announced from the stage at Austin's South
by Southwest Interactive conference that he was getting back into the world-
building business. After four decades doing game design, Garriott's track
record for creating popular worlds was undeniable. Yet just as undeniable
was his apparent inability to work with some of the biggest game companies
in the industry. Throughout the years, he'd had public breakups with Sierra
Online, Electronic Arts, and, most recently, Korea's NCSOFT.

His most recent split between NCSOFT and Destination Games, the
company he'd founded when he left Electronic Arts' Origin Systems, was the
bloodiest yet. After the tumultuous development process and comparative
flop of *Tabula Rasa*, he decided to take a break from development. In 2008
he used a large chunk of his gaming fortune to hitch a ride into outer space
with the Russian space program, spending twelve days on the International
Space Station before returning to Earth. In many ways the trip seemed
to be a neatly packaged end to Richard's design and development career.
He'd grown up near NASA with an astronaut father, in an environment
that inspired his fascination with games. Four decades later, he'd become a
cosmonaut because of those games.

As Richard sat in quarantine after returning from orbit, NCSOFT
executives notified him that he no longer worked for their company. A fight
erupted. Garriott claimed he had been fired, while NCSOFT said he'd left

voluntarily. At stake was a rather large chunk of money tied up in stock options. Garriott would eventually win two judgments—and $32 million—from NCSOFT when litigation was finally settled in 2011, but even then, it was difficult to imagine a future for him back in the massively multiplayer game-development ecosphere.

Instead of trying to push his way back into the corporate game-design world, he decided to go directly to the players, much as he'd done during the original *Ultima Online* beta tests. He'd already watched as more than thirty-four thousand people using Kickstarter gave one of his former developers, Chris Roberts, $2.1 million in less than two months for *Star Citizen*. In the next year, Roberts would raise a total of $24 million using a basic crowdfunding plug-in for the game's WordPress Web site.

On March 8, 2013, Richard launched a Kickstarter project with the hopes of raising $1 million to develop *Lord British's Shroud of the Avatar*, a game that was quite clearly the spiritual progeny of both *Ultima* and *Tabula Rasa*. As described by him in various blog posts and discussions, the game would adhere to a set of familiar rules: It would be a large and dynamic world, players would be able to craft their own stories or participate in directed adventures, everything in the world would be usable, and players would have the freedom to create a world they wanted.

"Since my original trilogy of trilogies is completed, we're building a brave new world to explore, new challenges to conquer, new ethical parables to test your virtues, and I as Lord British will be with you in the game. Together we will forge this new world," Richard said in the Kickstarter video introducing the project.

When fundraising ended on April 7, Richard had substantially exceeded his initial goal, raising $1.9 million from more than twenty-two thousand backers. By summer's end, he'd begun assembling a familiar cast of characters, including former *Ultima Online* producer Starr Long.

Much about the project remains in doubt. But it is a striking beginning to an unlikely comeback story, and one that returns the future of massively multiplayer role-playing games, virtual worlds, and online communities to the hands that helped birth gaming's communal revolution.

What happens in this sequel, quite appropriately, will ultimately be up to the players themselves.