Ultima and World-Building in the Computer Role-Playing Game

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Acknowledgements

This project first began as a conversation between two graduate students on a patio at the University of Texas at Austin in 2007 following the founding of the Videogame Archive at the Briscoe Center for American History. During a moment of the world being remade, it's perhaps fitting to have spent time thinking and writing about the practices of fictional world-building. The upheaval of the recent past that resonates into the present—a moment marked by the accelerating effects of climate change, a global pandemic, and the collective desire for overdue social justice reforms—doesn't figure explicitly in the pages that follow. Our account is a more modest one. It is about video game authorship, design, storytelling, and a community of play and players spanning forty-plus years. But this project—which began after slogging through mud with drinks in hand while exploring the grounds of Britannia Manor during a fundraiser for Briscoe's Videogame Archive, and which feels like another lifetime ago—is coming to fruition during a time when global crises challenge us to reimagine the possible. This book is certainly a different one than the two students on that patio would have written had things turned out

otherwise. Hopefully, that's for the best. We have, over the past decade, benefited tremendously from the support and contributions of many people and institutions. If this book tells a compelling cultural history of an influential computer game, the series that followed, and its artists, it is to their collective credit. As always, the mistakes remain ours alone.

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Finally, there'd be no *Ultima* book without *Ultima*. We thank Richard "Lord British" Garriott, the extended Garriott family, his collaborators at Origin Systems, and the legions of fans who've sustained the *Ultima* universe over the years.

In closing, we dedicate this book to our children and to our students who will need the resolve to reimagine the worlds that they've inherited, and the inspiration to imagine the ones they've yet to build. We're both trying, we promise, to leave this place better than we found it. We hope you'll do the same.

Foreword

During their final years, Origin System's tagline was "We create worlds," and the most noted of these were, of course, the *Ultima* series of computer games. At the time, they represented a role-playing game experience that combined the complexity and detailed narrative of text adventures with the visual elements of graphical adventure games, a tile-based world that extended far off-screen, where unknown encounters awaited the eager player. *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) was popular in those days, and influenced role-playing games in multiple media, with its grid-based worlds and mathematical combat and reward systems. There were other computer games attempting to do the same sort of thing, but the *Ultima* games continually set a high standard to be followed, and represented the peak of a certain type of adventure gaming experience, especially in the 1980s.

Ultima and World-Building in the Computer Role-Playing Game by Carly A. Kocurek and Matthew Thomas Payne is a succinct and fun exploration of the history and legacy of the *Ultima* games, and I am very glad to see it finally get into print. Overlapping with two areas of my own interests, imaginary worlds and video games, the book is

a fine introduction to the game, its author Richard Garriott (a.k.a. Lord British), the world of the game—or, rather, worlds, since *Ultima*'s world was reinvented more than once—and the game series' fortunes and legacy over time. A comparison of all the games reveals how their design changed over time, from simple, flat 2-D graphics (arranged very noticeably on an underlying grid) to increasingly detailed isometric graphics seen in an overhead perspective, to even intricate open worlds seen in a first-person perspective. Overall, it is an interesting series to follow through video game history.

Whether you're familiar with *Ultima* or not, *Ultima and World-Building in the Computer Role-Playing Game* is definitely worth reading. Kocurek and Payne clearly enjoy the games, as well as their role as tour guides, taking readers through various aspects of the series' history and realms, and providing a context for the development of *Ultima* not just as a game series but as an imaginary world and a media franchise. Their combined enthusiasm is infectious and makes the book a pleasure to read. Enjoy!

Mark J.P. Wolf
July 1, 2023

INTRODUCTION

Atari's *Adventure* (1980), a console video game inspired by the text-based computer game *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther 1976), was believed for many years to contain the first video game "Easter egg," an inside joke or message squirreled away within a game's interface or gamespace. In 2004 an Easter egg was discovered in the Fairchild Channel F's *Video Whizball*, released in 1978. And in 2017 an Easter egg was found in Atari's arcade game *Starship 1* from 1977, giving it a strong claim to being the first such hidden treasure (Thompson 2017). What is fascinating about these examples is what they have in common. When uncovered, these hidden messages read simply: "Created by Warren Robinett" in the case of *Adventure*; "Reid-Selth" in *Video Whizball*; and "Hi Ron!" in *Starship 1*. These are the names of the games' programmers. In other words, the first video game Easter eggs address authorship. Through them, game developers laid claim to their programming and design labor. Because early console and arcade games rarely featured credits in the games themselves, on their box or cabinet art, or in the instruction manuals—indeed such uncredited work was a major catalyst for the creative exodus from Atari in the

early 1980s (Donovan 2010)—designers like Warren Robinett, Bradley Reid-Selth, and Ron Milner devised ingenious methods for inserting their names into their creations.

The commercial landscape was considerably less developed for computer game production at this time. The computer game market had fewer barriers to entry than the console market. An array of modest newsletters and magazines supported a nascent retail distribution network, and aspiring game creators could convince store owners to sell their work on shelves or entice magazine readers to mail-order their homemade titles. Computer game designers were thus more often an immediate and integral part of how these titles were understood by the public. Consider, for example, the most popular commercial PC games from the early years of home computing and the prominent place their designers continue to hold in gaming memory: Roberta Williams and *King's Quest* (Sierra On-line 1984); Al Lowe and *Leisure Suit Larry* (Sierra On-line 1987); Peter Molyneux and *Populous* (Bullfrog 1989); Will Wright and *Sim City* (Maxis 1989); Tom Hall and *Commander Keen* (id Software 1990); Sid Meier and *Civilization* (Microprose 1991); and, of course, Richard Garriott and *Ultima* (California Pacific Computer Company 1981).[1]

Created for the Apple II computer in 1980 and distributed in 1981 by California Pacific Computer Company, *Ultima* is considered by critics, historians, and fans to be one of the most influential titles in video game history. In fact, in a 2012 piece impressively titled, "*Ultima*: Most. Important. Game Series. Ever.," games journalist Rowan Kaiser contends that the *Ultima* series regularly introduced gameplay and design innovations that are now common elements to the role-playing genre: open-world gaming, morality, winding narratives, and interface conventions, to name but a few. Yet, even the very first *Ultima* grants the player a tremendous range of freedom: character creation options, the buying and selling of items, minor and major quests, dungeon crawling, and large world exploration. Though

accurate, this accounting remains incomplete. Indeed, one of *Ultima*'s greatest innovations, and one that lasts to this day, is Richard Garriott himself; that is, Richard-Garriott-as-Lord-British. The *Ultima* series contains Garriott not as some elusive Easter egg waiting to be discovered, but as the bold and brash "Lord British," a major character in the series' fictional worlds of Sosaria and Britannia.[2] Garriott is one of the few game designers to be primarily associated with a single series throughout his career—a career nearly as long as the computer game industry itself. He is likewise one of the few designers to regularly appear in his own games.

Garriott is game designer, dungeon master, and non-player character. His is a production hyphenate that rivals that of the Hollywood writer-director or the television showrunner (see Figure 0.1). In this book, we argue that much of *Ultima*'s status in computer and video

Figure 0.1: Richard Garriott at the 2018 Games Developer Conference (GDC) in San Francisco, California. Image Credit: Trish Tunney and Official GDC. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Richard_Garriott_GDC_2018.jpg

game history is owed directly to how Garriott's intertwining identities as a flesh-and-blood designer and as a virtual monarch have been fused over time into a single, transdimensional persona.

But the story of *Ultima* is more than the story of Richard Garriott or even Richard-Garriott-as-Lord-British and his celebrated authorship over four-plus decades. The initial game and the series that would bear its name is a conceptually rich case study for understanding what analyses of individual games-as-texts can yield for researchers, both because it invites challenging questions about the locus of game authorship *and* because of its lasting contributions to the computer role-playing game (CRPG) genre.

In *Building Imaginary Worlds*, Mark J. P. Wolf (2012) argues that scholars have largely ignored world-building as a creative practice and have not sufficiently attended to fictional worlds as discrete objects of study. Instead, when critics have discussed imaginary worlds—be they in novels, films, comics, or across media as with transmedia properties—they've done so from more traditional interpretive perspectives, including narrative and genre analyses, adaptation studies, and medium-specific approaches to media. Wolf calls on scholars to examine "the history of their development and their structures, as well as other areas like internarrative construction, transmedial growth and adaptation, self-reflexivity, and authorship" (12). Our book understands *Ultima*'s world-building from multiple angles, including the formative biographical experiences that inspired Garriott to take up game design (Chapter 1); those technical and cultural preconditions for the first *Ultima*'s development (Chapter 2); the textual choices that give *Ultima*'s Sosaria its distinctive character (Chapter 3); how paratextual objects and packaging support the series' on-screen worlds (Chapter 4); and the contextual practices of a player community to sustain a franchise's fictional worlds for decades (Chapter 5). The progression of the chapters—from Garriott's biography and his creative inspirations to the ways in which players would inhabit and

eventually maintain the fictional realms created by Origin Systems—highlights the multiple points of connection between authorship and world-building.

Ultima: An Iconic Game in an Influential Series

The *Ultima* series is one of the longest running and most successful game franchises in the history of computer games. The first commercial release in the series, *Akalabeth: World of Doom* (California Pacific Computer Company 1980), often called *Ultima 0* by fans, laid the groundwork for the first game to bear the name of the famed series, *Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness*.[3] The runaway success of the initial *Ultima*s launched Garriott's career and established his software development company, Origin Systems, Inc. as a major design studio during the 1980s and 1990s.

Broadly conceived as open-world fantasy adventures, *Ultima*'s gameplay mechanics and storytelling techniques—innovations that evolved with each sequel—helped establish the de facto design blueprint for future computer and console-based role-playing games (RPGs). In fact, during the 1980s and 1990s, the name *Ultima* was synonymous with fantasy gaming, as Garriott and Origin parlayed their achievements into creating a series that would span ten-plus single-player installments and culminate with *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems 1997), a title that defined the first generation of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) genre.[4]

The *Ultima* series has numerous design accolades and claims to influence. Both individual installments and the series as a whole regularly appear on "best of" and "most influential" games lists. *Time* magazine included *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (Origin Systems 1985) in a 2012 list of the 100 greatest video games (Peckham 2012). Matt Peckham praised the game lamenting, "few games since have

managed or even tried to emulate its uniquely contemplative quest vibe." In a celebratory article noting the 30th anniversary of *Ultima III: Exodus* (Origin Systems 1983), Jeremy Parish claims that while *Ultima IV* is perhaps rightfully better remembered, much of what makes *IV* so exceptional is built on the design groundwork of *III*, and calls that game the place "whence RPGs came forth" (2013).

Ultima's influence on the RPG genre and on the broader game industry is often tied to its consistent technological and stylistic innovation. Computer game historian Matt Barton cites *Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness* as having employed the first use of tiled graphics in a computer role-playing game (2007; 2008). Rowan Kaiser (2012) sings the praises of the series' profound shaping of multiple games and genres, noting:

> If you're playing an open-world game, you're dealing with *Ultima*. If you're playing a massively multiplayer game, you're dealing with *Ultima*. If you're playing a game with a morality system, *Ultima*. Even something as simple as three-dimensional graphics—either in perspective or overall representation—have [*sic*] ties to *Ultima*.

Kaiser organizes the series' influence into several areas, recognizing the importance of *Ultima* for open-world gaming, morality systems, and narrative styles. In this last category, *Ultima* is particularly groundbreaking for including conversations with non-player characters as a key aspect of its gameplay. The series also featured some of the first games optimized for mouse-based gameplay. While many remember the design contributions of individual titles—be it the four-person party in *Ultima III*, the morality system of *Ultima IV*, or the runic alphabet of *Ultima V* (1988) to name a few—what the chorus of praise makes clear is that its legacy is larger than the contributions of any single game, and it is more than a checklist of technical achievements.

The first *Ultima* presents game historians and fans with a compelling, Janus-like moment in the development of computer games—one that looks simultaneously backward to tabletop gaming and forward to as yet unrealized promises of computational adventuring. On the one hand, the first two games (*Akalabeth* and *Ultima I*) seemed like inevitable outgrowths of the analog gaming practices preceding them. According to journalist David Kushner (2008), in designing *Ultima I*, Garriott drew directly on his love of fantasy fiction like *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1954) and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Lewis 1950–56), as well as on his passion for tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*; Gygax and Arneson 1974). His affinity for science fiction and interest in drawing from that genre's tropes also infused the series with an air of science fantasy, even as it was and is widely understood as a fantasy title (Malmgren 1988). But while Garriott drew on established popular culture, he wedded the core concepts of tabletop gaming to the nascent possibilities of home computing. In his *Wired* piece about *D&D*, David Kushner (2008) notes:

> *D&D* allowed people to build a numerical representation of themselves, a numerical representation of a monster, a numerical representation of how a character and monsters could interact. If there had never been *D&D*, computer games would be more like simple arcade games, like *Pac-Man* and *Pong*.

In using the computer to automate *D&D*'s combat rules and to manage character details like stats and inventory, while providing (for the time) a relatively rich multimedia experience, Garriott created a powerful role-playing framework that seemingly defied the limitations of the available hardware. Moreover, whereas many other computer games relied on abstraction, *Ultima* presented an immersive world that combined screen graphics, narrative prose, and sound alongside physical, packaged materials supporting the on-screen adventure. Similar to the

magical moongates which first appear in *Ultima II: The Revenge of the Enchantress* (Sierra On-line 1982), Garriott's worlds invited players to step through them and to lose themselves in new realms for days, weeks, months, and years at a time.

Overview

This book is neither a straightforward, descriptive history of the first *Ultima* title, nor is it a celebration of a series that has produced some of gaming's most iconic titles. Rather, it emphasizes *Ultima*'s historical significance as a mediated role-playing experience and its continued relevance to game designers and players, considering it as a key text in a broader lineage of computer games, tabletop role-playing games, and of gaming culture itself. To best narrate and document *Ultima*'s lasting cultural legacy, we draw extensively on a variety of primary and secondary sources, including: trade and popular press records, fan-produced materials, scholarly criticism, personal correspondences, our own gameplay experiences, and archival materials—many of which were donated to the University of Texas at Austin's Videogame Archive by Richard Garriott himself. As of this book's publication, Garriott's first computer game is over 40 years old, and the last of the series, Origin Systems' *Ultima IX: Ascension* is over 20 years old. Despite their age, these games remain cornerstones of the gaming landscape and they continue to shape titles across genres including popular MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004–present), sandbox action-adventure series like *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games 1997–present) and *Fallout* (Interplay Entertainment 1997–2004; Bethesda Softworks 2004–present), and even casual social media and freemium titles such as *Farmville* (Zynga 2009) and *Candy Crush Saga* (King 2012) which, like *Ultima Online*, play with computational and human networks (Osborne 2012).

Each chapter considers a different facet of *Ultima*'s production history and its cultural relevance. We begin by examining how Garriott's multifaceted identity as Lord British informs our understanding of *Ultima*'s origins in particular and computer game authorship generally. From this starting point, we then analyze the series from multiple thematic angles: examining Garriott's formative exposure to *Dungeons & Dragons* and his initial experiments in game design that led the way to the creation of *Akalabeth* and *Ultima I*; the unique blend of gameplay mechanisms and narrative elements that comprised the first open-world *Ultima* title; the series' use of packaging and other physical items to expand its world-building; and fan practices in and around the series that maintained its world- and community-building efforts. This multipronged approach introduces readers to the *Ultima* experience while considering it from diverse perspectives, illustrating the extent to which the franchise functions as a cohesive, game-centered transmedia work, while also making a compelling case for its status as a landmark computer game and series.

Chapter 1: Becoming Lord British

In most tabletop RPGs, game referees (or "dungeon masters" in *D&D*'s parlance) have significant power in shaping the game's narrative world. By the time Garriott developed his first proto-computer games in 1979, he was already an experienced tabletop dungeon master. That Garriott's first commercial computer game drew directly on the fantasy genre conventions he had already worked with is unsurprising. Serving as an analog game master provided practical, first-hand experience in game design and shaped the creation of *Akalabeth* and *Ultima I*.

This chapter considers how Garriott's early notoriety as Lord British contributes to our understanding of computer game authorship.

Figures 0.2 and 0.3: Lord British is literally the "coin of the realm" in these pressed quarters which are part of a multisite geocache prize that ends near Garriott's property in Austin, Texas. Image credit: Carly A. Kocurek.

Although his cult of personality was clearly an asset for himself and for Origin Systems, the typical "creative genius" narrative inadvertently overshadows the contributions of those around him. Garriott's burgeoning celebrity represents a critical juncture where a computer game designer first donned the mantle as a creative auteur in an emerging entertainment industry searching for artists and cultural legitimacy (see Figures 0.2 and 0.3).

Chapter 2: The Road to *Ultima*

Dungeons & Dragons became a cultural phenomenon on its release in 1974. In its first 30 years, the role-playing game had attracted over twenty million players and topped $1 billion (U.S.) in sales, with its longevity being owed in large part to the game's novel play mechanics (Waters 2004). Most notably, the game departs from traditional, tabletop war games by assigning each player a specific character to play rather than an army or group of characters. This performative element has had long-lasting effects and is arguably *the* defining characteristic of the role-playing experience—from live-action role-playing events to mediated video games.

This chapter traces the historical lineage between *D&D* and the computer role-playing game, and places *Ultima* in the context of 1970s RPG culture. In interviews, Garriott frequently cites *D&D* as being extraordinarily formative to his career in game design. He was an early *D&D* devotee, with the weekly play sessions he organized drawing dozens of his schoolmates and neighbors to his parents' home. The teen developed his first attempt at combining computers and tabletop role-playing adventures through a high school independent study course. Working on his school's programmed data processor (PDP)-powered teletype machine, he authored 28 different dungeon crawls (*DND1*, *DND2*, *DND3*, through *DND28*). His final prototype would find its way onto an Apple II in 1980 under the title *Akalabeth: World*

of Doom. By placing *Akalabeth* and *Ultima I* in the historical context of tabletop gaming and fantasy fiction, this chapter makes an argument for considering the ties between computer RPGs and their analog predecessors, as well as the iterative steps Garriott took to remediate the tabletop experience to the computer screen.

Chapter 3: The World of *Ultima*

Video game critics and scholars often point to *Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness* as being one of the most influential titles in the history of CRPGs because it includes activities integral to that experience: character creation, buying and selling items, completing minor and major quests, dungeon crawling, and open-world exploration. While Garriott's classic was not the first to translate the storytelling and play mechanics of paper-and-pencil games to the computer—indeed, one can point to important predecessors like Will Crowther's *Adventure*, Infocom's *Zork* (1977), or even Garriott's own *Akalabeth*—*Ultima*'s intuitive user interface made the genre's gameplay conventions accessible to broader populations and sold the industry on the commercial viability of the CRPG.

And yet, for all of its famed influence on the RPG, *Ultima* is also a profoundly experimental title—a point that is often missed *precisely* because of its lauded centrality to the genre's origins. This chapter details how *Ultima* blends elements of high fantasy sword fighting with science fiction time traveling; mixes gameplay perspectives of first-person dungeon crawling and overhead world exploration; merges turn-based and arcade-style combat; and how it combines large, carefully designed world maps with randomly-generated labyrinths. In short, while exploring the world of Sosaria as "the Stranger," the player discovers that *Ultima* is itself a strange experiment in game design and storytelling. Ironically, *Ultima* looks particularly odd in retrospect because of how calcified role-playing conventions have

become in the decades since its release—conventions that were established, in large part, by the *Ultima* series. This chapter conducts a close textual analysis of the first *Ultima* to understand how Garriott's design choices brought Sosaria to life. By scrutinizing the game's narrative, rules, and representational choices we can better understand how Garriott experimented with transporting players to a strange new land in a strange new medium.

Chapter 4: *Ultima* in the World

One of the more interesting aspects of the packaging and marketing of the *Ultima* series was the inclusion of so-called "feelies"—small props or artifacts that were included in game boxes. The computer game company Infocom coined the term feelies, but it was not alone in distributing them. Beginning with *Ultima II*, feelies were a highly recognizable part of the series. While they were not necessarily integrated into the gameplay, feelies derived from the game world and provided a tangible extension of it. Many *Ultima* titles included cloth maps, and some incorporated more idiosyncratic items like coins, a metal ankh, and books of spells.

This chapter addresses the marketing and packaging of *Ultima* titles, using feelies, packaging, and manual design as a springboard for considering the ways materials external to the game shape player experiences. For example, package artwork extends the graphical capabilities of computer games by providing a richer representation of what characters and settings "really" look like, implying to some extent that the on-screen graphics are more symbolic than representational. This process is particularly interesting in the case of CRPGs as they ask players to step into the game world in a material way; objects like feelies facilitate immersion, allowing game developers to extend the games' world-building efforts well beyond the screen, even as they draw attention to the incommensurable differences between

the material and the virtual. Rather than offering commentary on the purported divide between the "real" and the "virtual," this chapter considers how packaging and marketing offer a multimodal threshold that tie together in- and out-of-game experiences while extending the game's textual boundaries.

Chapter 5: *Ultima* Ever After

As feelies and marketing materials extended the scope of the game world experience, so too did the contributions of *Ultima*'s player community. From the first iteration of *Ultima*, the game has inspired creative works and documentary efforts among its player community. These efforts are sometimes aimed at aiding other players, as in the case of game transcripts and other archival materials, and sometimes they contribute to broader world-building and preservation.

In this final chapter, we argue that fan-generated texts and documentary projects, and even player communities, extend the "*Ultima* experience" by encouraging others to participate in the preservation and completion of the games. Here, as in other transformative works, fan creations raise interesting questions about authorship and community. Today, *Ultima* exists for most as a kind of historical text—and indeed, it is stored in archives and is meticulously documented by journalists, researchers, and fans. But for its devoted players, the games survive as living texts. In *Ultima*, we see what it might look like for games to circulate like classic literature with players forming communities, creating supplementary works, and hosting live events. As management of fan communities has become a key strategy of game companies, *Ultima*'s devotees present fandom largely outside corporate intervention—or even interest. At its initial release, the first *Ultima* belonged to its developers and publishers, but today, this series belongs equally to its fans.

The *Ultima* series represents historical artifacts and an extensive corpus of games deeply connected to a community of players. In this book, we examine both the authorial act of world-building and distributed acts of community-making, not only because each are compelling practices in their own right, but because neither exists independently of the other. Simply put, *Ultima* would not have developed into a long-standing gaming phenomenon had it not been for Richard Garriott and the design team at Origin Systems working to reinvent their flagship CRPG experience year after year. Similarly, we wouldn't be discussing *Ultima* today had its legions of players and fans not spent countless hours exploring its virtual realms and reimagining it in the years since. *Ultima I* and the series that bears its name are landmark moments in the development of the computer RPG due to their gameplay innovations and for what they showcase about different types of ludic authorship. This book tracks *Ultima*'s place in the evolutionary development from questing alone to questing together to tease out the complexities of game authorship as it relates to producing, popularizing, and preserving a legendary fantasy world.

CHAPTER 1
Becoming Lord British

Introduction: What's in a Name?

The analytic utility of considering Richard Garriott not simply as a designer but as a transdimensional being—Garriott-as-Lord British—illuminates the multiple discursive layers of authorship bound up in *Ultima* where game design and transmedia character creation intersect. On one level, and as we discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2, *Ultima* represents Garriott's remediation of a tabletop game system like *Dungeons and Dragons* for the computer. He is a dungeon master turned game designer turned salesman who creates a fantasy world in the BASIC programming language and then packages 5.25″ floppy disks into Ziploc bags containing their photocopied instructions. But Garriott also exists as a tiny, pixelated Lord British on the screen—as lines of code—within Sosaria and as words and images in the instruction manuals, guiding the player's fantastic quests. Meaning, rather than hiding his labor surreptitiously as was the case with the programmers of early console games, Garriott-as-Lord British foregrounds himself as authoring and, indeed, authorizing *Ultima*'s unique role-playing

experience. Second, Garriott-as-Lord British sets the stage for thinking of computer game designers as computational auteurs before such a category existed in popular discourse. (It bears noting, however, that there was a palpable desire in the computer publications and fan magazines for such a label even at that nascent moment in its history.) Finally, this transmedia character bridges the eventual spate of sequels that bear the name *Ultima*, branding Garriott's future cultural productions as adventures created and approved by his highness Lord British.

Auteurism, authorization, and authenticity are more than alliterative signposts organizing this chapter. These keywords are essential for appreciating how the contours of a virtual world come into being, and how a narrative game space (in this case Sosaria and later Britannia) permits, invites, or forecloses certain play practices. Posed differently, this chapter not only asks questions about a major character in a video game, but is also interested in a video game's character. In the case of *Ultima*, the games are inextricably linked to Garriott, whose presence as the game's ostensible author and as an in-game character is its own kind of framing. Lord British is not *exactly* Garriott, and Garriott is not *exactly* the author, but the precise naming of Garriott/British is less important than the fact that his hybrid identity functions as a core part of the designed experience. Attending carefully to the history of this unique persona allows us to appreciate how the deliberate and careful cultivation of a transludic alter ego—one that is developed over the course of *thirty-plus years*—constitutes a foundational authorial gesture and stylistic presentation of self, since it is this character-auteur who frames and guides our explorations of Sosaria, Britannia, and all-things *Ultima*.

Lord British's Origin Story

The mythologizing of Garriott as a techno-wunderkind turned entrepreneur begins mere days into his first commercial venture. His origin story as an artisanal game designer who cut his proverbial teeth on

his high school's teletype machine has long been a central component of his personal legend and of industry lore, having been reprinted in game history books, newspaper articles, and magazine interviews. While it is necessary to recite this well-worn narrative presently, it bears underscoring that this genre of success story is hardly novel to Garriott, the computer game industry, or to the history of media technology for that matter. New and emergent media platforms have long offered spaces where (usually) male, (usually) white, (usually) straight adolescents could test their technical and economic acumen, and by extension their masculinity, through the mastery of machinery—be they teens playing in arcades in the 1970s and 1980s as chronicled by Carly Kocurek (2015) in *Coin-Operated Americans*, boy-inventors tinkering with wireless radio technologies as in Susan Douglas's (1987) *Inventing American Broadcasting 1899–1922*, or young men competing for esports tournament dollars in T.L. Taylor's (2012) *Raising the Stakes*. What these disparate cases, including Garriott's own story, across eras have in common is that play and experimentation are the processes by which amateur tinkerers "level up" into the ranks of the professional class.

Lord British's story begins appropriately enough in Cambridge, England where Richard Garriott was born to American parents Owen and Helen on July 4, 1961. Richard was the couple's third child—behind Randall and Robert, and before Linda—all of whom were reared for the most part outside of Houston, Texas in the town of Nassau Bay. Owen Garriott was a NASA scientist and astronaut who served on several space missions, including the record-breaking 60-day Skylab 3 mission. Richard's mother, Helen Garriott, was an accomplished artist who specialized in painting and ceramics. In high school, young Garriott became fascinated with computer programming, which he attributes to his father's interest in science and technology, as well as fantasy role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*) and *Tunnels and Trolls* (Flying Buffalo 1975), which he attributes to his mother's creative spirit. He threw himself into Tolkien's *The Lord of*

the Rings and C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* after being introduced to the series in 1974.

Tolkien and Lewis were, notably, both part of the Inklings, a group of Oxford authors and academics, all white men, who met regularly to share their writing. As Emma Vossen and other researchers like Helen Young have argued, the "politics of exclusion" both of the Inklings and of the members' most famous works, including *The Lord of the Rings*, have been reproduced and remediated for decades in part by defining what fantasy media looks like (Vossen 2020; Young 2015). While Tolkien, Lewis, and their compatriots deliberately excluded women from their chummy writing circle, they also excluded them or at least limited them in their written works. The fraught gender and racial politics of Tolkien's and Lewis's worlds have been considered at length by scholars, but they remain foundational texts for fantasy literature and, in turn, other fantasy media, including video games (Rearick 2004; Stuart 2022; Young 2015; Lavezzo 2021). In short: fantasy worlds largely look like worlds built for the enjoyment of white, straight men, and individual creators can unintentionally replicate those fraught racial and gender politics. Avoiding them requires deliberate disruption and an intentional break from mainstream fantasy narratives and aesthetics. Role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* often reinscribe these problematic representations (Stang and Trammell 2020; Trammell 2016). And, while the games have evolved over time, these earlier texts established an exclusionary politics of play heritage that persists to this day (Pinkston 2019; Trammell 2023). This isn't to say that those who enjoyed these texts necessarily came to them because of their exclusionary values, but rather to point out that white young men like Garriott were likely to find them welcoming and were the assumed audience.

A few important things came into focus for Garriott during the summer of 1977, his sophomore year of high school. First, he acquired the handle "British" while attending a computer programming camp at the University of Oklahoma. As legend has it, Garriott's fellow

camp-goers thought they detected a British accent when the youngster introduced himself with a "Hello" instead of the more informal "Hi." Garriott was so taken with the mistake, given his birthplace and his love of fantasy lore, that he readily adopted the pseudonym in various *Dungeons and Dragons* campaigns and adventures. Second, the combination of computer programming during the day and role-playing at night led to the critical realization that computers could expedite the calculations that often dominate tabletop gaming campaigns. Garriott now had a technical and creative challenge: how to bring fantasy gaming to the personal computer.[1]

After completing the only programming class offered at Clear Creek High School in Nassau Bay, Texas, Garriott and two classmates successfully proposed self-directed independent studies where they could teach themselves to code in the BASIC programming language. During these independent studies, Garriott wrote his *Dungeons & Dragons*-inspired adventures on the school's PDP-11-powered teletype machine. The high school's underutilized technology displayed its computational results out on a roll of paper tape in lieu of a monitor. This means that there were no traditional screen graphics to speak of in Garriott's initial "games." Instead, alphanumeric characters represented their elements: an "A" was a giant ant, a "$" was a treasure chest, and so on (Garriott 2013). The painstakingly iterative process of coding and printing and coding and printing taught Garriott programming skills and the value of knowing hardware limitations—a lesson that figures prominently in his design ethos to this day. This iterative design work also resulted in his first series of proto-computer games, titled *DND1*, *DND2*, *DND3,* all the way up to *DND28*, which are described in detail in Chapter 2.

Garriott brought his interest in computer game design with him to the University of Texas at Austin, where he enrolled during the fall of 1979. Following his freshman year, he worked a summer retail job at the Clear Lake City ComputerLand store near his parents' home.[2]

There, Garriott was encouraged by his boss and store owner John Mayer to sell his most recent creation, *DND28b*. Although *DND28b* had, like all its homebrewed predecessors, been created for his personal enjoyment and that of his friends, Mayer thought it could stand alongside other titles in the store. Garriott saved the $200 needed to self-publish the game—a considerable sum for a teenager working retail in the summer of 1980 (see Figure 1.1).[3] This initial investment

Figure 1.1: An original *Akalabeth* computer disk featuring Richard Garriott's name. Image credit: Richard Garriott papers, box number: 2009–241/4. Packaging for *Akalabeth: World of Doom*. Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

went towards buying blank 5.25″ floppy disks, creating a stack of photocopied instructions, and purchasing Ziploc bags, the standard DIY packaging materials at the time. Garriott also used this opportunity to retitle *DND28b* as *Akalabeth: World of Doom* (1980), borrowing a name from Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* (1977). Notably, Garriott also added the subtitle, "beyond adventure lies AKALABETH," a reference to Will Crowther's and Don Woods's influential 1976 *Colossal Cave Adventure* (aka *Adventure*, itself influenced by Tolkien's work). Not wanting to overextend himself financially, Garriott limited the initial duplication run to a modest 16 copies (TANK 2006). Sporting original artwork by his mother, five copies of the game were sold during the first week, and only an estimated dozen titles bearing Garriott's given name ever left the ComputerLand store (Addams 1992, 8) (see Figure 1.2). This was a typical if inauspicious beginning for the young game designer. The story would be noticeably different for Lord British, however.

Without Garriott's knowledge, Mayer mailed a copy of *Akalabeth* to California Pacific Computer Company.[4] This software firm was best known for publishing Bill Budge's computer games ("Akalabeth," 2013); Budge would later gain fame for *Raster Blaster* (BudgeCo 1981) and *Pinball Construction Set* (BudgeCo 1983). Al Remmers, the founder of California Pacific, wanted *Akalabeth* and wasted no time reaching out to Garriott. As luck would have it, California Pacific's professional affiliation with Budge was a huge plus for young Garriott, who saw Budge as an unofficial mentor (Addams 1992), at one point calling him "*the* computer game author" (Ferrell 1989, 17, emphasis original).[5] Remmers flew Garriott out to California under the watchful eyes of his parents and extended a deal. Garriott signed it. *Akalabeth* went on to sell over 30,000 copies, with the teen pocketing about $5 per copy, or $150,000 in all.[6]

When he returned to university for his sophomore year in the fall of 1980, Garriott officially majored in electrical engineering

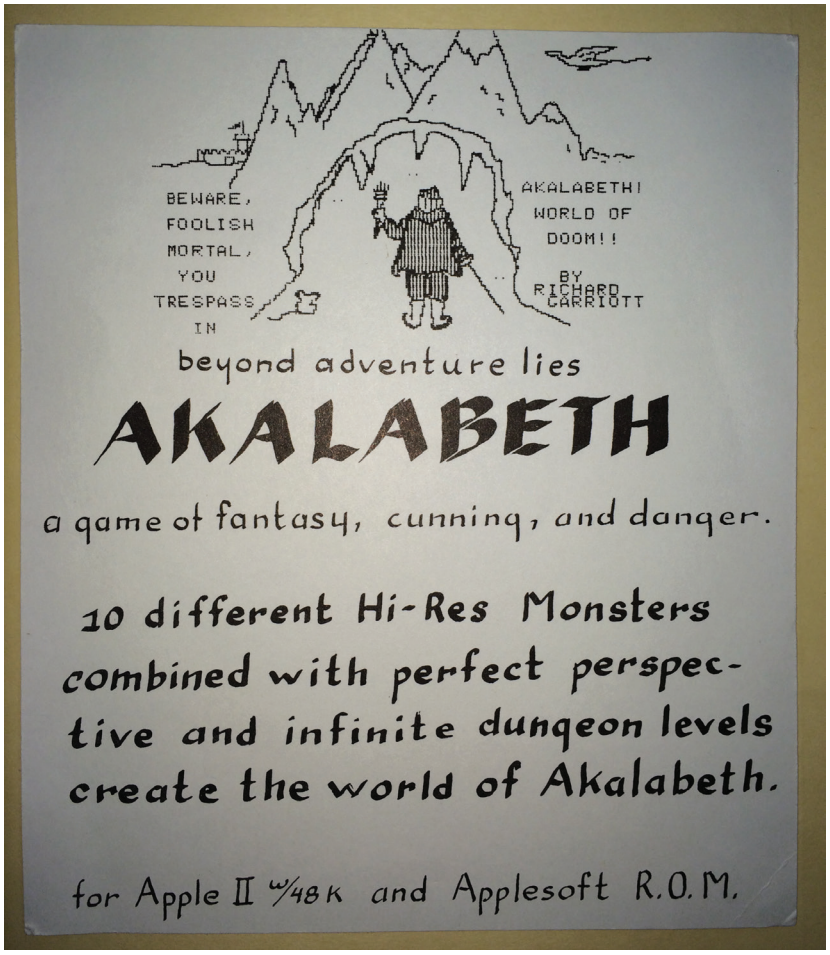


Figure 1.2: This card insert was packaged with the first run of *Akalabeth* computer game disks. It too listed Richard Garriott, and not Lord British, as its creator. Image credit: Richard Garriott papers, box number: 2009–241/4. Packaging for *Akalabeth: World of Doom*. Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

(Associated Press 1987, 9, section 3). Unofficially, he majored in subjects closer to *Akalabeth*'s dungeons. He joined both the school's fencing team and the Society for Creative Anachronism, a fantasy-oriented role-playing student organization. Garriott credits the latter group as being particularly influential and supportive during this formative period. Indeed, a number of his classmates would join Garriott a few years later in dressing up in medieval attire when Lord British sold his games at computer conventions (Lynch 1990). Garriott completed *Ultima* during his second year at the University of Texas.[7] The game was an unqualified success, quickly selling over 50,000 copies. This number is all the more remarkable considering that Apple had only sold 300,000 units of the Apple II by 1981 (McCracken 2012). In other words, approximately one in six Apple II owners had their own 5.25″ portal to Lord British's Sosaria. Garriott quickly earned more money than the rest of his family combined, and in 1982 during his junior year of college (after he had published *Ultima*), he transferred to the University of Houston, only to later withdraw in 1983 to pursue full-time computer game production (Ellison 1984; Addams 1992, 24).

Techno-Auteur: Lord British-as-Wunderkind

Variations of this origin story are recounted again and again in magazine interviews and professional profiles published in the 1980s. Most of the standard narrative ingredients—his passion for tabletop and live-action role-playing games, the self-taught programing skills, a fascination with immersive and expansive fantasy universes, and a budding entrepreneurial sensibility—all give Garriott's meteoric rise to fame a sense of inevitability. His story's *pièce de résistance*, however, remains the Lord British *nom de guerre*. It is nothing short of

remarkable just how quickly the "Lord British" handle was adopted by the popular computer gaming press, with the preponderance of articles often either putting his given name in parentheses or omitting it entirely. For instance, *Computer Gaming World* (Scorpia 1984, 14), *Antic Magazine* (Chabris 1984, 56), *Compute!* (Peacock 1984, 110), *The Wizards Journal* (1984), *ROM Magazine* (Ellison 1984, 8), *Softline* (Shore 1983, 40), and *K-Power Magazine* (a Scholastic publication aimed at young digerati; Riley 1984, 50) all gleefully embraced Garriott's regal handle in their interviews, game reviews, and editorials. But the popular computer press's complicity in mythologizing Garriott-as-British goes beyond simply deploying the Lord British moniker time and time again. Rather, there is clearly a collective investment in establishing Garriott's uniqueness and growing his stature as a gaming auteur. An example of this tendency is evident in one of *Softline* magazine's "profile in programming" pieces on Garriott. In it, the author notes:

> The teenage success story is a popular myth in microcomputerdom, but one that is actually not true as often as you would think. Steve Wozniak and Bill Budge, although traditionally thought of as boy geniuses, were both in their twenties when they first made names for themselves. Richard Garriott, however, is the true article.
>
> (Durkee 1983, 27)

Of course, it helps that Garriott has long since wholly embraced this individualistic brand of mytho-biography. Both in his capacity as a game designer and as a virtual ruler, Lord British discursively and ludically positioned himself as the authorial center of all-things *Ultima*. Lord British may be a DIY game designer, but he is not a self-made ruler. The distinction of kingmaker belongs to someone else.

Al Remmers, California Pacific's founder and the businessman who successfully acquired the distribution rights to *Akalabeth* and

Ultima, suggested that the teen drop his name from the packaging and use Lord British instead as a marketing gimmick. After all, Garriott was forgettable. Lord British was not. The elevation of the software author's name over that of the publisher was quickly becoming part of Remmers's marketing modus operandi. A profile on Remmers and California Pacific appearing in the January 1981 issue of *Softalk Magazine*, an early 1980s publication dedicated to industry and hobbyist news of the Apple II computer, details how Remmers had been rethinking the attribution of his freelancers' work. After having finally convinced Bill Budge to work with California Pacific, Remmers saw a way to parlay Budge's name for additional sales.

> Prior to [*Bill Budge*'s] *Trilogy*, the names of the authors had been downplayed and the names of the software publishers prominently displayed. Remmers noted this was contrary to the natural order of things in the book and movie businesses, where the name of the publisher or distributor is far less noticeable and important to the end consumer than that of the author, star, or director. [Remmers said:] "Nobody goes to see Twentieth Century-Fox's *Star Wars*; they go to see George Lucas's *Star Wars*. Likewise, nobody reads a book because it's published by Doubleday—they read the book because they know and like the author. People in the software business had their priorities backward.
>
> (Knudsen 1981, 33)

With *Akalabeth* under contract, Remmers wasted no time pursuing a similar tack with Garriott. To wit, the name Lord British appears in four different places in that same January 1981 issue of *Softalk* magazine: in a review of *Akalabeth*; in the software sales chart at the end of the issue; in the profile on Remmers and California Pacific; and in the full-page color advertisement on the issue's inside cover. Strikingly, at no point in the issue does Garriott's given name appear.

Remmers took his author-focused marketing strategy one step further by working with the magazine to turn the unknown designer's identity into a game. Later in that same company profile, the magazine's reporter notes:

> California Pacific maintains an aura of mystery about the identity of Lord British, author of *Akalabeth*. Speculation has ranged from a child prodigy being protected by his parents to a British recluse. Neither is correct. Remmers is willing to acknowledge any correct guess as to the identity of Lord British, but offers no information on his own.*
>
> (Knudsen 1981, 34)

Following the asterisk, one finds these additional contest details:

> **Softalk* will reward $50 in product from any *Softalk* advertiser to the reader who can first correctly describe the identity of Lord British. Each month that Lord British remains unidentified, *Softalk* will publish a clue provided by California Pacific. Most imaginative incorrect descriptions may also be published. Al Remmers of California Pacific shall be the sole judge of whether the identification in any particular entry is complete. First clue: Lord British is not a resident of Silicon Gulch.
>
> (Knudsen 1981, 34)

While this is unquestionably a unique case of an industry publication working with a company to manufacture intrigue around a game designer, it nevertheless highlights the multiple commercial functions served by having something like a computer game auteur for the software firm's bottom line and for an industry seeking to elevate its cultural status.[8]

Film scholar Timothy Corrigan introduces the phrase "commerce of auteurism" to identify the ways that the authorship category has been deployed for commercial purposes in 1970s Hollywood filmmaking (Corrigan 2003). Rather than being the examination of some

transcendent creative identity, auteurism had from the beginning been "bound up with changes in industrial desires, technological opportunities, and marketing strategies" (96). As Corrigan notes: "Since the 1970s especially, the auteurist marketing of movies [… aims] to guarantee a relationship between audience and movie whereby an intentional and authorial agency governs, as a kind of brand-name vision whose contextual meanings are already determined" (97). There was, of course, no established "Lord British" brand as yet. Rather, this marketing gambit was intended to foster curiosity around *Akalabeth* and add an air of artisanal legitimacy to Remmers's growing stable of freelance game makers. This strategy is obvious when one examines California Pacific's broader marketing materials. For instance, the catalog of games appearing at the end of *Ultima*'s Playbook lists eight available titles with all but two mentioning the names of their creators (Lord British 1981b). Likewise, California Pacific's computer magazine ads regularly foregrounded the designers' names in their full-page color ads.

It is impossible to know if Garriott would have embraced the Lord British publishing handle had Remmers not urged him to do so. Keep in mind that the handful of copies of *Akalabeth* that were sold out of the ComputerLand store in Clear Lake City, Texas, sported Garriott's earthly name on their card inserts. Furthermore, when the names of Garriott's contemporaries appeared on their work, they sported their legal names, not pseudonyms (e.g., "Bill Budge's *Raster Blaster*" or "*Apple-oids* (1980) designed by Tom Luhrs"). What is certain, however, is that Garriott readily and earnestly embraced his stately title once he made the decision to take up the virtual crown.

Tellingly, in the first computer magazine publication (that is, the first we could locate) where Garriott speaks as a designer—the May 1981 issue of *The Space Gamer*—his byline reads "Lord British."[9] Garriott credits his thinking behind *Akalabeth*'s 3D dungeon design as follows: "I approached the problem from three angles: the artist's

approach (thanks, Mom!), the calculus approach (thanks, Dad!), and the trigonometric approach (thanks, Me!). Fortunately all the paths led me to a very simple solution" (Lord British 1981a, 15). This playfully phrased familial attribution gets to one of the persistently thorny questions regarding game auteurism specifically and authorship generally: namely, how does one think seriously about a game designer's creative choices without inadvertently neglecting or overshadowing the contributions of others? Put plainly: we have no interest in reproducing the problems inherent to auteurism by elevating Garriott as some singular boy genius. Rather, we want to use this book as an opportunity to critically evaluate how the sustained cultivation of a professional persona has benefits and limitations when it comes to understanding the significance of an influential computer game.

In addition to falling prey to the intentionalist fallacy—the notion that the computer game creator has or should have the final say on how their work is interpreted—auteurist discourse too often overshadows and elides from history the contributions of others. This is a particularly vexing problem for creative labor in the media industries. Keep in mind that the console Easter eggs mentioned in our Introduction represent resistance to such authorial erasure. Moreover, someone or something like a "Lord British" doesn't happen on its own. This figure is an authorial placeholder who is overdetermined through press interviews, magazine profiles, and so on.[10] That creative identity and any attendant cult of personality result from a constellation of discursive acts and actors: the creative agent, their supporting design team and/or company, the external validation of cultural brokers and various tastemakers, in addition to other forces of social legitimacy.

One such example of how the auteur's voice can too easily eclipse the work of others comes from *The Official Book of Ultima* (Addams 1992). This in-house production of Garriott's Origin Systems—which functions as part Garriott biography, part canonical tome of *Ultima*'s sprawling diegetic history (for *Ultimas I–VI*)—was penned by

adventure game veteran Shay Addams.[11] In the book's introduction, Garriott waxes nostalgic about his early work, reflecting fondly:

> There was a certain kind of *magic* about my life in the early days that makes the first three *Ultimas* very special. I did those *entirely on my own*, and there was something *magical* about them being utterly my own creation, utterly *my own vision*. I really lived to work on those games.
>
> (Addams 1992, 2, emphasis added)

But this is not precisely the case, as it rarely is with any project as large or complex as a computer game. As Garriott acknowledges in *Akalabeth*'s postmortem, there would be no successful 3D design without the support of his parents, or title screen art without his neighbor and high school buddy Keith Zabalaoui's efforts. Likewise, there is no commercial version of the game without John Mayer, Garriott's enthusiastic boss at the ComputerLand store. There is no Lord British without Al Remmers's author-centric marketing strategy. And there is no *Ultima* without the machine language programming assistance and lessons that Garriott received from Ken Arnold, one of Garriott's former co-workers at ComputerLand. In fact, there are twelve names in the production credits at the end of the *Ultima* playbook, with "Richard Garriott" being but one (Lord British 1981b).

Garriott clearly needed technical and business assistance to bring his games to market. Moreover, as his widely circulated origin story makes clear, he also needed the support of an enthusiastic computer press to proselytize on his behalf. Quite simply: there is no Lord British without reviews heralding his design ingenuity and genius. Take, for example, this review of *Ultima*, which appears in the June 1981 issue of *Softalk* magazine:

> Once in a while, a product appears on the market that truly seems to reach the ultimate development of its genre. The phenomenon occurs more often than usual in this infant industry of microcomputing, and, also peculiar to this industry, such products are often surpassed in

> relatively short order. Aptly named *Ultima* fits the first description but is likely not to succumb to the second for some time. There is no doubt that eventually it will be surpassed, however, if only by its own author: Lord British, whose identity is detailed elsewhere in this issue, is merely a sophomore in college. What we can expect from him in years to come is beyond imagination.
>
> (Tommervick 1981, 48)

The vitality and longevity of Garriott's cult of personality are partially due to similar reviews that lionize the teenager as a techno-wunderkind.

There is another theme that emerges in the early game reviews, however, that is essential to the creation of Lord British. This additional layer appears in Steve Jackson's February 1981 review of *Akalabeth*:

> Aaahh, yes, son. It's as I've told you many times: There are fearful monsters in this land. Many have gone out to slay them, but few return, and fewer yet become knights. Knights? They're Lord British's men. Surely you've heard of British. He lives in a bloody great castle out there somewhere. If you want to be a knight, you have to go to him. He'll help you – he has magic to make you stronger and faster. But he'll send you underground, on fearful quests. For every one that comes back, ten starve to death in the wilds or go to fill some monster's gullet.
>
> (Jackson 1981, 10)

It is not surprising that Jackson would positively review Garriott's freshman effort. After all, he and Garriott were friendly, having met through the local SCA chapter.[12] But Jackson's review crucially positions Garriott within *Akalabeth*'s narrative world *as* Lord British, as the one who both creates *and* who is brought to life by the game system. These dual forms of identity—as the designer from without and the storyteller from within—proved useful on a number of fronts. Shortly after meeting Garriott, Remmers realized the value of selling Lord British as a computer game auteur, just as Garriott soon

discovered that there were storytelling and world-building benefits to *becoming* Lord British in and across his games.

Ludic Authorization: Lord British-as-Dungeon Master

The Garriott-as-Lord British auteur mythos is as much a result of the public discourse swirling around the designer as it is a consequence of Garriott's ability to craft immersive worlds by growing his programming know-how and by embedding his alter ego within his series' story spaces. Garriott is likewise notable for his dogmatic insistence on supplementing his computer games with a rich assortment of trinkets and collectibles whenever possible (items which receive sustained attention in Chapter 4). For now, it is worth examining how Garriott-as-Lord British's dungeon master persona manifests through his game design ethos and in the games as a diegetic character.

Garriott's approach to game design is inseparably tied to his working knowledge of the underlying computer technology. This makes a certain amount of sense when one considers that the computer functions as the dungeon master's proxy, determining if an arrow finds its mark, the number of skeletons spawning in a dungeon hallway, if a hero can avoid being roasted alive by a dragon, and so on. But the run-of-the-mill game referee adopts and modifies a preexisting game's rulebook; they are not typically creating it from scratch. Similarly, computer game designers generally use the same game engine whenever possible to save on development time and production costs. This, again, was not Garriott's chosen path. Instead, with each new *Ultima* game he started anew, noting:

> I rewrite each *Ultima* from scratch so that I can add significant improvements. This also has the unfortunate side effect of making each *Ultima* take longer and longer to finish. *Akalabeth* took me only three months,

> *Ultima I* nine months, *Ultima II* one year, *Ultima III* one year, and, finally *Ultima IV* two years to complete."
>
> (Lord British 1986, 20)

It is worth noting that Garriott also scrapped the map editors and game-creation resources each time.

This tech-centric, build-it-again approach to game design is also responsible for some of the series' most memorable elements. For instance, the spaceship sequence near the end of the first *Ultima* was not a loving testament to his astronaut father as some might guess, but it was included to take advantage of available disk space (Addams 1992, 14). Additionally, the playable harpsichord in *Ultima V* (1988) was first a technical novelty—Garriott wanted to know if he could make it work—before it was woven into the game's narrative. (Playing it successfully opens a door to a new level [Aycock 1992, 98].) Thus, the driving design question for Garriott is more often if he can make something work on a technical level, rather than if it needs to work to support the narrative. If the potential innovation holds the promise of adding interactive depth to Sosaria or Britannia, then that probably justifies the investment of time and energy. Garriott asserts: "*Ultimas* are fun […] because everything from the moment you open the box is there to compel you to believe that you might really be going to a real place. The fiction of the whole game is there to support the reality of your escape to the world of Britannia" (Aycock 1992, 98).

Garriott readily concedes that his idiosyncratic approach to design may not constitute best practices, and he acknowledges his shortcomings as a programmer. In this 1986 interview with *Computer Gaming World*, he flaunts his abandonment of conventional wisdom:

> I program in just the way you are not taught to program in school. Most of the plot's detail is not decided upon until it comes time to put it in. The first thing I do is decide what major features in the graphics I want, what

> the capabilities are, put them in and work on that. Then I let the player walk around on the outdoor map. I then add the towns and the ability to walk in and out. Next I add monsters to threaten the player, followed by the ability for the player to fight back. Next I add shops so the player can buy weapons to better fight … in this manner I slowly add game elements as they become necessary. Technically, this is bad programming technique, because portions may need to be rewritten when new features are added. However, one of the major reasons new ideas get into an *Ultima* is because I use things that naturally fit into the existing code. This way lots more can be crammed into less space. In fact, the bridge trolls that many who have played *Ultima IV* have seen, were added about one week before the game's release, when I finally found a spot to put in the ten lines of code.
>
> (Lord British 1986, 21)

This non-traditional production method required that Garriott pick up programming skills as needed, and to lean increasingly on others as he embarked on more ambitious sequels. For example, he wrote *Ultima* in the BASIC language, but called on his ComputerLand work friend, Ken Arnold, to assist him with the machine language programming for the tile graphics for Sosaria's expansive overworld (Lord British 1988, 28; Minson 1988). Tom Luhrs of *Apple-oids* (1980) fame (California Pacific was the distributor for Luhrs's knock-off of *Asteroids* [1979]) gave Garriott a crash course in assembly language, which allowed *Ultima II: Revenge of the Enchantress* to run more efficiently on the Apple II (Addams 1992, 21). And for *Ultima III*'s production, Garriott learned aspects of writing machine code.

Garriott's informal programming education during his early years in the industry wasn't limited to learning new computer languages. He was also picking up keen business strategies. To stay alive in a competitive and tumultuous software retail environment, Garriott sought out newer and better distribution partnerships. Although California

Pacific Computer Company had successfully distributed and marketed *Akalabeth* and *Ultima*, Garriott wanted to amplify his next game's immersive potential by shipping the game in a box with a cloth map. The production cost was too prohibitively high for California Pacific, so Garriott partnered with Sierra On-Line for the distribution of *Ultima II*, a point we explore in Chapter 4. It was a fortuitous move as Remmers's company went bankrupt the following year, with Garriott blaming the demise on the owner's expensive drug habit (Rigby 2009, 51; gamedevthings 2011).[13]

The relationship with Sierra On-Line was similarly short-lived. The two parties had disputes about royalty payments, and this disagreement convinced Garriott and his close friends and family to launch their own company, Origin Systems (Barton 2008, 67–8). Origin handled all of development and distribution of *Ultima III: Exodus* (1983) in-house, or more accurately, in-garage as their first offices were in their parents' Houston-area home.

Despite the challenges of shifting technological and business terrains, Garriott and his games succeeded during the early to mid 1980s. Garriott attributes his maturation as a game designer, businessman, storyteller, and the success of the entire *Ultima* series to developing *his* way of doing things, stating: "The early games evolve because I am becoming a better programmer, a better author" (Ferrell 1989, 17). This growing sense of the authorial self convinced *Ultima*'s supreme dungeon master to write himself into the games and into their supporting materials.

While Garriott's skyrocketing fame as an emerging CRPG auteur kept his name and his games circulating in microcomputer publications, his alter ego kept busy in the virtual realm of Sosaria and Britannia tasking players with various quests. Lord British appears throughout Garriott's series as a diegetic component of his larger, world-building efforts. Although his character's centrality to the various game narratives deviates from title to title, his identity is no more

front and center than in his first commercial effort. The following passage is excerpted from *Akalabeth*'s instruction manual:

> There arose from the land a man, pure and just, to battle the Dark Lord. British, Champion of the White Light, did battle with Mondain deep within the labyrinth of dungeons, eventually driving him from Akalabeth forever. British of the White Light was proclaimed Lord British, Protector of Akalabeth. Alas, much damage had been suffered unto the lands. The Revival of Akalabeth has begun. Tis thy duty to rid Akalabeth of the foul creatures which infest it whilst trying to stay alive!!
>
> (*Akalabeth: World of Doom* playbook 1980, 3)

In other words, Lord British has already finished the hard work. He is the hero. Make no mistake about it. The player must now clean up the monsters left in wake of the previous battle. ("'Tis truly noble work, good player.") Once the player vanquishes the monsters, British proclaims: "Thou hast proven thyself worthy of knighthood."

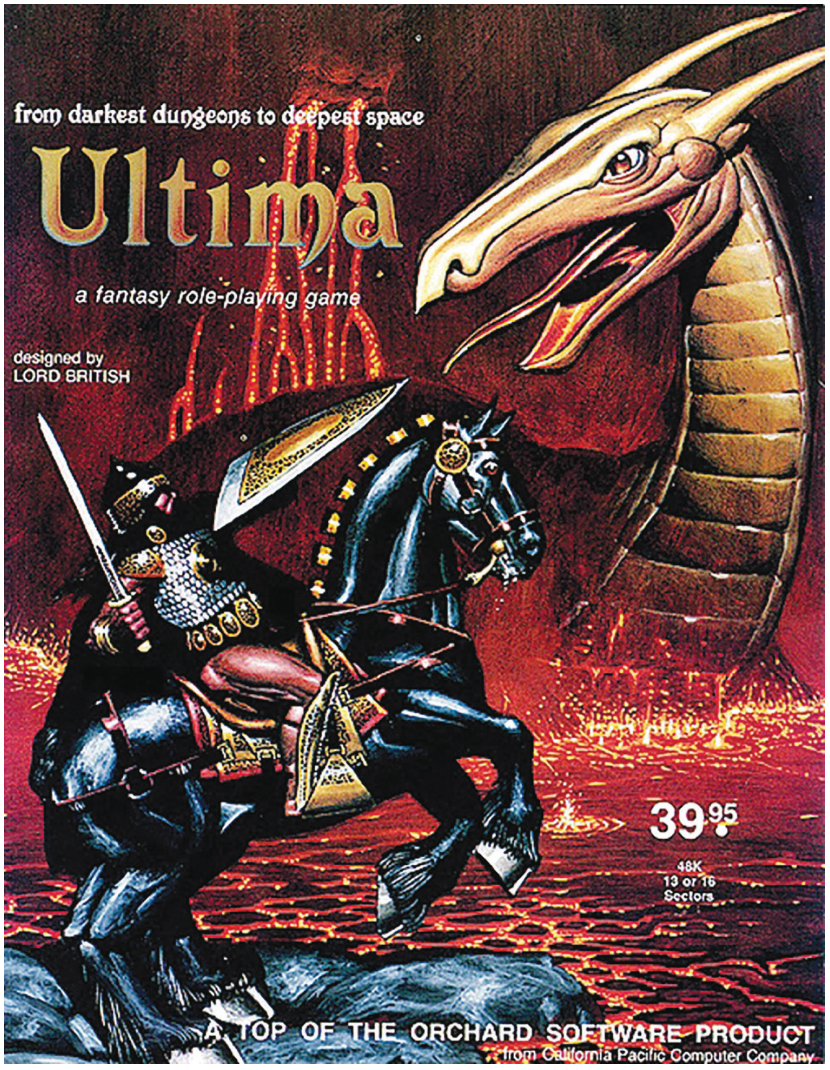
Unlike *Akalabeth*, British maintains a relatively low profile in Garriott's sophomore effort. Lord British as non-player character appears in *Ultima* and rewards the player, identified as "the Stranger," for the completion of various quests. Garriott also engages in a bit of retroactive continuity (or "ret-con"), resurrecting the evil wizard Mondain, the same villain dispatched by British in *Akalabeth*. During the Stranger's adventures through Sosaria, the good ruler remains safely ensconced in the domains that bear his name. He can be found in the Castle of Lord British, located in the Lands of Lord British. (As we said, his name is on everything.)

Ultima's "playbook" (the instruction manual included with the initial Apple II release) is light on backstory, but it does contain a few revealing elements regarding authorship. First, in a span of two pages—in the production credits at the end of the manual and the one-page California Pacific ad that follows it—we see Remmers's marketing

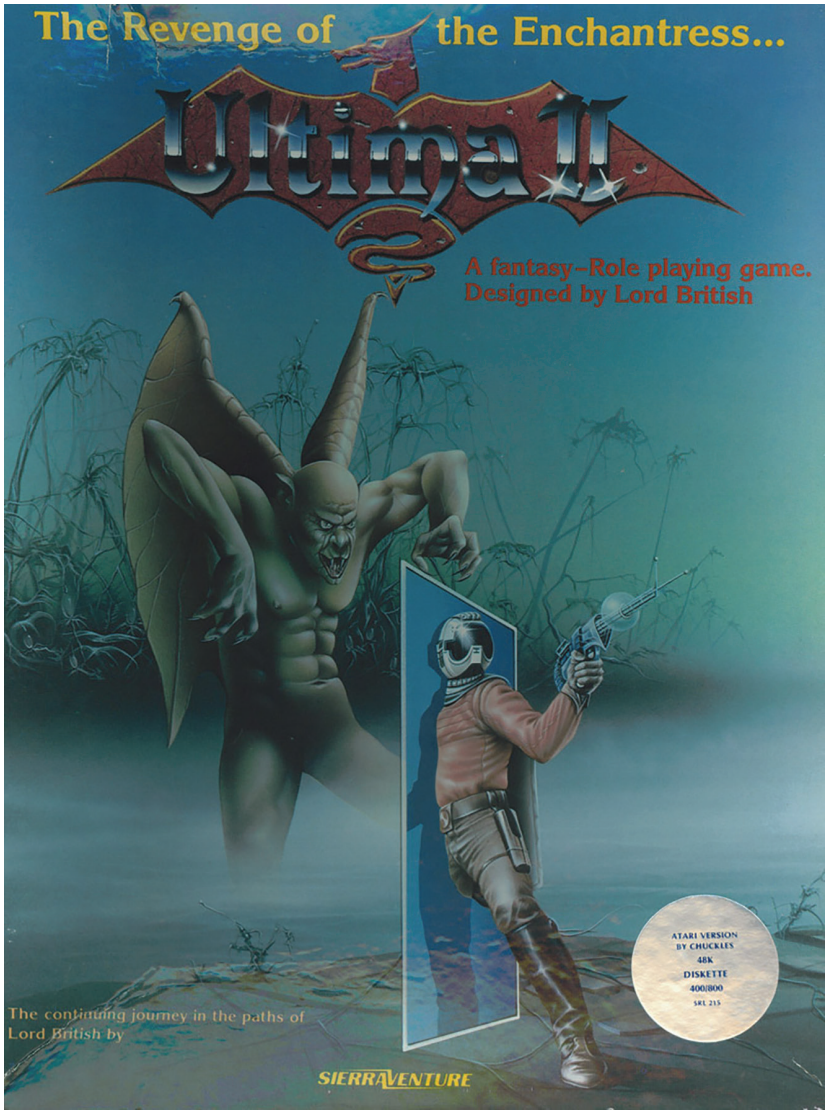
effort in full effect as the Lord British identity is elevated over Garriott. The programmer's name appears once in a list of production credits, while the good ruler's name appears twice in the ad on the following page. More importantly, British receives the "by-line" authorial credit for *Akalabeth* and *Ultima* ("Ultima playbook" 1981, back cover), while Garriott's name appears in an alphabetized list (10). Second, in *Ultima II*'s manual, Lord British's name first appears on the outside cover under the game title ("by Lord British"; see Figures 1.3 and 1.4), and again on the inside cover at the bottom with the copyright information: "Copyright Lord British and Sierra On-Line, Inc." Following a contentious dispute with Sierra concerning unpaid or underpaid *Ultima II* royalties and after the launching of Origin Systems, the language on the *Ultima III* manual read: "ULTIMA and LORD BRITISH are trademarks of Richard Garriott" ("*Ultima III* Book of Play," 1983).[14] With he and his team striking out on their own business venture, Garriott didn't want there to be any question over who owned *Ultima* or the name Lord British.

Cultural Authenticity: Lord British as Lord Geek

Garriott has described his design process—at least with *Akalabeth* and the initial three *Ultimas*—as trying, first, to include all those things that one would want to do in a fantasy world. Then, after he exhausted the platform's technological capabilities, he would craft a narrative around those programmable gameplay mechanics. This design approach is predicated on possessing an extensive knowledge of the underlying technology's abilities and its limitations. Indeed, part of what cemented Garriott's fame within the ranks of his fellow computer game developers is that he would reinvent *Ultima* with each sequel. Garriott notes of this technology-first, story-second approach: "if you develop the technology, then you can say, 'Okay, I can design a story



Figures 1.3 and 1.4: Lord British, rather than Richard Garriott, is given authorial credit on the covers of *Ultima I* (California Pacific Computer Company 1981) and *Ultima II* (Sierra On-Line 1982). Image credits: Scans courtesy of Ernst Krogtoft and Tribun.



Figures 1.3 and 1.4: (*continued*)

that does that.' The story is well within the scope of the technology" (Aycock 1992, 98).

Game designer and scholar Tracy Fullerton analogizes her creative mission of creating "playful situations" to throwing a party (Fullerton 2008, 5). Like the game designer, the party host must anticipate the needs of their guests. The host should make their guests feel welcome. And, of course, the host should give guests fun activities. Without quite articulating it in these terms, this is what Garriott had in mind. He was throwing a *D&D* party but one that he could not attend personally. The festivities would instead be hosted on others' computers and would be refereed by his lines of code. "Party," as it turns out, is an apt metaphor for Garriott's design ethos for the multiple ways he fully embraced his love of geek and nerd culture, weaving it into his games, company, and everyday life. As it has been argued throughout this chapter, the entity known as "Lord British" is an overdetermined persona resulting from numerous historical and discursive forces. A substantial part of Garriott's fame as a gaming auteur is tied to his public performances as British and his abiding love of geek culture—one that informed everything from his personal dress code, to his running of Origin Systems, to how he spent his leisure time and money. To truly become Lord British, Garriott had to perform the role outside of Sosaria and Britannia.

Much has been made in the press about Garriott's "look" from the beginning of his career. He did not, after all, look like the erudite son of a NASA astronaut and engineer. Numerous newspaper interviewers and magazine profilers remarked on the teen's exceedingly casual manner of dress, and it quickly became a role that Garriott relished. Well before it was part of the pop culture vernacular, Garriott regularly engaged in cosplay (short for costume play). But even when he wasn't fencing, sporting medieval chainmail for some Society for Creative Anachronism event, or selling his games while in costume at software conventions, Garriott's everyday wardrobe exuded a distinctly

anti-establishment vibe. His more conservatively mannered brother, Robert, would joke that their parents would not be seen with Richard in public if he was in character (Miller 1985, 3E). Even Garriott's day-to-day office attire—his Mickey Mouse shirts and long, braided ponytail—worn well after he had attained fame, further enhanced his renegade boy-genius persona (Pope 1990, 12). The profile appearing in the youth-focused *K-Power* magazine noted of their own teen reporters' shocked impressions: "Steven and Daniel were surprised that the prolific Lord British was so young, and that the blue-jeaned leather-jacketed designer looked more like a punk rock star than a Lord" (Horowitz and Horowitz 1985, 57). Garriott was cognizant of his public image and wisely used his look to further brand his games. One such example is Garriott's bronze snake necklace. He was often seen wearing this homemade trinket, which he crafted when he was eleven. " 'People at computer and software conventions don't recognize my face, but they recognize my snake,' he said. 'It is a recurring symbol in Origin Systems games' " (Associated Press 1987, 9). Garriott's casual dress and his playfulness naturally carried over into the workplace, where he prided himself on making Origin Systems the preeminent house for computer game designers. In a sense, he extended to would-be dungeon masters the kind of working relationship he never enjoyed with California Pacific or Sierra On-Line.

The inviting work culture at Origin Systems partly reflected Garriott's personality and his creative commitments regarding design, but the general looseness was not uncommon to upstart design studios. As points of comparison, Origin was not nearly as freewheeling as Atari was ten years prior. There was no evidence, for example, of rampant drug use by the staff, nor was Garriott a provocateur like Atari's lead creative and *PONG* (1972) inventor Nolan Bushnell, who famously introduced himself to Warner Communication management wearing a shirt emblazoned with "I love to fuck" (Donovan 2010, 71). And perhaps because Origin was best known for producing reflective

role-playing games that involved character development and morality systems, the Austin crew had a more innocent image than did the id Software programmers who were churning out quick-twitch, visceral first-person shooters just north of them in the Dallas suburb of Mesquite, Texas.

Origin's workplace climate was established early on in its history, with much of its intimacy being owed to its beginning as a family operation. Richard's brother, Robert, had encouraged him to take the leap and served as a co-founder and the company's president. Richard would work with Robert on the contracts (Miller 1985, 3E), but as vice president for product development, Richard wanted to remain focused on pushing the series forward (Ruth 1985). And, despite having understandable concerns about the business venture, their parents threw their support behind their sons. Their father, Owen, became a primary investor and co-founder, and he and Helen allowed the boys to set up shop in their three-car garage (as is the tech start-up cliché). Garriott's close high school friend and brief University of Texas roommate, Charles "Chuckles" Bueche, who was a programmer and game designer (*Jawbreaker* [1981], *Laff Pack* [1981], *Lunar Leepers* [1981], *Caverns of Callisto* [1983]) joined Richard, Robert, and Owen as the fourth Origin Systems, Inc. co-founder. Garriott would later pull in his former ComputerLand co-worker Ken Arnold, whose machine language know-how had been critical for *Ultima*'s tile-based world.

Irrespective of Origin's location—beginning in the Garriotts' Nassau Bay garage in 1983, followed by a full team relocation to Londonderry, New Hampshire in 1985, and a final company move to Austin, Texas in early 1990 (Pope 1989)—the company remained committed to cultivating a different kind of corporate culture.[15] This followed Richard Garriott's conviction that "creativity follows creative swings" (Associated Press 1987, 9). A 1987 Associated Press piece describes the environment thusly: "During happy hour—which can happen any time—programmers grab Rabasers, wooden guns that

shoot lengths of surgical tubing and hunt one another in the atrium of the office building that they occupy" (Associated Press 1987). Remarkably, a company profile in *Texas Monthly* published nearly a decade later confirmed that things hadn't changed much:

> Then there's the ultracasual atmosphere at Origin's offices: Garriott typically shows up in jeans, sneakers, and a work shirt and wearing his blond hair in a long, tightly braided queue. Employees—Garriott included—ambush each other in the hallways with rubber-band pistols and find inspiration in an arcade furnished with "ancient" games like *Space Invaders* and *Donkey Kong*.
>
> (Biesada 1996, para. 6)

Origin's success was due to more than its zany office culture. It was a company that focused on ensuring that the visions of its lead designers were realized, while maintaining quality product control. In a 1989 interview with *Compute!* magazine, Garriott remarked: "We started the company with the premise that, unlike other companies, if a product sells a large number of copies, it's a result of the author's efforts […] We're a very author-oriented company […] By the way, I sign exactly the same royalty contract as our other authors" (Ferrell 1989, 17). This sentiment was echoed years later by Stephen Beeman, a project director at Origin, who stated: "Origin's cardinal virtue was its commitment to do whatever it took to ship the director's vision. We had a motto for it: 'A game's only late until it ships, but it sucks forever'" (Varney 2005, para. 8).

Success breeding success; collegial personalities; fortuitous timing; being in a pre-dot-com Austin; heck, dumb luck: it is impossible to know what ultimately catapulted Origin into the ranks of legendary game design studios. What is undeniable is the deep roster of talent who worked there reads like a "Who's Who" of computer game development in the 1990s and 2000s. In no particular order: Raph

Koster worked on *Ultima Online* before moving on to *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment 2000) and *Star Wars Galaxies* (Sony Online Entertainment 2003). John Romero, of id Software fame, had a brief stint at Origin before creating *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1992) and later the infamous *DOOM* (id Software 1993) and *Quake* (id Software 1996) series. Warren Spector, known for fostering a strong sense of user agency in his games, worked on *Ultima Underworld* and *System Shock* (1994) while at Origin, and later helped create *Thief: The Dark Project* (Looking Glass Studios 1998), *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm 2000), and *Epic Mickey* (Junction Point Studios 2010). And British game designer Chris Roberts and project lead of Origin's *Wing Commander* (1990), is now producing *Star Citizen* (Cloud Imperium Games 2016), a Kickstarter fundraising behemoth that has raised in excess of $339 million dollars (as of December 2020; Good 2020).

It bears underscoring that Garriott and most of his collaborators benefited from their social positioning as young white men from largely middle-class backgrounds. Race, gender, and other facets of identity can have strong implications for access to capital, investors, and other resources necessary for launching a business (Fairlie, Robb and Robinson 2021; Pantin 2018; Smith-Hunter 2006, 4–46). Both the tech and games industries have a long history of similar disparities (Abbate 2012; Goyal 1996; Hicks 2013; Margolis and Fisher 2002; McDivitt 2020; Prescott and Bogg 2011). The point is that innovators, like the team that launched Origin Systems, are able to achieve their ambitious goals because their personal and group ingenuity can find fertile ground thanks to their social, cultural, and economic positionings.

In a city that stakes a great deal of civic pride in differentiating itself from its larger Texas neighbors—sporting for many years a marketing slogan turned mantra "Keep Austin Weird"—Garriott sought to establish himself as permanent geek royalty in the state's quirky capitol. This quest began by fully relocating Origin Systems to Austin in 1990,

whereupon it evolved into a design studio that transformed avid game players into veteran game designers. But this professional achievement was not enough for Garriott to crown himself Austin's King of Gamers. To become truly legendary, he needed to connect with the non-computer gaming public. He began his self-coronation by building himself a castle dubbed Britannia Manor.[16] Colorfully described by a Dallas newspaper reporter as "Pee Wee's Playhouse from hell" (Pope 1990, 12), Garriott's hilltop mansion contained multiple secret passageways connecting various rooms à la the board game *Clue*, and it housed exotic collectibles: medieval weapons and armor, a shrunken human head, a turn-of-the century vampire hunting kit, among other oddities. It is no surprise that Britannia Manor has since attained its own semicelebrity status and has been featured on *MTV Cribs* ("Britannia Manor: Tales from the Crib" 2007), HGTV's *Secret Spaces* ("Britannia Manor" 2007), and is the subject of a short Spike TV documentary ("The World's Most Famous Haunted House," Neese and Neff 2006).

Taking inspiration from his days in the Society for Creative Anachronism, Garriott sought to recreate the wonder of live role-playing for his neighbors by hosting haunted house events at Britannia Manor—essentially inviting Austin's residents to become game players, at least temporarily. These Halloween events, which were held from the late 1980s into the early 1990s, were smashing successes, and were known less for their frights than for their various puzzles and fantasy themes. Tour guides would lead small groups through the house and estate grounds, and it became such a popular event that people began camping out for weeks in advance to get a pass for the free event. But what was free for Austinites cost Garriott in excess of $20,000 in labor and special effects to produce. According to Dallas Snell, then an employee of Origin and later a chief operating officer of Garriott's company, Portalarium, Inc.: "The spook house is just a different facet of the numerous creative talents collected around Richard in this company" (Associated Press 1988, 40A).

Although Garriott no longer hosts annual haunted houses, it lives on in its spiritual successor as the "Necropolis of Britannia Manor III" geocaching puzzle (Olivetti 2012). For the uninitiated, geocaching involves treasure hunts where players use GPS coordinates to locate a physical cache that has been hidden by another player. "Necropolis" leads players through eight different "chapters" across the city of Austin, ending on the edge of his Austin estate. And, never one to be outdone, Garriott holds the current record for placing two of the world's most extreme geocaches: one on the International Space Station (where he visited in 2008 as the world's sixth space tourist) and the other at the bottom of a European ocean trench (Schudiske 2010). Designing complex geocache puzzles, hosting haunted house tours, and establishing a playful office work culture all demonstrate Garriott's steadfast investment in a playful "for us, by us" geek sensibility, which infuses his eclectic creative efforts and helped cement Lord British's fame in Britannia and Austin alike.

Conclusion: "The King is Dead, Long Live the King"

Roland Barthes's (1967) "Death of the Author" essay and Michel Foucault's (1969) "What is an Author?" lecture have been hugely influential in debates around auteurism and authorship—both in terms of theorizing the readers' interpretive power over texts, and identifying the author as an overdetermined discursive construct, respectively. Garriott has managed the Lord British persona through the popular press, in the numerous *Ultima* game narratives and packaging, and through other live, geek chic events for over 40 years. But the good Lord's reign has not always been a peaceful one. In fact, the post-structuralist assertion that "the death of the author is the birth of the reader" is perhaps acutely apropos for what has become a kind of virtual blood sport over the years for *Ultima* players: namely,

killing Lord British. Players have devised increasingly ingenious methods for slaying Garriott's supposedly invincible avatar throughout the years. A sampling of homicidal techniques include leveling up so as to simply overpower him in *Ultimas I* and *II*; blasting him with cannons in *Ultima III*; exploding gunpowder kegs around him in *Ultima VI*; and feeding him poison bread in *Ultima IX*, to name some of the more colorful deaths (Gillen 2008). Shay Addams, in *The Official Book of Ultima*, even intimates that Garriott has been personally affected by these vicarious attacks, saying: "Perhaps because he feels so deeply a part of *Ultima*, Garriott was less than pleased when he heard some players had finally figured out a clever way to kill Lord British in *Ultima III*" (1992, 30). Furthermore, because Addams's book is an Origin product, he invites reader feedback should gamers discover a way of killing Lord British in *Ultima VII*. ("Whether Garriott was able to prevent players from slaying Lord British in *Ultima VII* remained a mystery when the game shipped, and anyone who discovers a way of doing so should immediately contact this book's author, in care of Compute Books" [Addams 1992, 31].) (Spoiler: Lord British can be slain with the Black Sword or powder kegs.)

But all of these fatalities are a modest preamble to British's most infamous death on August 8, 1997, during the final beta testing of *Ultima Online* (1997), the game that popularized the massively multiplayer online role-playing game as a genre. Lord British and Lord Blackthorn (played by Starr Long, who was part of the initial design team) were conducting a royal visit to serve as a stress test when "Rainz," a player-character blasted a "fire field" at Lord British, killing him. Garriott had forgotten to turn British's invulnerability back on following a server reset. In retaliation, Blackthorn conjured demons who slayed all of the innocent bystanders. This led to virtual protests where players objected to Starr/Blackthorn's reaction to his friend's

death, and the banning of the in-game assassin, Rainz. This incident is often considered to be among the most memorable events in MMO history ("Killing Lord British" n.d.).

Where does this leave us with respect to creative authorship and identity? Garriott would almost certainly have issue with the death of the author concept, as would those players who were slayed by the summoned demons after his fall. What we are in need of in game studies is a means by which to understand the designer's authorial force as a creative agent, and, as Foucault suggests, a way to understand how they are implicated into broader networks and discourses of power. Again, Timothy Corrigan: "Yet, within the commerce of contemporary culture, auteurism has become, as both a production and interpretive position, something quite different from what it once may have been" (2003, 109). As game scholars and historians, we should acknowledge Garriott's achievements without reproducing the celebratory rhetoric that so often gets deployed when discussing designers of his influence. (To wit, EA's former chief creative officer Bing Gordon on Garriott: "He's kind of been a legend in our industry […] He's the only person in our business who has withstood the test of time [and] kind of been the George Lucas or Steven Spielberg of our business" [Pope 1990, 12].) We are not trying to slay Lord British's identity or any authorial claims so much as critically historicize how acts of authorship, broadly understood, give rise to the series' well-known world-building innovations. Indeed, Ultima's beloved world-building is predicated on the work of Garriott-as-Lord British, those around Garriott, as well as the series' legions of players.

It was the business brains of Origin Systems' Robert Garriott, not Richard, who hit upon the company motto: "We create worlds" (Retro Gamer Team 2014).[17] The pronoun "we" is of paramount importance as it not only signals that there was more than Lord British operating at Origin, but that there is more to game creation and inspiration than

a professional design team. As was noted in an issue of *RUN*, a magazine for the Commodore computers (published from 1984 to 1992):

> Programmer Richard Garriott (aka Lord British) considers himself the storyteller of the 80s and 90s. His sentences are programming lines. He weaves the images—not through metaphors or similes—but through graphics on the screen. The tale unfolds—not chapter by chapter—but disk by disk. And the reader—er, computer user—plays an integral role in determining the character development and plot of the story.
>
> (Brisson 1989, 78)

To understand how *Ultima* came to be, we need to look more closely at the key stepping stones of inspiration that led to Garriott's realization that certain role-playing game mechanics could be successfully transferred from a kitchen tabletop to a computer screen.

CHAPTER 2
The Road to *Ultima*

Introduction: First Steps

Taking its design inspiration from brothers Robyn and Rand Miller's classics *Myst* and *Riven* (Cyan 1993; 1997), Jonathan Blow's *The Witness* (Thekla 2016) contains complex puzzles that demand reflection and note-taking. Similarly, the arcane rune system of Phil Fish's indie darling *Fez* (Polytron Corporation 2012) requires careful scrutiny to decipher its enigmatic code. Today, keeping a gameplay journal to best a title's hidden mysteries is a relative rarity. Chronicling places visited, clues collected, and characters met, seems like a lost art—an artifact and practice of computer and video gaming days gone by. And yet, this general lack of personal documentation might also seem counterintuitive given that games are nothing if not boundary exploration. They are about moving through space, testing limits, and making choices over time—be it a few minutes in a casual or mobile game, or hundreds of hours in an open-world, sandbox-style adventure. Games are likewise about opportunities: choosing one path rather than another; opening some doors while leaving others closed; taking the red pill or swallowing the blue one.

If we're no longer in the habit of keeping written notes about our virtual journeys, perhaps it is largely because we don't have to. Massive "AAA" RPGs and popular action-adventure franchises—*Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda Softworks 1994–present), *Fallout* (Interplay Entertainment 1997–2004; Bethesda Softworks 2004–present), *The Witcher* (CD Projekt 2007–present), *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games 1997–present)—come equipped with fantastically detailed in-game maps, many of which contain filtering options that facilitate the systematic exploration of their massive story worlds. This isn't to say that contemporary game design has obviated note-taking entirely. In addition to smaller dungeon-crawling or detective-style games that demand record-keeping such as the *Etrian Odyssey* series (2007–present) or *A Hand with Many Fingers* (Colestia 2020), even multimillion-dollar productions have embraced inscrutability with the aim of amplifying gameplay and encouraging collective puzzle-solving. However, in general, because modern computers and consoles can record gameplay clips and broadcast those moments to others—whether it is sharing gameplay tricks to friends via social media, repurposing video content for a machinima short, or steadily building one's audience on streaming sites like Twitch.tv or YouTube Gaming—keeping notes feels like an antiquated or nostalgic practice. Perhaps hand-drawn translation charts of mysterious alphabets and scribbling dungeon maps on graph paper are simply quaint analog practices in the digital era. Speaking to the "joys of manual cartography," Scorpia (2017), the prolific computer and video game journalist who published under her fantasy pseudonym, notes:

> Despite being on mere 8-bit machines, the RPGs were big, and seemed all the larger because mapping was a very slow process. There you were (or I was), carefully penciling in one step at a time, and there all the critters were, ready to pounce and rip out your heart, lungs, and assorted organs for appetizers.
>
> (Scorpia 2017, 22)

Yet thinking about drafting maps and creating personal pathways, those technological practices key to exploration, invites us to examine the choices Garriott made en route to designing *Ultima*, as well as those inspirational touchstones he encountered along the way. If the previous chapter was about Garriott's cultivation of his emergent auteur identity, then this one charts his steps in remediating the role-playing game from paper to screen in just a few short years.

Quite simply, how did *Ultima* come to be? What life experiences inspired the series that would occupy Garriott's imagination and that of his fans for decades to come? What pre-*Ultima* technical discoveries set the foundation for Garriott's world-crafting practices? Garriott has consistently responded to these kinds of "origin" questions by acknowledging three key ingredients. In an interview with *Hardcore Gaming 101*, he states:

> When I began in 1974, I was inspired by three things: *The Lord of the Rings*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the unused Teletype my school had in one classroom. I wrote 28 small BASIC *D&D* games before discovering the Apple II and its real time graphics! I immediately wrote "D&D 28B" which became *Akalabeth*.
>
> (Kosarko 2011, paragraph 3)

We know from interviews such as this one, as well as from personal accounts of friends and family, about the general influence of *Dungeons and Dragons* on the *Ultima* series. Fantasy series like J.R.R. Tolkien's novels and science fiction films such as *Star Wars* (George Lucas 1977) and *Time Bandits* (Terry Gilliam 1981) left their marks on the *Ultima* series in the form of various in-game elements—points examined in detail in Chapter 3. However, most analyses don't trek far beyond this general level of observation because the historical picture gets blurry. That is, we can take it as a given that *D&D*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the technical affordances of early microcomputing were preconditions for making *Ultima* a reality. Of course, determining

how *exactly* these systems of play and computation offered nascent creative possibilities with any historical precision proves a more vexing task. This line of inquiry carries methodological challenges specific to doing game history and to game studies historiography. Gary Alan Fine's ethnographic observations of role-playing subculture in the late 1970s or T.L. Taylor's work on the lives of esports competitors from the 2000s depend on a type of firsthand access we don't have to Garriott's high school RPG sessions (see Fine 1983; Taylor 2012). We also don't have primary design documents disclosing Garriott's creative principles, or postmortems reflecting on his production process. Fortunately, this does not exhaust our options as we can scrutinize those cultural touchstones and technological achievements that helped establish a creative field of possibilities.

Bringing his personalized style of tabletop adventuring to the computer was, for Garriott, both a cultural and a technological feat. It was a *cultural* accomplishment insofar as *Ultima* represented—or more accurately re-presented—the rules, customs, and conventions of the *D&D* play community in the still-emerging, mediated play space of the microcomputer. *Ultima* was a *technological* achievement for the reasons mentioned in Chapter 1 but which will receive greater attention here: namely, the iterative steps needed to translate a Lord British-style tabletop adventure onto a 5.25″ floppy disk. The "road to *Ultima*" is thus a pathway fundamentally about gaming authorship between and across platforms. We use this chapter to work through Garriott's design choices as he transitioned from hosting analog adventures to creating computational ones by focusing on his pre-*Ultima* design efforts. However, and as we've been emphasizing throughout, we want to offer a more nuanced account of gaming authorship.

This chapter has two goals with respect to theorizing early computer game authorship. First, we argue that by overemphasizing Garriott's achievements (remarkable though they were) and by lionizing him as a self-taught developer wunderkind (popular mythologizing

that became key to his designer lore as argued in Chapter 1), popular game histories about *Ultima* too often neglect the foundational role that *D&D* and its fan culture played in Garriott's creative process. That is, *D&D* is frequently presented as a convenient inspirational springboard and not as a foundational rule set and creative toolbox for subsequent world-crafting. This is a critical distinction. *D&D* provided the ludic and social foundations—through customizable world-building rules and fans' shared play practices—for transporting the analog RPG experience from the tabletop to the computer screen (see Figure 2.1). *Ultima* incorporates key elements of the fantasy worlds of both *Dungeons & Dragons* and earlier fantasy media, and this sometimes fraught heritage—particularly with regards to the racial and

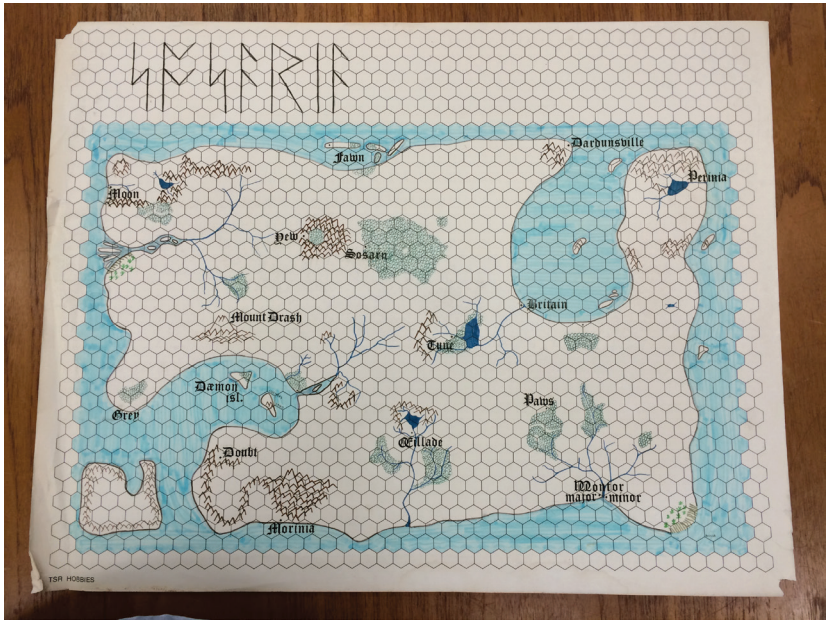


Figure 2.1: This undated paper map of Sosaria contains many of the same towns and geographical features as *Ultima*'s overworld. Image credit: Richard Garriott papers, box number: 2.116/OD1440. Prototype *Ultima* world map. Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

gender diversity of the player base and representational practices—is integral to understanding *Ultima*.

The second goal is to examine how Garriott's early prototypes in game design constitute the initial steps in the "road to *Ultima*." Specifically, Garriott's series of dungeon crawls that began on his high school's PDP-powered teletype machine—*DND1* through *DND28b*—culminating in 1980 with *Akalabeth* (a.k.a. *Ultima 0*), was an attempt at translating a live, face-to-face tabletop gaming experience into a computer-mediated, single-player adventure. By historicizing *Ultima* within the broader context of fantasy role-playing of the mid-to-late 1970s in the United States and by more closely examining Garriott's pre-*Ultima* prototypes, we can gain a better appreciation of *D&D*'s formative influence as a flexible play engine, and the challenges that come with computationally rendering these fantastic adventures.

Remediating Cultural and Technological Protocols

This chapter brings together Lisa Gitelman's (2006) notion of "cultural protocols" with Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's (1996) idea of "remediation" in theorizing Garriott's authorship of *Ultima* as occupying a middle ground between creative freedoms and technological limitations. Specifically, we're interested in studying the overlapping terrain between the considerable storytelling and performance freedoms of a role-playing system like *D&D* on the one hand, against the technical constraints of early personal computing on the other. Cultural protocols and remediation are complementary ideas that facilitate a contextualized account of Garriott's creative process situated within a larger historical milieu.

In *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture*, Gitelman discusses the importance of cultural protocols, or those rules of social comportment that accompany any media technology.

For example, in an American English context, one typically answers a phone call with a "Hello?" New media often loses its perceived newness when these technologies and their social protocols become normative—when their usage dissolves into the banality of the everyday. In the mid-to-late 1970s, emerging media like personal computing, and gameplay genres like the computer role-playing game, did not have long-established protocols from which to draw. They were both still novel forms and formats. Thus, it stands to reason that Garriott and other aspiring RPG designers would lean heavily on *D&D*'s normative rules and default conditions when hosting weekly play sessions and when drafting computer game prototypes.

What were the "cultural protocols" of *D&D* during this period? As noted earlier, we neither have access to Garriott's live sessions hosted in his home, nor do we have records—aside from a character sheet or two—of those campaign materials.[1] Where else, then, can we turn for that kind of evidence? Gitelman reminds us that media inscribe, and that this inscription is both material and semiotic. With media there is a record. But *what* is that record? And *where* is that record? Fortunately, because fantasy role-playing and tactical wargaming predate the personal computer, there are a good number of historical resources. As we detail shortly, when new media and their expressive forms come into being—in this case computer games and the CRPG genre specifically—they represent less a radical rupture with the past than they do a renegotiation of rules and processes (that is, existing cultural protocols).

Borrowing from and building upon past media finds a complementary idea in remediation. Bolter and Grusin's popularized concept argues that new media, and particularly digital media, is constantly building on its predecessors' symbolic codes and communicative conventions: for instance, photography built on the visual rules of painting; cinema built on photography and live theatre; broadcast television built on radio and film before it. Video and computer games continue the historical process of remediation by borrowing and combining

elements from existing media. Furthermore, Bolter and Grusin claim that remediated texts possess a double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy. This dual impulse of new media often appears contradictory in nature because there is at once a desire to erase any evidence of technological mediation—the immediacy of virtual reality, for example—and an impulse to multiply instances of and opportunities for mediation, as evident in the hypermediacy of multiple windows in cable news broadcasts. The scholars adopt the useful distinction that Richard Lanham strikes in art interpretation between looking "at" something (hypermediacy) versus looking "through" it (immediacy) (Bolter and Grusin 1996, 334). The medium of the digital game arguably represents the high point of this double logic. For example, in CRPGs, there is an impulse to lose oneself to the immediacy of the fictional world *and* simultaneously there exist elements of hypermediacy such as control interfaces and character customization options that foreground agency and choice. Remediation isn't some mutually exclusive, either-or tug-of-war between immediacy and hypermediacy. As game scholar Cameron Kunzelman keenly observes, "remediation is less a distinct term and more a flavorful combination of immediacy and hypermediacy" that designers can utilize to amplify subjective and affective play experiences (2016, 4). The latter part of this chapter tracks how Garriott's pre-*Ultima* prototypes engage immediacy and hypermediacy as his *D&D*-style adventures are remediated from his notebooks to the teletype/PDP-11 minicomputer. However, we begin by considering the cultural and historical parentage of the earliest *Ultima* games.

Remediating Cultural Protocols and *Dragon* Magazine

Ultima and *D&D* are both engines of ludic exploration where players make personalized and strategic choices to navigate narrative pathways. But the former is not simply a savvy adaptation of the latter by

an inspired designer. To fully appreciate how *D&D* served as a creative platform for young Garriott, we need to understand the prevailing protocols for that community of practice. In his book chronicling the origins of *Dungeons and Dragons*, role-playing scholar Jon Petersen makes the case that it was players rather than some evolving set of game rules that constituted the core experience. "One of the signature features of *D&D* is that its play takes place in a conversation between players and a referee, where players explain verbally to the referee what they want to accomplish" (Peterson 2022, xvii). What were the conversations and play practices that breathed life into evolving rulebooks and number-covered character sheets? Channeling Lisa Gitelman, how do we locate signs of their inscription? One possible solution is to dive into *Dragon* magazine, a monthly publication that helped to popularize fantasy role-playing by functioning as a community resource that circulated gameplay tools and fan art, promoted regional conventions, advertised merchandise like miniatures and campaign expansions, and featured letters to the editor and editorials by game makers, among other things. Turning our attention, if only briefly, to the practices valued by *D&D* players as expressed in early issues of *Dragon* magazine, offers key insights for understanding the creative alchemy that forged *Ultima* and helped to build its audience.

In *Shared Fantasy*, Gary Alan Fine adopts sociologist Erving Goffman's "frame analysis" to make sense of how role-players interpret their own liminal gameplay experiences (1983, 181–204). We make a similar maneuver by drawing on the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (whose own work was informed by Goffman's research) (Schwartz 1997, 26). Bourdieu's theorization of social practice and cultural capital allows us to better understand the kinds of ideas that are valued within a cultural field. Every social field possesses its own discursive sets of rules. Bourdieu calls these shared norms "doxa," or those understandings that unify a field. In order to navigate a field for a community of practice and to earn cultural capital within said

community, one must comprehend and embrace its rule set. Bourdieu's turn of phrase—"rules of the game"—is apropos in this case since participating in a role-playing game, and certainly the more complex task of running campaigns as a dungeon master, is all about knowing the rules of play, of *D&D*'s rules of play. A closer look at *Dragon* magazine discloses what was valued by this subcultural field, and it offers a better sense of how Garriott straddled the overlapping cultural terrains between *D&D* and microcomputing. Tabletop role-playing games of this period were "unapologetically incomplete," according to Peterson, with authorship being diffuse and shared among a range of participants (2022, 3). Examining something like *Dragon* is therefore methodologically beneficial as it underscores our goal of understanding how game authorship is irrevocably embedded within larger historical contexts and is not simply a singular tale of creative genius.

The Dragon (or *Dragon* as it was typically known) was published by TSR (Tactical Studies Rules, Inc.), the company behind *D&D*. Although billed on its cover as "The magazine of Fantasy, Swords & Sorcery and Science Fiction Gaming," it nevertheless functioned as a de facto house organ for the company for over 30 years. Following on the heels of TSR's *The Strategic Review* (1975–76), *The Dragon* printed its first issue in June 1976, and it released its final printed issue in September 2007. During those three-plus decades, it published 359 issues and helped usher in its sister publication *Dungeon* (1986–2007), which focused on play-tested game modules. (Both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* enjoyed an online-only run from 2008 to 2013 after they were acquired by Hasbro's Wizards of the Coast.)

We survey the magazine's early years to get a holistic sense of the subcultural field that Garriott was entering as a high schooler who would host *D&D* parties at his house and craft prototype dungeon crawls—game scenarios in which heroes fight their way through a labyrinthine underworld filled with assorted monsters—during his independent study classes. A quick research caveat is in order before

we begin. At no point in our archival box-digging or in our review of primary and secondary materials did we find evidence that Garriott held subscriptions to *Dragon*, *The Strategic Review* before it, or to *Dungeon* magazine. We do know, however, that Garriott was an active and enthusiastic participant in the University of Texas's Society for Creative Anachronism student chapter—a national group chronicled in a 1979 issue of *Dragon* (Hammack 1979). He also enjoyed a professional relationship with Steve Jackson of Steve Jackson Games, a longtime publisher of card and board games and a mainstay of the Austin gaming community. Jackson's publication *The Space Gamer* (1975–1985) ran ads in *Dragon*, as did Jackson's previous employer and previous publisher of *The Space Gamer*, Metagaming Concepts. And, as detailed in Chapter 1, Garriott worked retail at a ComputerLand store. We cannot say for certain or to what extent *Dragon*, *The Space Gamer*, or smaller fantasy zines influenced Garriott. Regardless, Garriott's widening social circles during his high school years in Houston and during his college days in Austin put him into close contact with other young folks also interested in fantasy role-playing and game design. Thus, *Dragon* evidences the larger discourse with which Garriott would have had to be conversant to prove his bona fides as one who belongs in that subcultural world of fantasy and science fiction play, game design, and computer programming.

Dragon contains copious resources for running campaigns and for inspiring new ones. And while *Dragon* features no shortage of number-filled tables for various kinds of calculations—including calculating the weight of giants (Shlump da Orc 1978) and alternative methods for generating numbers when "the dog eats your dice" before a game session (Kwalish 1977)—it would be a mistake to view it primarily as a monthly rulebook supplement. *Dragon* is equal parts about world-crafting and community-building. This flagship TSR magazine and similar, smaller periodicals of the time helped to popularize and normalize the practices of role-playing for players and aspiring game

referees and dungeon masters. Its monthly issues offered all manner of information for RPG experiences, including essential gameplay information like combat resources, armor stats, magic items, new spells, and fantastic monsters in their long-running "Creature Features" column (later renamed "Dragon's Bestiary"). But *Dragon* also contained painting guides for miniatures, photos of community events and conventions (Ferguson 1978), insider debates about creating game balance (Ward 1978a), artwork and associated fandom, various contests, songs (Stone 1978), and discussions of *D&D*'s origins and its later social controversies.[2] *D&D*'s co-creator Gary Gygax and *Dragon*'s first editor, Timothy J. Kask, were committed to creating a magazine with high production values to help ensure high circulation (Peterson 2012, 560). The approach to combining discussions of RPG mechanics and play culture worked, and *Dragon* became a vibrant archive of a community's doxa and its shared values.[3]

If there is a word that characterizes *Dragon*'s ethos it is *possibility*. The magazine was a font of ideas—a veritable watercooler around which players could debrief on adventures that worked and those that needed additional play-testing. Fans could write in to share newly created spells, weapons, and combat charts, as well as more personal accounts of how role-playing had changed their lives. As Jon Peterson notes in his mammoth history, *Playing at the World*, role-playing games aspire to a state where "anything can be attempted" (Peterson 2012, xiii). This differs considerably from the wargaming that preceded fantasy gaming in three primary respects. First, the player's locus of control shifted from managing an armed force and strategizing battlefield tactics, to embodying a single player-character who grows and changes over the course of multiple adventures and campaigns. A second difference is the shifted emphasis from historical reality to fictional fantasy. Role-playing gamers were liberated from simulating the possible to imagining the impossible. Finally, a third major difference is rather than playing against one another, as was and is often

the case in wargaming, players worked together to best enemies and complete quests. This movement from competitive to cooperative play in tandem with a markedly expanded world that was liberated from a delimited and realistic battlefield, amplified players' connections to their personalized heroes and created open-ended storytelling opportunities. The dialectic of player choice and the adjudication of those choices by the game referee, produced emergent, hero-focused fantasy narratives. As Peterson notes: "What set *Dungeons & Dragons* apart from these [wargaming] precedents is the vastly greater freedom of agency, the shift from simulating wars to simulating people; having to direct the actions of a fictional person necessarily creates a feeling of identification between player and the character" (604). We can push this idea further by noting that fantasy role-playing is appealing for many because authorship isn't centralized in any one person but is dispersed among players, dungeon masters, columns appearing in *Dragon*, modular adventures crafted by TSR employees, and so on. Peterson makes clear that early editions of the game functioned less like a game and more like a kit from which to build one. Moreover, because these adventures emerged in an era before video chat, streaming services, and a commercialized internet, *Dragon* became a major site where role-playing discourse and practices found routine expression for this play community.

Dragon also gave *D&D*'s cadre of "founding fathers"—a decidedly appropriate term given the highly gendered state of the hobby—a platform from which to proclaim certain creative elements and practices as being more authentic than others—including its idealized image of its game player. The decidedly heteronormative nature of *D&D* is aptly represented in numerous issues of *Dragon*. For example, there was a dust up after Gygax noted that dwarven women have beards. This resulted in columnist Jean Wells—the only woman in TSR's design department—having to remind players that they could decide what dwarven women looked like in their own campaigns (Wells 1979, 14).

Another example of D&D's heteronormativity is found in a single-panel comic of an adventurer sitting on a throne surrounded by three voluptuous young women, with the caption reading "All treasure in a dungeon is not measured in gold pieces" (Gygax 1979, 17).[4] The game resources in *Dragon* were considerable and wide-ranging, even if its imagined community of players was not.

From copyright questions in letters to the editor—was it OK to photocopy *D&D* materials in a non-profit capacity for friends (it wasn't) ("Out on a Limb 1976, 20)—to instigating and resolving the nerdiest of debates—was Gandalf of *The Lord of the Rings* fame only a 5th level magic user (he was) (Seligman 1977, 27)—*Dragon* concretized best practices, hosted debates, and sanctioned histories of *D&D*'s origins and its social effects. Indeed, Gary Gygax would opine so frequently in the early issues of the magazine's "Designer Forum" column (a space open to TSR and non-TSR designers), that *Dragon* created a regular spot for him called "From the Sorcerer's Scroll." Here, Gygax weighed in on topics ranging from how he and Dave Arneson launched TSR (1977a, 7), the differences between the *Basic D&D* and the *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* sets (1978a, 20), as well as the need for TSR to legally protect itself from perceived "rip-off" zines distributed by the amateur press association (1977b; 1978b).[5] Consider this full-throated justification from Gygax for locking down their role-playing system from competitors:

> But our interest in *D&D* extends beyond money and even beyond reputation. TSR created the whole of fantasy role playing gaming as a hobby, and we are proud of this achievement. Pride is [*sic*] what we have accomplished gives us a paternal right to protect our creation. Be glad, for it will help to assure that your game remains a good one, and that when you see "*D&D*" on a product you will have reasonable expectations with respect to its quality. Use your imagination and creativity when you play *D&D*, for there is much room within its parameters for individuality

> and personalization; always keep in mind that everything in the game is there for a reason, that major systems are carefully geared and balanced to mesh together to make a workable whole. Changing one part could well ruin the rest, and then what would you play?
>
> (Gygax 1978b, 21)

Gygax positions himself in the pages of *Dragon* as author and as paternalistic guardian. He oversees *D&D*'s internal coherency and gameplay balance as it expands and grows across worlds and modules, and he protects it from outside forces that seek to capitalize on its meteoric success. His regular "Sorcerer's Scroll" column and its fantasy naming position him in a similar capacity as Garriott's "Lord British" identity—as an authentic and knowledgeable father figure who exists between worlds both as the ultimate dungeon master, and as a savvy business owner and game publisher.

Fantasy is entangled with the ideologies of its makers and its historical point of origin. While this, of course, does not apply to every individual fantasy text, there was and remains a hegemony of fantasy that drew heavily from and reinforced ideologies deeply enmeshed with patriarchy and historical white supremacy. For example, C.S. Lewis, a close associate of Tolkien's, deliberately "smuggled" Christianity into his *Chronicles of Narnia*, presenting the fantastical story as a kind of ideological Trojan horse (Giardina 2011). The ongoing ripples of European-inflected white cultural and historical norms throughout fantasy occur through what Helen Young refers to as a "habit of whiteness" (2015). Culturally and historically specific influences have been repeated so often as to become the generalized tropes of the genre in which they are invoked.

This has begun to shift, but the legacy remains. It doesn't necessarily follow that all fantasy producers from this period were actively hostile to women or were overt white supremacists (although some definitely were). Rather, the point is that even fantasy media, as seemingly

removed as it is from our reality, originates from somewhere, and that values and ideologies get encoded into stories and rule sets in obvious and less obvious ways. *D&D* invoked existing cultural values and standards from the popular fantasy genre and from the wargaming culture.

Despite Gygax's indisputable centrality to all-things *D&D*, the system itself remained flexible and inviting enough that enterprising playgroups could engage in collaborative role-playing and storytelling. This DIY design ethos made *D&D* an engine for collective authorship with *Dragon* serving as a kind of community bulletin board.[6] And because *D&D* was a constantly renegotiated narrative-focused rule set, it highlights an important distinction that game scholar and designer Gonzalo Frasca (2003) strikes between strictly narrative authors (or "narrauthors") and authors of simulations (or "simauthors"). In his influential "Simulation versus Narrative" essay, Frasca argues:

> Certainly, simulation challenges narrauthors because it takes away their source of power: the ability to make statements through sequences of causes and effects. To use a metaphor, narrauthors "train" their stories so they will always perform in an almost predictable way. By contrast, simauthors "educate" their simulations: they teach them some rules and may have an idea of how they might behave in the future, but they can never be sure of the exact final sequence of events and result. The key trait of simulational media is that it relies on rules: rules that can be manipulated, accepted, rejected, and even contested. Narrauthors have executive power: they deal with particular issues. On the other hand, simauthors behave more like legislators: they are the ones who craft laws. They do take more authorial risks than narrauthors because they give away part of their control over their work.
>
> (Frasca 2003, 229)

Authorial control is central to Frasca's dichotomy. There are no shortage of complaints from dungeon masters when their adventuring players deviate too far from the campaign's script forcing improvisation and role-playing headaches.[7] Seductive sword and sorcery scenarios and low barriers to entry (all one really needs are rule books, dice, paper, time, and players) fueled *D&D*'s and *Dragon*'s rocketing successes during the late 1970s and 1980s.[8]

Yet these fairly modest gaming requirements remained hurdles for some wanting to play RPGs. A number of hybrid game systems were created to offer players less capricious game referees and fellow gamers with whom to play (a number of "letters to the editor" in *Dragon* complain about not being able to locate fellow players). In his review of the sci-fi game *Pellic Quest*, *Dragon* contributor James Ward (1978b) frames this hybrid role-playing experience this way:

> Imagine a role-playing game with a "Dungeon Master" or a "Starship Master" that is completely unaffected by the shouts of his or her players, the bribes made during the game, or the amount of alcoholic beverages consumed during the play. This is the situation that faces all the players in the game of *Pellic Quest*. It is a game entirely refereed by a computer programmed to take players from their beginning roles into a universe of endless chances.
>
> (Ward 1978b, 8)

If games like *Pellic Quest* gave players an assurance of dispassionate rule adjudication and put them into contact with other gamers, they didn't do so quickly. According to its print ad, a number of which appear in early issues of *Dragon*:

> *Pellic Quest* is a fast moving, tactically oriented, computer generated and moderated multiplayer, play by mail game. (whew!) Players receive a new printout (turn) approximately twice a month (a quality of service we

> intend to keep for our players by limiting ourselves to a *maximum* of 30 games at any one time).
>
> (Conflict Interaction Associates 1978, 10, emphasis original)

Tabletop RPGs were already notorious for being time-consuming experiences with tedious combat calculations grinding adventures to a halt. A play-by-mail computer-aided game certainly expedites these calculations, but not if these inputs are conveyed by the postal service. The CRPG addressed all three of these issues: it replaced the human referee with a supposedly impartial judge; it substituted multiple dice rolls and chart consultation with precision and speed; and the CRPG player only needed a party of one to embark on an adventure.

Remediating Technological Protocols: *DND1* (1977)

Most historical narratives trace *Ultima*'s origins to *Akalabeth* (a.k.a. *Ultima 0*) in 1980, Garriott's first commercial offering. But before it was known as *Akalabeth*, this title was known as *DND28b*. And before there was a *DND28b*, there were at least 28 prototypes.[9] It was this series of iterative programming experiments that largely convinced Richard Garriott's father to split the cost of an Apple II home computer with his son in 1979. Before that momentous occasion, Richard Garriott toiled in his notebooks and on his high school's PDP-11-powered teletype machine. These transitional gaming objects—*DND1* through *DND28*—bridge the high schooler's living-room RPG sessions to his days of packaging 5.25″ copies of *Akalabeth* in Ziploc bags for sale in the local ComputerLand store. In doing this, Garriott was extending his engagement as a player and game referee of *Dungeons and Dragons*. As Jon Peterson and other *D&D* historians have noted, these early role-playing sessions were founded on loose rule sets that required tinkering and collaboration. These analog games weren't fully formed systems with sacrosanct rules.

Unlike *Akalabeth* and *Ultima*, which had narrative frameworks and screen graphics, *DND1* through *DND28* were simple dungeon crawls that pitted the player against various menacing threats. These adventures were represented visually as ASCII (pronounced ASS-key) characters that were printed move-by-move by the teletype printer (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3). Also, unlike *Ultima* and *Akalabeth*, games that enjoy numerous remastered and emulated versions, Garriott's prototypes were seemingly consigned to the proverbial dustbin of history since they only existed on paper rolls and in his personal notebooks. That is, this was the case until Lord British declared that they should live again.

As part of a promotional effort for his massively multiplayer online computer RPG, *Shroud of the Avatar: Forsaken Virtues* (Portalarium 2014 [early access]; 2018 [official release])—a spiritual successor to *Ultima Online*—Lord British issued a challenge to his loyal subjects: to recreate *DND1*. Garriott released the game's original source code and he held a contest to see who could recreate his teletype game in a modern-day programming language like Unity or by porting it to a native web browser ("Richard Garriott's DND #1 Contest!" 2014).[10] There was more at stake to this competition than nostalgia—the winning entry would appear as a playable game within *Shroud of the Avatar*.[11] As it often does, the internet came through. In all, 24 code-savvy fans submitted entries and Garriott selected two winners (one Unity port and one web native port) and four runners-up. The winning Unity version of *DND1* can be played via the virtual teletype in *Shroud of the Avatar* while the other versions appear on their creators' websites.[12]

When fans breathed new life into this pre-*Ultima* steppingstone, they revived a remediated text for a much larger audience. This in itself is not terribly novel. After all, the history of the media arts, and digital media especially, is the history of reimagining and remediation. What, if anything, can we learn from playing an emulated version of *DND1*? Can these fan offerings illuminate salient pre-*Ultima* design

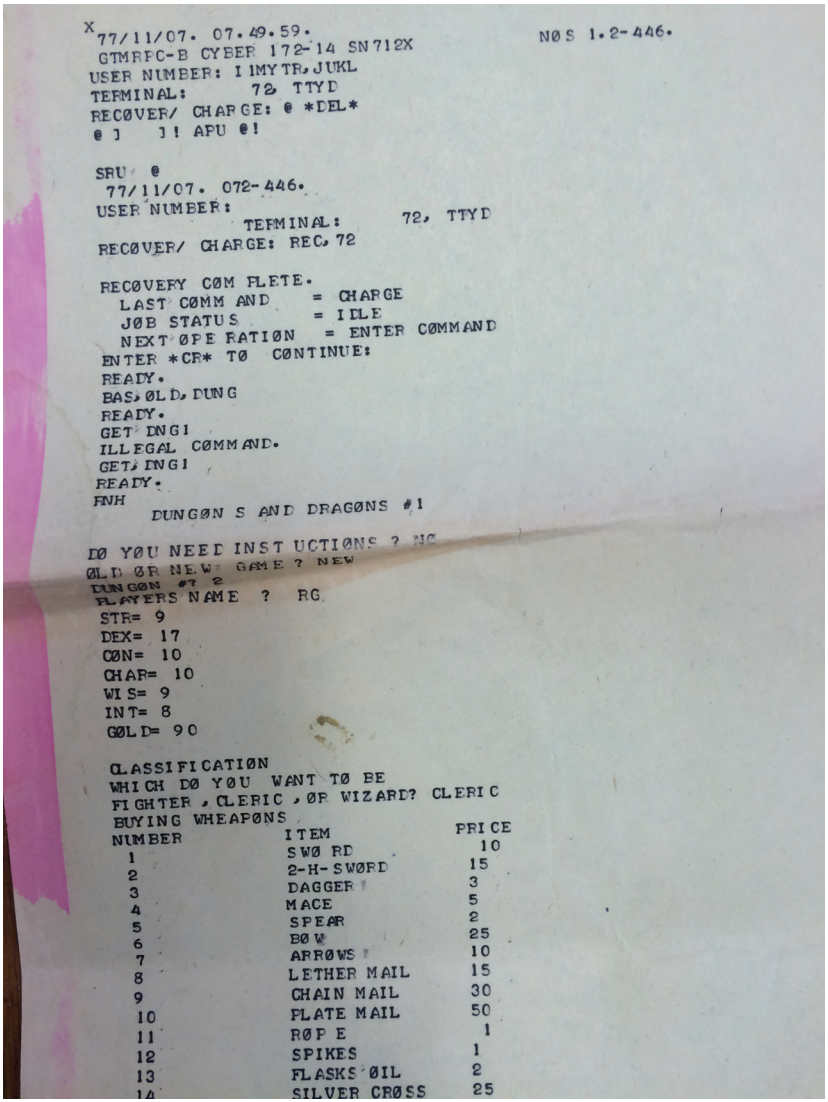


Figure 2.2: A closeup view of an original *DND1* teletype printout dated November 11, 1977 features the teenage designer's notoriously bad spelling ("dungon" and "instuctions") and his initials "RG" next to player's name. Image credit: Richard Garriott papers, box number: 2009–241/4. Early design materials. Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

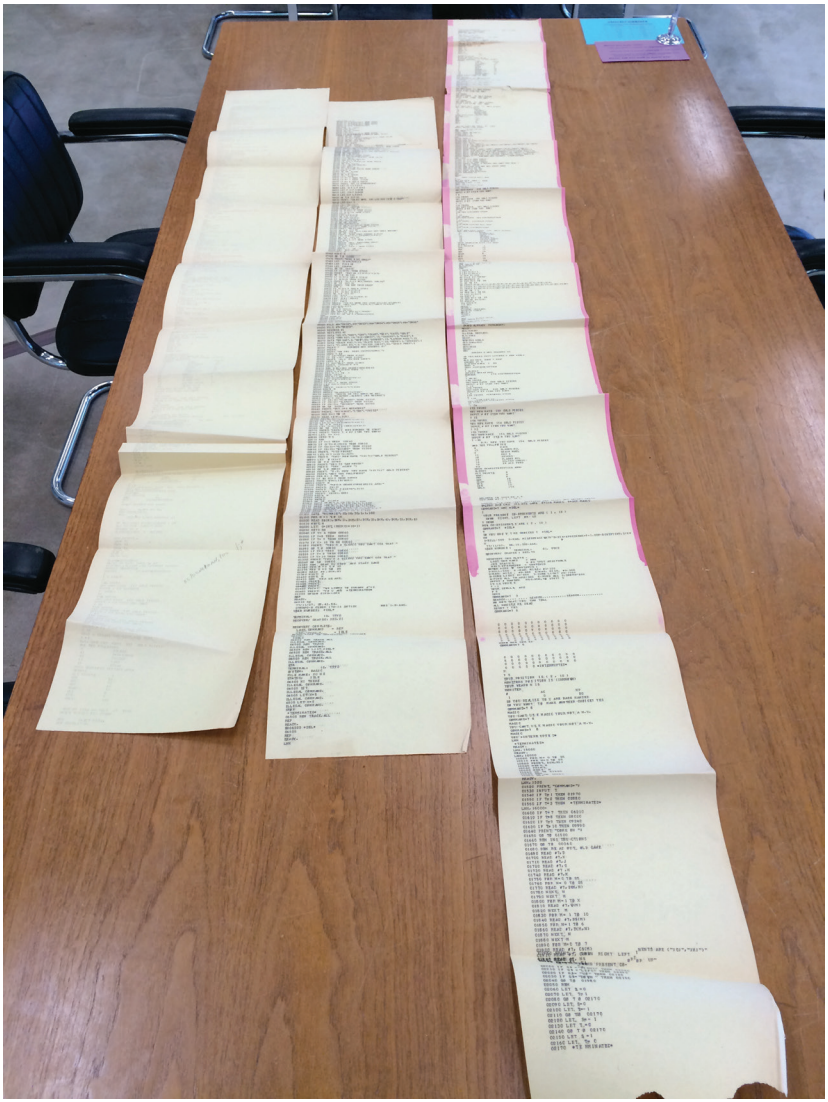


Figure 2.3: This long teletype printout serves as a step-by-step record of early dungeon exploration and proof-of-concept that tabletop gaming could be remediated for the home computer. Image credit: Richard Garriott papers, box number: 2009–241/4. Early design materials. Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

choices, or is this previously unplayable footnote in *Ultima*'s origin story simply a creative novelty that speaks more to the collective passion of CRPG fandom than anything else?

If *Dragon* magazine is an archival testament to the creative flexibility of *Dungeons and Dragons* as a play platform and the cultural codes of its community, then *DND1*'s remediation of role-playing gaming's most basic operations for a PDP-11 minicomputer offers insights into those elements that Garriott privileged during this intermediary phase of dungeon-building. The contest entry on *Shroud*'s website reminds the reader: "DND #1 represents one of the earliest known computer role playing games. Originally created and refined between the years 1975 – 1977, this game is one of the few true founding efforts of the entire computer gaming genre" ("Richard Garriott's DND #1 Contest!" 2014). Of course, fans' submissions were and were not *DND1*. On the one hand, they are loyal ports that make use of the original game's source code. On the other hand, and for all of their attempted fidelity, these recreations are not teletype-based dungeon adventures. Still, because the only other versions of *DND1* exist in Garriott's early design notebooks and as thin paper spools, we will proceed cautiously in analyzing the experience of playing the *DND1* ports, paying particular attention to how these recreations evidence aesthetics of immediacy and hypermediacy.

DND1 is not a good game. It isn't elegantly coded, intuitively designed, or fun to play. Then again, it isn't fair to hold *DND1* to the standard applied to most games. After all, it was Garriott's first attempt in what would become an iterative proof-of-concept process. *DND1* was a means to an end, with that end being convincing a parent to split the cost of a personal computer. As Richard Fleming (2014), the winning Unity contestant, notes in his YouTube video, *DND1*'s BASIC code is 1,500 lines of "spaghetti logic." There are other telltale signs that a high school programmer authored *DND1*, such as its sloppy if endearing typos—"do you need instuctions" and "your dead." Setting aside

its technical and grammatical shortcomings, *DND1* nevertheless showcases a number of design decisions that translate tabletop gaming for a new platform. The following observations are drawn from our play sessions with a few of the winning *DND1* ports—specifically those *DND1* reproductions by Santiago "Slashie" Zapata (runner-up for best native web version) (2014), Mundi King (first place for best native web version) (n.d.), and Sean Gailey (runner-up for best Unity plug-in) (2014).[13]

It may seem inconsequential but *DND1*'s first sign of immediacy appears with its opening "Do you need instuctions" [*sic*] question. By hailing the player with the second person "you," the program lays the discursive groundwork for establishing a player-game relationship. Replying with a "y"(es) results in: "Who said you could play" evoking a playful "members only" ethos reminiscent of *Dragon*'s discourse before terminating the game. Because *DND1* wasn't created with an audience beyond Garriott, this question is really a pro forma query likely intended to impress Garriott's father. Reflecting on the laborious nature of this prototyping decades later, Garriott remarked:

> I never let anyone else play those games. They couldn't; the only way to play the game was to be in the classroom with me, and there was never anyone else in the classroom. So I was not only the entire creative and production team, I was also the entire audience. Creating the games was a laborious process. I had to write the entire program in a notebook before I could type in the code, and there was no way of testing the program until it was typed in. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. Sometimes the game turned out to be better than my last effort, sometimes it didn't. When a code didn't work, I would debug it, figure out where I'd made a mistake and try again.
>
> (Garriott and Fisher 2017, 31–2)

Additional questions followed the opening, misspelled query. Typing "n"(o) leads the player through a series of pregame prompts

that customize their experience. Is this an old or new game? What dungeon number do you want to play (#1–#8)? Should the game reset after you've completed it? These questions conclude by asking the player's name. Entering anything other than "Shavs" (see Figure 2.4) in the original version results in another "Who said you could play" game-ending response (a few ports are more forgiving in this respect and allow other player names).[14]

Once the player navigates these opening questions, the game generates the player-character's abilities—numbers for (STR)ength, (DEX)terity, CON(stitution), CHAR(isma), (WIS)dom, and INT(telligence)—as well as a number of gold pieces for purchasing items. This is *DND1*'s second sign of immediacy. Garriott's program streamlines what is typically a time-consuming process—the rolling of player characteristics (unsurprisingly *DND1* uses the same categories as *Dungeons and Dragons*). This number generation step is followed by the first consequential gameplay question: "Which do you want to be?

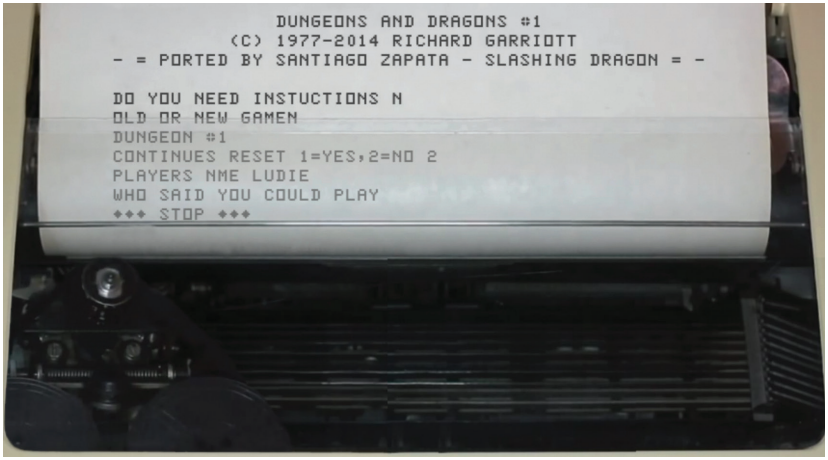


Figure 2.4: Santiago Zapata (a.k.a. Slashing Dragon) recreates *DND1* as part of a promotional contest. His faithful recreation even includes Garriott's inside joke where entering any name other than "Shavs" results in the game ending.

Fighter, Cleric, or Wizard?" This choice determines whether the player has access to certain spells or equipment. After selecting one of three classes, the player is invited to purchase items. As with the nonexistent "instuctions," there isn't any guidance about what one should procure before moving forward. Which is better: the regular sword or the two-handed sword? What kind of armor should one select? How much spare food should one buy? Why purchase a rope, a flask of oil, or a silver cross? Is there any need to conserve one's gold pieces? Despite its lack of guidance, *DND1* nevertheless produces the player's stats, maintains an updated inventory of items, and processes the purchasing math. Recall that technological immediacy is an aesthetic experience that foregrounds a sense of presence with the contents of a medium. By quickly and effortlessly facilitating the player's character-creation and inventory-building processes, the game (at least for the moment) highlights the player's centrality in making these decisions by hiding the computational efforts that make it possible.

Following these choices, the player is welcomed to the dungeon of their choosing, and is given their location in *x*-*y* coordinates (for example, [22, 16]). A two-dimensional grid of numeric characters also appears representing various dungeon elements: the player-character is represented with a 9; the walls are depicted as 1s; open spaces are 0s; doors are 4s; enemies are 5s; and treasures are 6s (see Figure 2.5). While these number assignments are less than intuitive and the dungeon space (such as it is) hardly immersive, this world is revealed immediately and autonomously *as if* it exists. And herein lies *DND1*'s third sign of immediacy. Whatever dungeon the player selects, it materializes before the player—be it as a ported game on a contemporary web browser or as a series of printed teletype lines. The number grids invite players to explore these abstracted dungeons and to experiment with gameplay strategies. Moving up and down, left and right as the number 9, opening "4"s to access new rooms, initiating combat with dangerous "5"s, or falling into hidden traps without rope and spikes

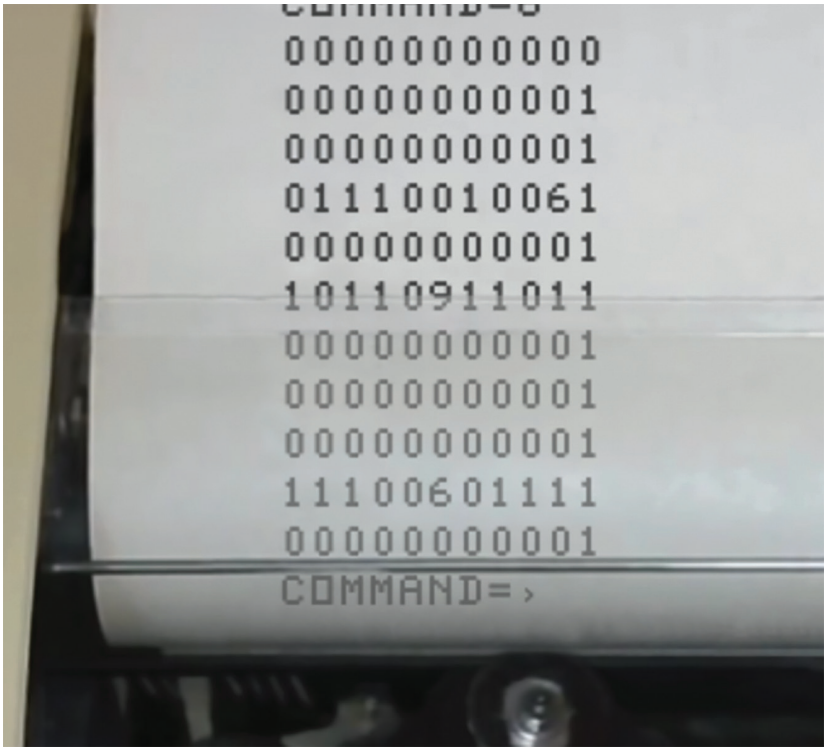


Figure 2.5: *DND1*'s dungeon is rendered in numeric figures. Screen capture taken from Santiago Zapata's recreation.

(resulting in an unceremonious "sorry your dead" [*sic*]) is a responsive if visually abstract CRPG.

As a once-new prototype, *DND1* likewise possesses signs of hypermediacy—or those medium-specific characteristics that foreground the act of mediation. Bolter and Grusin (1996), for example, point to the computer desktop interface—complete with its multiple web browser tabs and open software applications—as illustrating the fractured nature of computer usage (317). In the case of Garriott's original *DND1*, the minicomputer's dual system of the off-site PDP-11 processor and his high school's on-site teletype highlights its inescapable mediation. Because there was no screen, the user had to wait on printed feedback to track the results of their dungeon-crawling choices. This is

something that even the loyal ports could not replicate (although that didn't stop Zapata from recreating a loud teletype printer sound effect in his browser port).

Another example of *DND1*'s hypermediacy is its use of the ASCII character set to depict its dungeons. Garriott used computational characters to represent fantasy units by transforming explorers into 9s and enemies into 5s. The ASCII graphics remediated the work typically performed by role-players' graph paper. Garriott made the most of the limited visual affordances of the minicomputer to create a brief but autonomous fantasy experience. The fact that the dungeons' elements were composed of ASCII figures speaks to the truly liminal state of this gaming prototype—one that sought to recreate a fantasy adventure on a new platform using its native symbols and affordances, including procedurality. *DND1* was less about world-building and storytelling than basic dungeon design and gameplay engineering. These were solo affairs drafted by Garriott for Garriott with the goal of leading to bigger and better adventures. Still, playing through the fan-authored *DND1* recreations leads one to experience ASCII-based space as a world. Yes, it's an exceedingly flat, hyper-abstracted, and largely non-narrative one, but it is an interactive world nonetheless.

Conclusion

Maps and roads are useful metaphors when thinking through *Ultima*'s prehistory of RPG remediation. Because of its technical achievements and due to its commercial success, *Akalabeth* is generally thought to be the linchpin that bridges Garriott's tabletop role-playing with his computer series. *Akalabeth* is often called *Ultima 0* for this reason. But *Akalabeth* couldn't have happened without the 28-plus "pit stops" along the way—indeed, *Akalabeth* was at one point *DND28b*. Years before Garriott became the world-famous, world-crafting Lord British, he toiled as a ludic cartographer who translated dungeon

sketches from his notebooks into the BASIC programming language (WtF Dragon 2015c).

Framing Garriott's work on *DND1* through *DND28* as being that of a self-taught ludic cartographer also reinforces Bolter and Grusin's insights about remediation's twin impulses of immediacy and hypermediacy. *DND1* works within the considerable visual limitations of the ASCII character set to present players with a symbolically abstract dungeon space that reminds them of the computer platform's characteristics (hypermediacy). Yet it simultaneously offers a seemingly autonomous space that is ripe for exploration and which responds to their actions (immediacy). Although different aesthetic experiences, they are two sides of the same proverbial coin. According to Bolter and Grusin (1996):

> Hypermedia and transparent media are opposite manifestations of the same desire: the desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real. They are not striving for the real in a metaphysical sense. Instead, the real is defined in terms of the viewer's experience: it is that which evokes an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response.
>
> (Bolter and Grusin 1996, 343)

There is an inherent danger in trying to find the "missing link" when doing game history. Inserting a new piece into the historical narrative invariably creates a new gap, and one can always find more evidence that needs to be integrated into an account. Just as we have been careful to avoid reproducing Garriott's "singular genius" narrative by highlighting the contributions of those around the designer and the discursive work performed by his Lord British identity, we similarly don't need to catalog every pre-*Akalabeth* and pre-*Ultima* influence. Instead we'd rather contextualize his creative choices within a larger subcultural field of practices—hence the attention paid to *Dragon* magazine.

Over the course of its print run, *The Dragon* published approximately 444 reviews of console and computer games (Crossett n.d.). One of the magazine's first columns on computer games argues that *Dragon* needs to focus more on this emerging pastime (Herro 1980, 62). Also appearing in that same April 1980 issue is the provocatively titled column, "The DM's Right-Hand Man[?]" wherein that contributor questions the ability of computer software to compete with or outright replace the dungeon master as a storyteller.[15] It is interesting to see *Dragon*'s contributors wrestle with the promise and threat posed by computers in the same year as *Akalabeth*'s release. Not surprisingly, *Dragon* ran reviews of Garriott's work and that of Origin Systems throughout the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, Mike Gray's (1986) assessment of *Ultima IV* reads in part: "… *Ultima IV* is the closest anyone has yet come to approximating a full-fledged fantasy roleplaying experience in a computer game" (41). Yet this glowing review was preceded by inauspicious coverage of *Akalabeth*. Bruce Humphrey's 1982 review of *Akalabeth* noted:

> Starvation is a frequent danger. Mental starvation is a danger, too, and if a computer game can cause such, this one will. A novice may find it diverting for a time, at least until he makes his third completed quest—only to be sent on still another. A veteran role-player will laugh off the program quickly and return to his *AD&D* manuals.
>
> (Humphrey 1982, 73)

Bourdieu argues that habitus is a "structured and structuring structure." Role-playing games like *D&D*, and publications like *Dragon* that helped to popularize those world-building systems and practices, are part of that "structuring structure."[16] They are not simply inspirational in some vague, amorphous sense—they established the social field that enabled Garriott to transition from a dungeon master into a CRPG designer. Still, for all of its many rules, charts, and calculations, there was nevertheless a profound sense of world-building potential present

in the pages of *Dragon* magazine—a publication that was establishing the horizon of possibilities for tabletop gaming, including Garriott's yet to be crafted gaming franchise. This sense of open-ended possibility was as clear in the pages of *Dragon* as it is on the opening screens of *Ultima*. Even today, *Ultima* remains a remarkable game for stuffing such wide-ranging fare onto a modest 5.25″ floppy disk—character creation, fantasy quests, dungeon exploration, time travel, turn-based and arcade-style combat—points we explore in the following chapter.[17] The game is anchored in a longer history of fantasy, but it also looked outside of standard genre conventions and thought creatively about what might be possible as role-playing migrated from dining room tables to the home computer.

CHAPTER 3
The World of *Ultima*

Introduction: "From darkest dungeons, to deepest space!"

Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness is often praised for establishing gameplay elements and mechanics now common to the video and computer role-playing game genre: character-creation choices, the buying and selling of items, pursuing major and minor quests, claustrophobic dungeon-crawling, and large open-world exploration. Add to this *Ultima*'s (then) relatively intuitive user interface and a freedom to explore a vast world brimming with monsters and mystery, and you have a game that helped make the CRPG accessible to broader gaming populations while codifying key design strategies for future generations. Game journalists, critics, and fans have heaped copious praise on the series for decades, cementing its status as a landmark game belonging to a landmark series.

Despite its famed influence, the first *Ultima* is also a profoundly experimental title—a point that is often missed *precisely* because of its lauded centrality to the genre's formation. *Ultima* blends high-fantasy

battles and sci-fi time travel; it mixes first-person dungeons with a third-person overworld; it combines turn-based combat with arcade-style shootouts; and it contains a carefully crafted geography complete with cities and castles along with randomly generated labyrinths. In short, while exploring the world of Sosaria as "the Stranger," the player discovers that *Ultima* is itself a strange experiment in game design and storytelling. This chapter offers a close gameplay analysis of the first *Ultima* with the goal of understanding what makes it a simultaneously compelling and enigmatic gaming experience, and how Garriott experimented with transporting players to strange new lands for a strange new medium.[1]

Our deep dive into *Ultima* takes its inspiration from one of the earliest book-length attempts to capture what it feels like to play a video game. Published roughly 15 years before the emergence of game studies as a humanistic pursuit, David Sudnow's 1983 auto-ethnographic *Pilgrim in the Microworld* chronicles the Berkeley sociologist's personal fascination turned obsession with the Atari 2600 console version of *Breakout* (Atari 1976).[2] *Breakout*, a single-player variation of *PONG*, challenges the player with eliminating horizontal lines of bricks by bouncing a ball off of a paddle. Unlike *Ultima*, *Breakout* contains neither characters nor narrative. *Pilgrim in the Microworld* isn't a cultural history of *Breakout*'s production or its lasting influence so much as it is Sudnow's own phenomenological exploration of the game's challenges and its enigmatic holding power. The book is a personal travelogue of a virtual journey—one that searches for a vocabulary to explain his embodied experiences while trying to best *Breakout*'s wily programming.

We obviously don't have to contend with the same challenges that faced Sudnow in the early 1980s. The industry has evolved dramatically over the intervening years and game culture along with it. Today, video gaming is neither a technical novelty, nor is it considered odd

for middle-aged adults (and even scholars like Sudnow) to take games seriously as objects of study. We also benefit from having a wellspring of online, fan-produced gaming information at our fingertips and needn't seek out assistance from designers—as Sudnow did when he interviewed Atari programmers for gameplay tips. Despite these differences, we share a desire to examine a beguiling plaything and to document that process of virtual exploration. For Sudnow, *Breakout* represented a radical new entrant into the domestic space—something that altered his body's relationship with television. For us, *Ultima*'s design is exceedingly familiar *and* unrelentingly alien. From its opening screens, *Ultima*'s debt to *Dungeons & Dragons* is obvious—there is a shared cultural DNA that tethers this early CRPG to tabletop gaming. Yet many of its story and gameplay choices confound us precisely because we've grown accustomed to the generic rules and conventions that the series would help codify over the following decades.

Pilgrim in the Microworld is also methodologically generative because it illustrates how the detailed documentation of a gaming experience constitutes its own authorial and archival act. Like the previous chapters, this one too is about authorship. Here, we offer a thick description of our *Ultima* experience. Our journey will not precisely match others' adventures in Sosaria because it cannot. The game's multiple variables—the character-creation choices, maze-like dungeons, glitches, and so on—defy easy synthesization. Instead, we narrate how our gameplay choices intersect with Garriott's design choices to create an experience of collaborative authorship. We hope our personalized account underscores that gaming authorship invariably begets gaming authorship as building worlds begets world-builders (points reinforced in Chapters 4 and 5), and that experiencing Lord British's world-crafting is more than the sum of its parts, including the design choices of a young programmer and the gameplay decisions of player-scholars decades later.

Loading...

We elected to play Origin Systems' 1986 version of *Ultima I* that came packaged with the 1989 Ultima Trilogy box set for the Commodore 64 (C64) for several reasons. First, playing *Ultima* on an 8-bit platform discloses material details absent from modern-day ports where visuals and game code have been optimized to look better and to run smoother. For example, there is virtually no delay when playing the visually sharper 1989 Windows/macOS versions available through online distributors Good Old Games and Origin.[3] Our Commodore 64 disk drive, on the other hand, would occasionally fail to read the floppy disk, prematurely ending that day's adventuring. Despite the technical headaches and inconveniences, we liked the idea of having a dedicated, pre-internet CRPG machine.

We were also attracted to this version because of its packaging. After Garriott successfully reclaimed his copyright from Sierra On-Line, with whom he'd partnered on *Ultima II: Revenge of the Enchantress*, Origin Systems released *Ultima I* by itself in 1986, and again with the Ultima Trilogy collection in 1989.[4] Being one of numerous collections released by Origin Systems and, later, Electronic Arts, this box set contains the 1986 recoded version of *Ultima I*, as well as *Ultima II* and *Ultima III*—the trilogy otherwise known as the "First Age of Darkness."[5] Also included in this set are the paratextual materials that Garriott and Origin Systems helped to make famous (more on this in Chapter 4). This set bears the packaging imprimatur of a young designer and company deeply invested in solidifying that which makes for a "proper" Lord British CRPG.[6] Along with the three game disks, the set includes a 100-page guidebook, an 8-page player's reference guide, "quickstart" instructions for the C64, paper maps of Sosaria (for *Ultimas I* and *III*) and one of Earth (for *Ultima II*), and an Origin Systems registration card.[7] One final reason for using this version of *Ultima I* is because it was the one we had—and it worked. This

practical justification is a necessary one when attempting to play titles using decades-old hardware and software.

Typing "LOAD '*', 8, 1" brings the Commodore's disk drive to life as it works to read side A of the 5.25″ floppy disk. After a series of mechanical whirs and grunts, the game's opening vista appears. There is no music or sound effects. A small, pixelated castle sits next to a large body of water, shining in the evening moonlight. Stars twinkle in the night sky as a horse busies itself in a nearby field. A white-headed bird (perhaps an eagle or a hawk) flies from screen right to left, landing in the tree in the foreground. As these animations play out, we are presented with the following text on sequential title cards: "Origin presents … a new release of the best-selling personal computer role-playing adventure … Lord British's original fantasy masterpiece … *Ultima I*." The large blade of a rapier emerges from the water and vertically bisects the title's roman numeral one (see Figure 3.1).

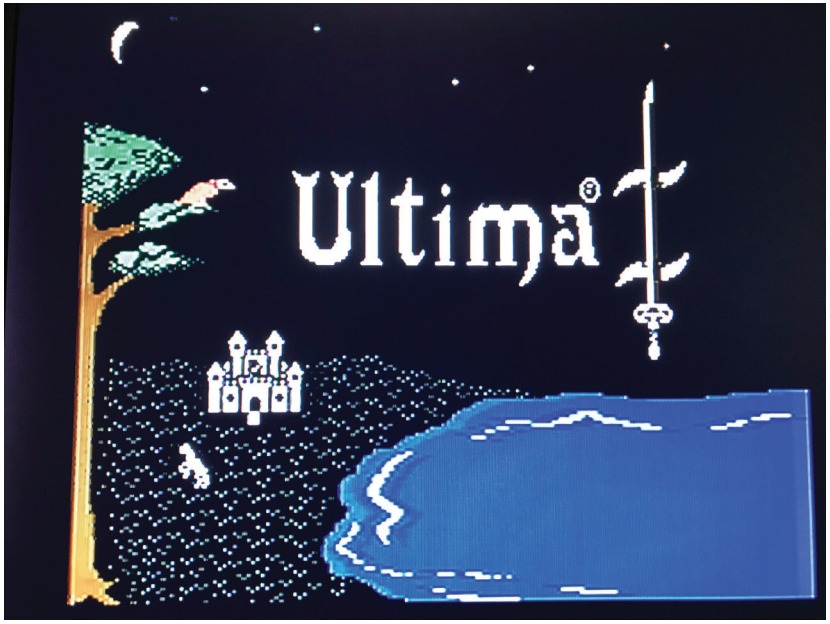


Figure 3.1: *Ultima*'s opening screen hints at its expansive world of Sosaria.

The next screen previews the audacious scope of the player's adventure, one that will take their heroic Stranger "from darkest dungeons, to deepest space!" The player is asked to make "thy choice" between generating a new character or continuing with a previous game. Selecting a new character presents the player with six common role-playing attributes—strength, agility, stamina, charisma, wisdom, and intelligence—with 10 points apiece. (These ability categories are the same as those in *Dungeons & Dragons* with the slight naming difference that it uses constitution instead of stamina, and dexterity in lieu of agility.) The player is given 30 additional points to distribute across these categories with a maximum of 20 points per attribute. Unlike *Akalabeth*'s randomized character generation, *Ultima* immediately grants players the freedom to customize their heroes. But *Ultima* also presumes that players are relatively familiar with role-playing conventions as there is little description explaining the ramifications of one's choices. The "Player Reference Card" (California Pacific Computer Company 1981) included with the game's initial release dedicates a sentence to each attribute. That character-creation information was not expounded upon in the "Ultima Trilogy Quickstart Instructions" (Origin Systems 1989) contained in our Commodore 64 box set. This choice likely reflects developer assumptions about audience—and audience familiarity with *Dungeons & Dragons* and the conventions of tabletop role-playing games, which, as we've discussed, often had problematic assumptions about audience identity (Stang and Trammell 2020; Trammell 2018a; Trammell 2018b; Vossen 2020).

The player must make a few additional character-creation choices. We are prompted to "select thy race" among a human, elf, dwarf, or bobbit—a playful nod to the hobbits in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and one likely altered out of copyright fears. Unlike the player attributes, the four available races and the four professions—fighter, cleric, wizard, and thief—receive colorful descriptions in the 100-page "Ultima Trilogy Manual" (Origin Systems 1989). The back of *Ultima*'s 1981 "Player Reference Card" distributed by California Pacific lists

the relative advantages of the different races and vocations. However, likely due to the cost of printing even modest guides, it too is light on explanation and world-building. Next, the player selects "thy sex"—a choice that doesn't have any gameplay effects. Once the player has determined their character's race, sex, and profession, they enter their name (no more than 15 characters) and save their newly crafted player-character to the disk. Loading this character transports the player's "Stranger" into Sosaria.

Finding and Assembling *Ultima*'s Narrative

Where are we? And what are we doing here? Our avatar is centered in the main play screen (see Figure 3.2). The white, 8-bit figure, which looks to be a fighter with raised sword and shield, stands alone in a grassy field, adjacent to a green forest. A castle lies to the upper left.

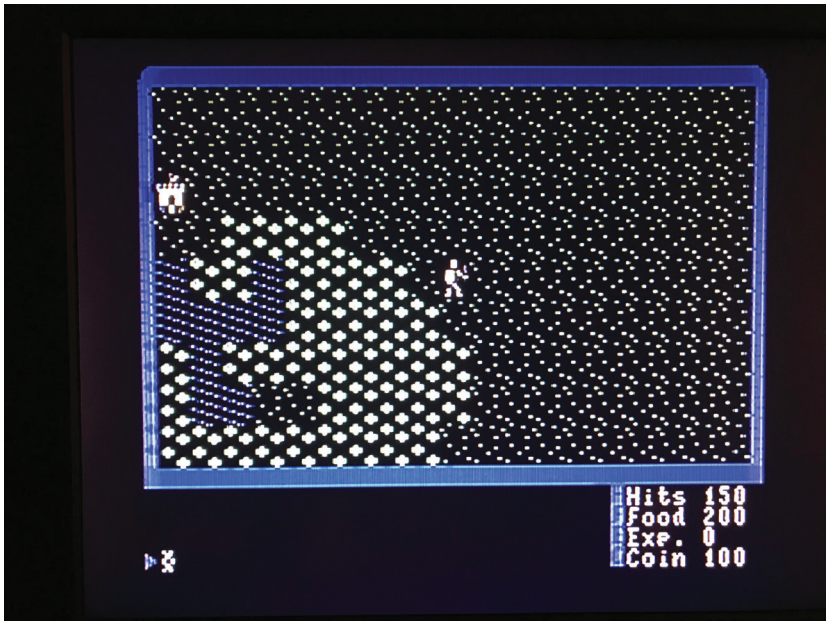


Figure 3.2: The player begins their adventure in the middle of a field without much guidance.

Below this play screen are two informational windows. The one on the bottom left is the command window where the player enters keystrokes and sees their effects: movement, spell-casting, combat, and so on. The lower right window displays four key stats: "hits" (for hit points, or how much damage our character can take before dying); "food" (which decreases steadily with worldly exploration); "exp" (for experience points gained); and "coin" (a running tally of all the copper pence, silver pieces, and gold crowns collected from besting enemies and exploring dungeons). We begin with 150 hits, 200 food, zero exp, and 100 coin.

Searching for narrative motivation and diegetic context, we consult our box set. The "Ultima Trilogy Manual" establishes who we are and why we're here. It is reproduced below in its entirety to convey how these printed materials directly interpellate the player as its would-be hero.

> Hail, Noble One! Our land is in need of a stalwart hero, one who will brave perils too horrific to consider. A plague has befallen the Realm, a scourge is upon the land! Our villages lie sacked, ruinous mounds of ashes where once trod peasants stout of heart and sound of mind, where once lay fields of grain and fruit, where kine and fowl grew fat upon the bounties of our fair Sosaria. All manner of wicked and vile creatures prey upon our people and ravage the land. 'Tis the doing of one so evil that the very earth trembles at the mention of his name.
>
> Mondain the Wizard hath wrought his malice well. Our nobles bicker amongst themselves, and each hath retired to the confines of his keep in hopes of watching the downfall of his rivals. Verily, the Evil One hath heaped indignity upon curse by releasing upon the Realm a host of creatures and beasts so bloodthirsty and wicked that our defenseless people fall as grain before the reaper's scythe. These denizens of the underworld hold sway over all that can be surveyed, save for the strongholds of the nobles besotted with their own ambition. Nowhere in our once peaceful

> country may a traveler find safe passage or lodging, save in the keeps of the self-proclaimed kings—and they demand hard labors for their indulgences.
>
> Only the young Lord British remains steadfast in the vision of a peaceful and united Sosaria. In his castle and his towne the pure of heart will find an ally and replenishment for the needs of one who hath chosen to fight for the Realm.
>
> Aid us in ridding our land of the scourge that hath befallen us, O Noble One. We beseech thee, for without thine aid we shall surely perish before the onslaught of the maleficent necromancer. Slay the evil Mondain!
>
> ("Ultima Trilogy Manual" 1989, 5–6)

The same plea for heroism is included in the materials for *Ultima*'s stand-alone 1986 update. The copy on the back of the 1986 packaging asks:

> Who among you will rise to challenge the evil Wizard? Who will brave the darkest depths of the earth and the farthest reaches of outer space? Who will track the foul Mondain to his hidden lair and put an end to the darkness he has cast upon Britannia? The Ultimate Quest awaits you!
>
> (*Ultima I* box art 1986)

Comparing versions of *Ultima I*'s supporting materials over the years—the 1981 original, the 1986 solo update, and the 1989 trilogy set—reveal differences that illustrate the game's changing relationship to its own storyline and to the increased value of narrative consistency to the larger franchise. First, by making Mondain *Ultima*'s primary villain, Garriott engaged in retroactive continuity (or "retcon")—a practice where past story details are altered to fit a new narrative. He wanted to amplify *Ultima*'s dramatic stakes beyond that of *Akalabeth* where players faced Mondain's underlings.

Thus, he resurrected the wizard for players to vanquish. Second, the 1986 box art notes that it is Britannia and not Sosaria that needs saving (that is, "an end to the darkness he has cast upon Britannia"). According to *Ultima*'s lore, the continent of Britannia isn't formed until the great cataclysm caused by the defeat of Exodus, the main villain in *Ultima III*. Britannia doesn't replace Sosaria as the main *Ultima* landmass until *Ultima IV* in 1986.

Why does this matter? This otherwise pedantic observation about misstated copy on box art from 1986 is offered as partial evidence that Garriott's stories have always come second to his world-building efforts. Yes, there was concern, especially as the *Ultima* universe expanded across sequels and eras, that Origin properly canonize the games' narratives, characters, and spaces. However, as we detail in Chapter 1, Garriott's design sensibility was motivated first and foremost by "what if" questions about role-playing possibility, and less by "what then" questions concerning narrative causality or coherency. This is a world-first, story-second approach to game design. Indeed, he has said as much about his creative process. In his co-written autobiography *Explore/Create*, Garriott notes:

> Rapidly improving technology and gains in computer memory made it possible for me to create an increasingly interactive environment with each new *Ultima*. I eventually came to believe that instead of conceiving of a story and then creating a world in which it could be told and make sense, I should create the world first—then let the player have access to all of its capabilities as they negotiate their own story. The door did open; it was up to the player to decide whether or not to open it.
>
> (Garriott and Fisher 2017, 109)

Perhaps story-craft was secondary to his world-building because he so routinely relied on a handful of elements drawn from his tabletop gaming sessions, live-action Society for Creative Anachronism

(SCA) events, and his prosaic fiction. Garriott recalls the origins of his *Ultima* universe:

> I was seventeen when I wrote "The First Age of Darkness: The Story of Mondain the Wizard." Clearly the influences that would shape my worlds—and the worlds I would create—were already present. "Here is the story of the Village of Moon, and the creation of the world of Sosaria," it began. "This is the only written history remaining from the first year of Lord British, immortal, twenty-seventh-level wizard, ruler of Sosaria. Before men, elves, dwarves, or the many other creatures of Sosaria were created, the fate of all the races was decreed in the heavens and shall remain so until the end of time."
>
> (Garriott and Fisher 2017, 15)

Although Garriott can trace *Ultima*'s narrative building blocks to his high school years, little of that made its way into the packaging materials distributed by California Pacific in 1981. The 12-page "Ultima playbook" contains instructions on how to run the game, how to move through its spaces, and strategies for fighting enemies. There is no explanation, however, about the endgame. Indeed, the California Pacific Computer Co. advertisement appearing on the last page of the playbook does little to clarify matters: "*Ultima*. The next generation in HiRes adventure/fantasy role-playing games. By Lord British. Superb color graphics span time itself as player [*sic*] evolves from medieval castles & dungeons to space war in future galaxies" (Lord British 1981b, 14).

Story is instead embedded within *Ultima*'s spaces of play. Experientially, it is something to be discovered and assembled rather than simply received. In later iterations of the game, Origin provided additional narrative clarity through its supplemental guides as part of its greater world-building efforts. But for those playing the original release in the early and mid-1980s, they had to venture forth and

survive *Ultima*'s challenges long enough to piece together the narrative clues that would lead to its conclusion.

Spaces of Exploration and Cycles of Frustration

Playing *Ultima* is an experience marked by two contradictory feelings: that of agency and user choice; and being locked into rote routines. Sosaria's three primary playspaces—its third-person overworld, first-person underworld, and its mixed-perspectives outer space sequences—all evidence these experiential tensions. The oscillation between spatial freedom and mechanistic repetition is owed, in large part, to the affordances and limitations of using a computer to mediate a *Dungeon & Dragons*-style role-playing campaign. Here, the programming code is the dungeon master's proxy, and the open-ended possibilities of tabletop gaming are delimited by coding skill, disk space, and time. Given the relatively open-ended nature of *Ultima*—one can create a variety of characters and set off in any number of directions—it is easiest to describe its spaces and tensions in the order in which we encountered them during our quest to kill Mondain.

Ultima's 2D Overworld

We are dropped into Sosaria without being told what to do or where to go. We know that we're a stranger to this land. We know we have to defeat Mondain. *Ultima* does not give its players a clear path; rather, it gives them a goal.

We begin by moving our level 1 female wizard, "Ludie," around the screen, becoming accustomed to the click-clack of the C64's chunky, brown keys. Complicating matters for our contemporary sensibilities, our Commodore 64 does not have a mouse and there are only two arrow keys—a left-right arrow and an up-down arrow. In *Ultima*, this means that moving up or left requires the Shift key and appropriate

arrow key be pressed at the same time. Aside from a space battle sequence that we'll discuss eventually, this control scheme is easy to manage as most of the game is *primarily* turn-based.

A quick note about this "primarily" qualifier is in order. If game time exists somewhere on a spectrum between strict turn-based moves on the one hand (for example, moving single game pieces one at a time in chess) and real-time play on the other (such as where game time and real time are synchronous as in a driving simulator), then *Ultima* is primarily a turn-based affair. The qualifier is needed because *Ultima*'s creatures will eventually move independently of the player's actions, albeit at a much slower pace. For example, if a player is battling a Wandering Warlock outside the city of Moon, the player and the Warlock will exchange attack after attack until one is defeated. However, if the player steps away from the keyboard while engaged in that battle, the Warlock will slowly bleed the player-character of hit points. Such a design choice both forces the player to act, functioning as a kind of internal game timer, and it imbues Sosaria with an independence separate from the player. The player can act on Garriott's world, but it can likewise act independently of the player.

Ultima's overworld is represented visually as tile graphics. It was one of the first games to feature scenery that scrolled both horizontally and vertically.[8] The experiential effect is that it conveys a sense of spatial freedom and scale that exceeds the monitor's edges. Indeed, if one squints, Sosaria looks as if were drafted using graph paper—appropriate given how common that material is to tabletop role-playing campaigns. This is not simply a trick of the eye. According to game historian Jimmy Maher (2012a), each screen was composed of 200 tiles, and each individual tile is 14 × 16 pixels. These tiles were prerendered on paper before they were entered into the computer, but this was no simple translation process. In a blog post supporting his Kickstarter-backed book project, *Through the Moongate*, game historian Andrea Contato (2018) underscores that

Garriott and his ComputerLand friend Kenneth Arnold collaborated on this arduous design process:

> They had to draft every tile on paper, on a 14×16 grid, translate it into binary code, reverse it, and then translate it into hexadecimal code, put the result in the engine and see if it looked nice enough. Or repeat the entire process. Apple II graphics had some unintuitive rough limitations because certain colors couldn't be next to certain others.
>
> (Contato 2018, para. 2)

Moreover, it was Arnold and not Garriott who was principally responsible for the assembly code that made the overworld view work. *Ultima*'s map contains numbers that assign specific tiles to the world grid, making its multi-continent realm possible.

Ultima's overworld is dotted with towns, castles, dungeons, and landmarks beckoning the player to explore them. The world's features have their own movement rules: mountains are impassible (one has to go around); forests can only be traveled on foot or on horseback; the oceans can only be crossed with certain vessels. Garriott's dungeon-master humor, which is evident throughout the game, also appears when attempting to move one's avatar into inaccessible spaces. For instance, trying to move Ludie onto a water tile results in, "You can't walk on water!" or trying to run her frigate onto a non-ocean tile results in a "Frigates like water!" Similarly, interacting with the Eastern Sign Post landmark results in: "The sign reads: 'Go east to go east!' "

This exploratory freedom is both exciting and paralyzing. Where do we go? What do we do? We move Ludie around her immediate surroundings, trying to assess our situation. We stand alone in grassy fields. Hitting "I" for "inform and search" tells us that "You are in the lands of Lord British."

As we wander about, we begin familiarizing ourselves with the numerous alphabetic keyboard commands. A number of these

commands are fairly intuitive: "A" is for attack. "Q" is for quit. And "E," for enter, transports the player from the overworld wilderness into a city, castle, or dungeon. Other commands are more idiosyncratic and imaginative: striking "O" for "open coffin" applies to coffins alone; "K" for "k-limb" [*sic*] moves up and down ladders between dungeon levels; "X" for "x-it craft" [*sic*] leaves vehicles or dismounts a horse. Not including the arrow and number keys, there are 20 command keys in all; only J, L, M, P, W, and Y have no use in our C64 version of the game. Pressing a non-assigned key results in a "Huh?" in the command screen. (Garriott mapped an action to all 26 letter keys by *Ultima III* two years later.)

We briefly explore our surroundings, including the nearby woods and the adjacent shoreline. Two buildings appear to the west. We notice, too, that our food count decreases a point with every two tiles traveled. Suddenly, two enemies appear in the distance from off-screen and begin making their way toward Ludie. Feeling suddenly underequipped and vulnerable, we retreat to the nearby city of Britain where we can safely strategize.

Ultima can be an unforgiving game. This is particularly true for beginner players who have yet to figure out its survival and combat systems. For instance, losing all of the player-character's hit points will result in death—a standard convention in analog and digital role-playing games. What is different about *Ultima*, however, is how the player-character recovers and earns additional health. Players can purchase hit points from kings by "offering pence" or by besting enemies in dungeons.[9] The complicating factor is that these earned hit points aren't collected until *after* a player exits the dungeon. This means that players must not overextend themselves during dungeon explorations lest they deplete their health before returning to the surface. Further complicating matters, fighting enemies in the overworld will earn players money but it won't recover any hit points.

Food also operates differently above and below ground. Food is typically purchased in city shops.[10] Overworld exploration steadily

depletes the food count, whereas no food is consumed in dungeons irrespective of the time spent or the depth of levels undertaken. Using different forms of transportation will reduce the food count at different rates of consumption. Hunger does not exist but starvation does. Once the food counter hits zero, the player suffers instant death.

Although rudimentary by today's standards, *Ultima*'s survival and combat systems drive and reinforce one another in the service of promoting exploration. Its gameplay loops are built around helping the player explore far and wide to discover and complete quests that will advance the game narrative. To move about, players must buy food from city vendors with the coins collected from vanquished foes. But because engaging in combat depletes a character's hit points, players must pay kings for their help or (counterintuitively) slay enemies in dungeons. And while characters don't use any food during dungeon exploration, they stand a greater risk of being killed by venturing too deep or getting lost underground. The failure to adequately keep one's food and health resources in check will result in short play sessions (see Figure 3.3).

Knowing how these interrelated systems operate is helpful, but it doesn't prevent one from being overwhelmed by enemies. On numerous occasions our hero was set upon while exploring the lands around Lord British's castle. Wandering Warlocks, Necromancers, Knights, Dark Knights, Thieves, Evil Rangers, and Hidden Archers (who are nearly invisible and are particularly irksome) roam Sosaria's wilderness hunting for targets. Additionally, sea-based enemies close to shore—like Dragon Turtles and Pirate Ships—can use their ranged weapons to attack adventurers on foot. There is little hope if novice players find themselves being chased by multiple enemies. Even seemingly successful retreats to nearby cities and castles offer but a temporary, false sense of security as enemies remain stationed outside waiting to pounce on underpowered adventurers. There are few viable options in these moments: give up and reset the game, or go down fighting and

Figure 3.3: This skull is a common sight for beginner *Ultima* players who quickly discover that Sosaria can be an unforgiving land.

be resurrected whereupon you start over with 99 hit points, 99 food, zero coins, and missing weapons. Resurrected players keep their experience points and any increased attributes from their previous life. However, because losing essential items like weapons, food, and hit points is so debilitating (to say nothing of the random respawn point), the most prudent option for escaping these vicious death cycles is to start anew with a freshly created character who begins with more hit points and food.

With enough time and good fortune, players will accrue sufficient funds to purchase items in the city shops. The transport units, in particular, dramatically change how Sosaria is explored and how its roving overworld enemies are engaged. Shops like "Scooter's Super Duper Transport, Inc." in the city of Britain sells horses, carts, rafts, and frigates at the beginning of the game. The game's vessels conserve

the amount of food consumed during exploration and improve the player's mobility relative to the speed of enemy units. For instance, the horse enables swift land exploration and the raft allows the player to traverse the water tiles.[11] More expensive units like the seafaring frigate and the aircar, which can move across water and grassland tiles, both come equipped with ranged weapons that make quick work of enemies. *Ultima*'s aircar bears more than a passing resemblance to Luke Skywalker's landspeeder in *Star Wars: A New Hope* [George Lucas 1977], a film which Garriott credits as being influential.[12] It is hard to overstate how transformative the vehicles' ranged weapons are as they turn the hunted into the hunter.

Chasing after overworld enemies to increase the player's treasure—money which can then be spent on better weapons, armor, spells, additional food, or even hit points (by offering pence to kings)—emerges as *Ultima*'s first "grinding" cycle (a.k.a. "farming" or "treadmilling") where players engage in rote, repetitive actions in the pursuit of basic resources. Given the game's status as an early CRPG, *Ultima* is likely one of the first titles to engage in this reviled process as players monotonously cruise Sosaria in search of would-be targets for incremental gains. Fortunately, this exhausting cycle is ameliorated somewhat by a grander sense of purpose: a purpose conveyed by the narrative clues embedded in cities and castles.

The land of Sosaria is made of four continents with evenly distributed content. Each land mass has eight cities and two castles (for 32 cities and eight castles in all). There are two castle layouts and eight city layouts. Larger cities may have as many as six kinds of shops. The city of Britain, for instance, contains a pub, and shops for food, magic, armor, weapons, and transportation (see Figure 3.4).

The game's smaller cities, like Bulldozer and Tune, only have two and three stores respectively. This modest variation encourages players to explore the countryside and new lands for cities containing different resources. But what really drives exploration is gathering information and minor quests from Sosaria's non-player-characters (NPCs).

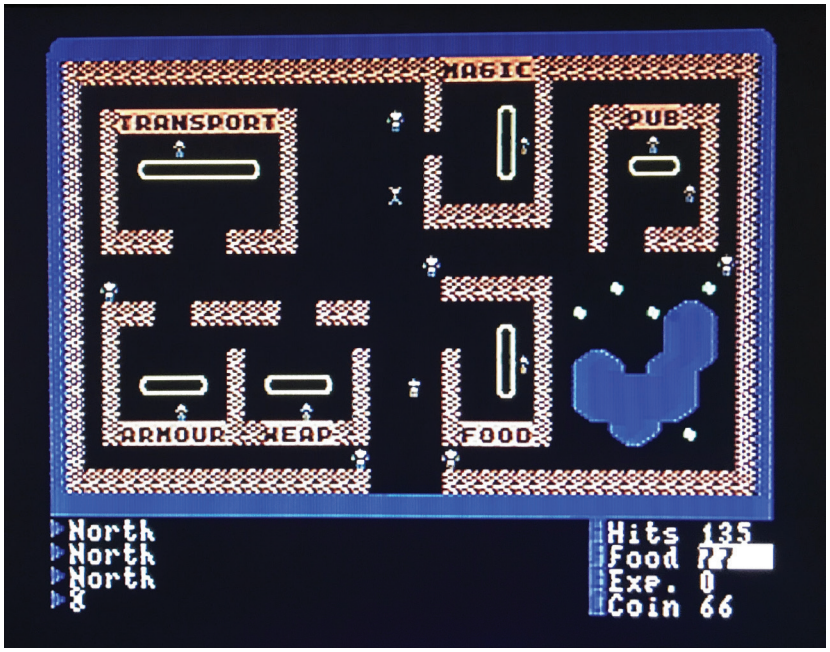


Figure 3.4: The player explores the city of Britain's shops.

As players venture through Sosaria, they discover loquacious bartenders, animated jesters, imprisoned princesses, and quest-giving rulers, all of whom offer narrative clues and gameplay guidance. Buying a round at a city's pub will solicit one of several rumors from the resident barkeep. Most of this information concerns the main quest of defeating Mondain and is revealed in fragments: "Thou had best know thou should destroy the evil gem!" or "Thou had best know thou must go back in time." The barkeep may also summarize the entire mission, saying:

> Thou had best know that over 1000 years ago, Mondain the Wizard created an evil gem. With this gem, he is immortal and cannot be defeated. The quest of—*Ultima*—is to traverse the lands in search of a time machine. Upon finding such a device, thou should go back in time to the days before Mondain created the evil gem and destroy him!

Indeed, one of *Ultima*'s simpler and enduring pleasures is reading what a young Texan might imagine Middle and Early Modern English to sound like.

It is somewhat curious that Garriott chose to have the barkeeps and not Lord British reveal this narrative information, especially since the bartenders have the most colorful dialogue in the game. For example, a barkeep may hyperconsciously remark that—"Thou had best know this is a great game!"—or warn the player, "Thou had best know to watch the wench." (This warning refers to the risk of being "seduced," whereupon the player wakes the next morning to find half of their coins missing.) It's worth noting that the only women in the game, besides potentially the player-character, are the pub wenches and the imprisoned princesses. The former is to be avoided while the latter must be rescued. *Ultima*'s gameplay innovations outpaced its gender politics (which mirrored mainstream RPG culture discussed in Chapter 2). In all, we only discovered eight lines of bartender dialogue during our playthroughs. Moreover, we found that these lines did not change from city to city. This was not the case for the kings in their castles, however.

After touring the city of Britain, we visit the castle of Lord British. The realm's castles have two layouts and possess similar features. Each castle has a garden, storage rooms for goods like food, armor, and weaponry, two prison cells, and a royal chamber for that land's lord or king. Each of Sosaria's castles also house six guards, Gwino the Jester (who sings, "I've got the key!" over and over), and an imprisoned princess. The purpose of the jester and the princess are revealed through further interactions with NPCs and the completion of minor quests.

Ludie now stands before Lord British—*the* Lord British—the ruler of the realm and the noble leader who has called upon heroes to save the land. British wears robes marking him as royalty, but there's little in the way of fanfare or ceremony. Nobody announces the Stranger's

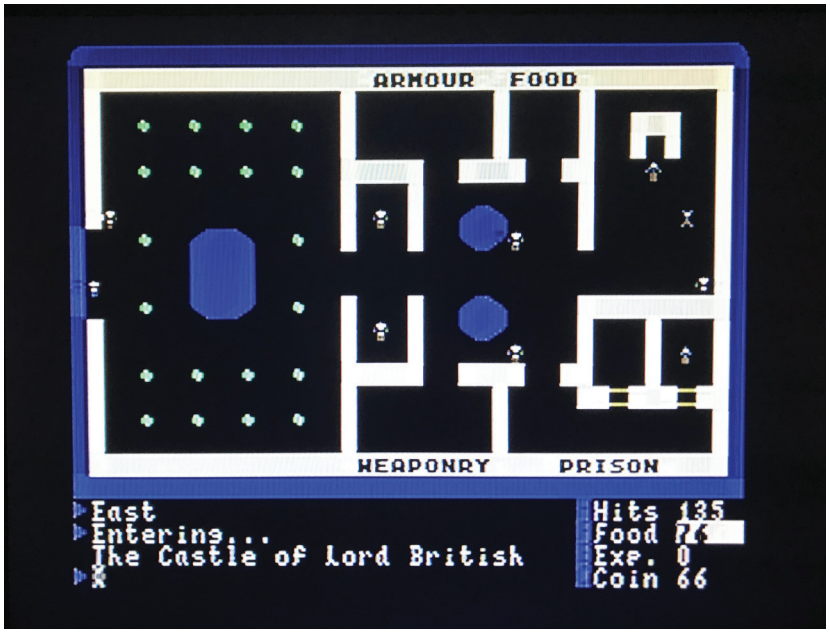


Figure 3.5: Garriott makes his trademark cameo appearance as Lord British in the castle that bears his name.

arrival with multiple screens of text. There is no intermediary managing our access to him. This first meeting with his majesty is, well, a little underwhelming (see Figure 3.5).

Hitting (T)ransact with Lord British results in the query, "Dost thou offer pence or service"? Players can purchase hit points at three points per two coins by selecting (P)ence. Alternatively, players can offer their service to complete a minor quest. There are eight kings scattered across the realm, with each ruler issuing a different mission to the player. Four of them task players with finding an environmental landmark in the overworld, while the other four challenge players with slaying a unique dungeon-dwelling monster. The goals of finding landmarks and besting enemies have the cumulative effect of driving exploration above and below ground. How they connect to the larger campaign to kill Mondain is unclear at first.

After offering our service to Lord British, he decrees, "Go forth and find The Grave of the Lost Soul. Do not return until thy quest is done!" Because there's no in-game quest log, we dutifully scribble down this directive in our notes before exiting the castle of Lord British. (Asking him again results in "Thou art on a quest for me already!")

Ultima's 3D Underworld

We travel north by northeast on foot, leaving the safety of Lord British's castle behind us. A mountain range to our right separates our underpowered adventurer from roving enemies to the east. They move back and forth vainly trying to close the distance (mountain tiles aren't passable). We spot an arched entryway in the mountainside to the north. Striking "I" (for inform), we discover that this is the Dungeon of Montor. By hitting the "E" key, Ludie descends into the underworld.

The first thing that one notices on entering any of *Ultima*'s dungeons is the point of view. Instead of the expansive, interlocking environmental tiles of the overworld, we are surrounded by stark three-dimensional lines (see Figure 3.6). Borrowing many of *Akalabeth*'s computational subroutines, *Ultima*'s claustrophobic black and white dungeons are represented as wireframe graphics with visual emphasis being given to the *z*-axis (the space in front of the adventurer). This allows players to respond to incoming threats in several ways: Should they fire a ranged weapon before the enemy gets close? Will they stand and fight? Or will they run away?

Even with modern eyes, exploring the Dungeon of Montor for the first time is riveting. The treacherous dungeon poses a number of considerations. How far into the unknown will you press? What creatures will you (A)ttack? Do you dare (O)pen a coffin or (U)nlock a chest? Do you (K)-limb down a ladder to the next level? Have you been dutifully keeping tabs of your hit points and recording the dungeon's layout to ensure a successful escape?

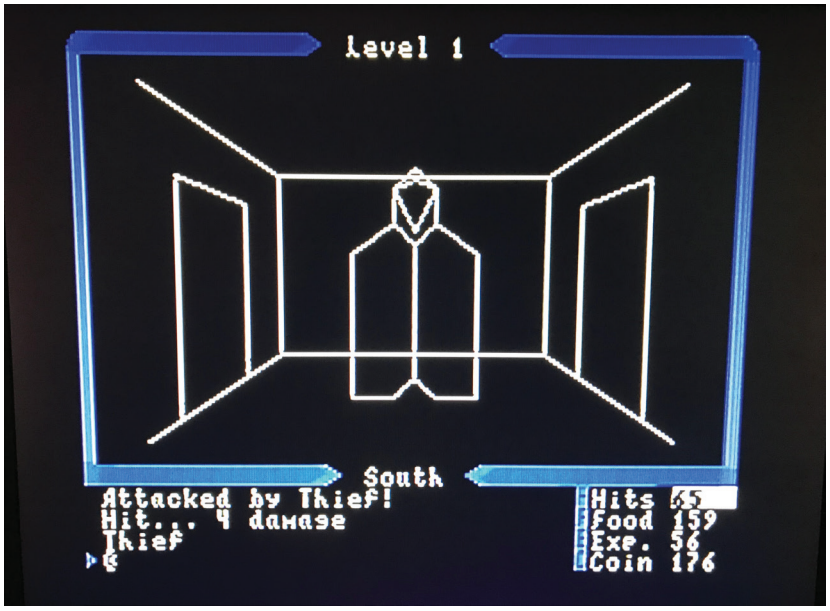


Figure 3.6: The player battles a thief in one of *Ultima*'s dungeons.

Dungeon combat mechanics are fairly similar to overworld combat. The player needs to ready their weapon, armor, and spells before fighting. The battle ends when either the monster or the player is defeated. Like the enemies above ground, these foes do not retreat. Moreover, because the valuable hit points that a player accrues are only collected once they return to the surface, having an exit strategy is essential.

Although the mechanics are similar, dungeon battles differ from those above ground in one key respect. In the overworld, players can see enemies approaching from different directions and from far away; meaning, they can plan and chart their course accordingly. This is not the case below ground. The first-person perspective limits the player to one of four possible first-person views (facing one of the cardinal directions: north, south, east or west). Enemies not only have a tendency of popping up suddenly, but—more irritatingly still—of ganging up on the adventurer from multiple sides. A player may think they

are fighting a single bat, only to discover from the bottom text display (accompanied by a grating sound effect) that they are taking additional damage from a skeleton and a ranger. Complicating matters, there isn't any information about where these attacks are coming from. It isn't unusual to turn 90 degrees multiple times before locating the hidden enemy. Worse still, even when a player has her back against the wall, monsters may materialize from nowhere and begin dealing damage.

We painstakingly chart our path through Montor's first dungeon level on graph paper, careful to create a shared shorthand for common elements like hallways, doors, barriers, and ladders. Getting lost can end badly, and we find ourselves playing cautiously. We march Ludie around and around in a circuit, reliably gaining hit points and coins. Whenever our health dips too low, we make a hasty retreat. Returning to the overworld ensures that we collect the hit points we've earned, and it allows us to save our game (which is only permitted in the overworld).

Narrative revelations courtesy of Sosaria's non-player-characters and certain gameplay realizations pave the way to *Ultima*'s endgame. Unfortunately, excitement about overworld exploration and dungeon cartography give way to tedium as role-playing devolves into rote data entry. In narrative games, there often exists a tension between story exposition and gameplay. Conventional design wisdom tells us that these forces should be in balance. The storytelling motivates action, and gameplay mechanics reinforce narrative, which then begs more gameplay. *Ultima*'s minor quests are underwhelming variations on a theme. These tasks do little to advance the story or deepen the world-building.

Recall Lord British's challenge: to locate the Grave of the Lost Soul. Finding this landmark rewards the player with a 10% increase in their stamina attribute. Upon returning to Lord British, the good ruler gifts the player with a strength increase. Three of Sosaria's other rulers extend similar offers: find an overworld landmark and be rewarded with

ability increases. For example, the lords in Castle Barataria, the White Dragon's Castle, and the Castle of Olympus will give strength bonuses for locating the Southern Sign Post, the Tower of Knowledge, and the Pillar of Ozymandias respectively. Each of these landmarks amplify an ability by 10% provided the player has previously visited another such landmark. This means that enterprising players will bounce back and forth, alternating between landmarks to power-up their stamina (Grave of the Lost Soul), charisma (Southern Sign Post), intelligence (Tower of Knowledge), and wisdom (Pillar of Ozymandias) scores. This reward system encourages exploration. However, because these quests are neither narratively interesting (they don't tie into the larger story) nor do they change as one advances, their novelty quickly wanes. There is a similar repetition problem for the dungeon-based quests.

The four remaining rulers challenge the player with killing an underworld monster. Specifically, the lord in the Castle of the Lost King wants a Gelatinous Cube; the lord in Castle Rondorin demands a Carrion Creeper; the king in the Black Dragon's Castle wants an undead Lich; and the lord in the Castle of Shamino challenges the player with slaying a demonic Balron. (Like Garriott's "bobbit" player race, the Balron is likely a variation on Tolkien's Balrog monster, and the Carrion Creeper is based on the Carrion Crawler from *Dungeons & Dragons*. Also, Shamino is Garriott's SCA character, a name derived from a misreading of his bicycle's Shimano-brand gears.) Each of these foes is found at different dungeon depths, and each successful slaying is rewarded with a different color gem. The Gelatinous Cube is generally found on levels 3 or 4 (red gem); the Carrion Creeper is on levels 5 or 6 (green gem); the Lich is on level 7 or 8 (blue gem); and the Balron is on level 9 or 10 (white gem). The increased abilities gained from visiting landmarks assist the player with surviving these deeper dungeon levels.

Garriott tried to create a balanced gameplay system that rewards exploration and role-playing. However, once it becomes clear that

maximizing a character's abilities and optimizing equipment is the fastest way of advancing, players often pursue all manner of solutions even if such actions are out-of-character or clearly exploit some gameplay imbalance. To wit, with Ludie's aircar, we make quick work of overworld enemies and zip between landmarks while consuming little food and increasing our stats. Then, using our newfound wealth from wasting overworld creatures, we purchase high-power items like the reflect armor and the blaster which greatly assist our dungeon battles. And because there's no encumbrance cap, we purchase multiple backup items in case they are stolen or destroyed (for example, Gelatinous Cubes dissolve armor, the thief steals items, the gremlins take half of your food).

Players have long found ways of circumventing or subverting Garriott's best-laid design plans (as the virtual slayings of Lord British discussed in Chapter 1 demonstrate). Garriott presumed that most were role-playing as heroes and wouldn't seek shortcuts. In his defense, games were rarely play-tested or focus group tested in the early 1980s, and there wasn't much in the way of feedback outside of magazine reviews. He reflects on his design naivete, saying:

> I had assumed people played the game to be the hero, the noblest person in the realm. I was wrong. Most people were doing what we in the gaming industry call "min-maxing" the game: finding the most direct path to power without the slightest regard for morality. In almost every role-playing game, the general goal is to defeat the main antagonist. From reading fan mail I learned that because there was no real motivation to care about the bad guy, there was no motivation to act morally or virtuously. Instead players were spending the minimum time and effort to reach the maximum reward, victory. They didn't care very much about the story, only about advancing.
>
> (Garriott and Fisher 2017, 91–92)

This was a momentous realization for the young designer. It inspired the celebrated moral dimensions of *Ultima IV* and changed the series forever. Although Lord British might look down on Ludie's min-maxing strategies, it is notable that even *Prima's Official Guide to Ultima Collection*, a strategy book published in 1998 that spans *Akalabeth* through *Ultima VIII*, recommends stealing. In the *Ultima* entry under the subtitle, "Steal, Steal, Steal," the strategy guide reads: "Ethical niceties don't play a huge part in the early *Ultimas*. By far, the easiest way to get started in the game is to steal yourself a full collection of expensive arms and armour from the local merchants" (McCubbin and Ladyman 1998, 13).

Min-maxing doesn't simply advance one's character, it also minimizes tedium and fatigue. There are long stretches of grinding gameplay in *Ultima*; repetitious cycles of battling foes above and below ground, followed by supply runs to Sosaria's shops. We opted not to steal in our particular playthrough. To be honest, this was less about proper role-playing than it was about the inconvenience of resetting the C64 if our character was caught. Ludie is a wizard after all, not a thief. Instead, we pursued what we called a "ladder up, ladder down" dungeon-diving strategy. After drawing the first few levels of the Dungeon of Montor, we discovered that we could circumvent this process by using two transportation spells. First, we would visit a spell shop and buy plenty of "ladder up" and "ladder down" spells. We'd type either TBG or TBF for "(T)ransact, (B)uy, (G)ladder up" or "(T) ransact, (B)uy, (F)ladder down" over and over until we had *dozens* of these spells. Next, we'd use these to instantly send Ludie to lower dungeon levels, enabling map-free exploration. This also means that anytime we overstayed our welcome, we cast "ladder up" to pull ourselves to safety. We used this process to slay the monsters needed for collecting the four gems from the kings that would trigger the next stage in our adventure.

Ultima's Outer Space and Endgame

Once we amassed enough wealth and hit points from our repetitive overworld cruising with our weapon-enabled aircar and numerous spell-aided descents into dungeons, we move to the next stage of our quest. After we complete his Lich-killing quest, the king at the Black Dragon Castle reveals that, "A Princess will help a Space Ace travel through time." We combine this information with one of the barkeeper's rumors—"Thou had best know about space travel! Thou must destroy at least 20 enemy vessels to become an ace!"—and we understand our next quest lies in space. We purchase a space shuttle from Britain's transport shop (as one does, naturally). Then, we equip our vacuum suit. The game's somewhat agnostic approach to genre strictures can be read as a type of science fantasy, but also derives from a historically specific cultural milieu that Garriott participated in. Regardless, *Ultima* is unapologetic in borrowing ideas from popular fantasy and science fiction. We board the shuttle and a launch countdown begins.

The next screen shows a two-dimensional view of our planetary system featuring Sosaria, the local star, and a space station housing two, fighter-style spaceships. We pilot the shuttle to the space station, taking care to adjust for the momentum introduced with the space physics (see Figure 3.7). We miss the approach several times, damaging our shuttle in the process. Once we're properly docked, we select one of two fighters. The larger ship has weaker shields but more fuel, whereas the smaller one has better shields but less fuel.[13]

After selecting the larger ship, we hit the (I)nform key. This brings up a 7×7 star map grid. Like *Ultima*'s other gameplay systems, there is a shocking lack of information about how this part of the game works. There's no legend explaining the map's symbols, and there's no description on how one finds enemy vessels. Through trial and error, we eventually stumble upon the procedures for the space exploration. First, the player must consult the star chart and determine where

Figure 3.7: The player carefully docks their shuttle in the space station.

they want to travel. We eventually determine that the plus (+) signs are space stations, the H-shaped symbols are enemy fighters, the diamonds are a system with a star, and the small dots are empty space. Next, players change to the overhead view and point the ship's nose in that direction. Finally, they strike "H" for hyperjump, which moves them to the adjacent sector (see Figure 3.8). If the player jumps into an enemy-filled sector, battle begins immediately.

There are moments in *Ultima* that are equal parts inspiring and befuddling. The spaceship combat is one such moment. This is the only point in the *entire* game that depends on quick-twitch responses. Playing from the first-person perspective, the player must quickly move their crosshairs to shoot down the zig-zagging enemy ships; targets which look suspiciously like TIE fighters from *Star Wars*. For us, this challenge proved to be impossible with our C64 keyboard set-up. Keep in mind that we have to hit shift-arrow to move either up or left.

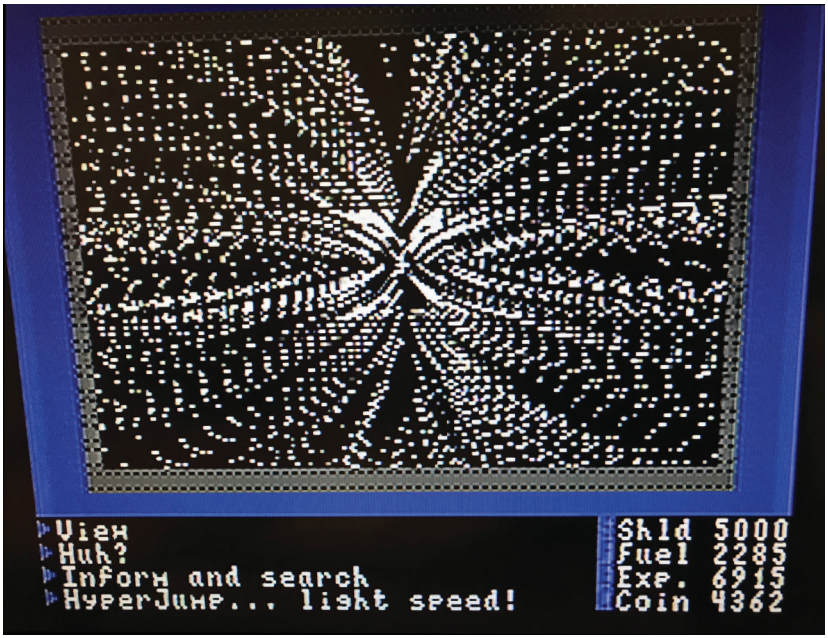


Figure 3.8: *Ultima*'s hyperjump takes its visual cues from science fiction like *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

Fortunately, we had an Atari joystick that, once plugged into the C64's control port #2, gave us much more responsive control.

If the sudden introduction of the action-oriented control wasn't challenging enough, the player must also monitor two new resources: fuel and shield levels. There is no preparation for this as the vehicles on Sosaria never took any damage nor did they ever run out of fuel. The fuel and shields curtail how far one can travel and how many battles one can engage in. Players may return to a nearby space station to refuel or change ships provided they can pay the 500 pence docking fee. The "Sorry, but thou canst not refuel thy ship without the 500p Docking Fee" was an unwelcome surprise. After several restarts, we accumulate the 20 kills needed to become a space ace and we return to our shuttle and then back to Sosaria.

Based on the barkeeper's rumors, we know that our next step is to free a princess. All of Sosaria's castles contain a princess in one of two

prison cells, as well as a court jester who sings "I've got the key" over and over. (It is all they ever sing.) The player must kill Gwino the Jester to acquire the key. There are several potential complications with this plan. First, the jester may not actually have the right key. There are two cells and only one key. Second, killing the court's resident comedian justifiably alerts the six castle guards. It requires a bit of luck to get the correct key *and* to successfully escape with a princess in tow. Several times we are forced to restart because we were cornered by the guards. If the player does escape, the castle is "reset" with a new spry jester and princess in her cell. It seems a bit odd that Garriott would take issue with gamers min-maxing in *Ultima*—actions seen as distracting from "proper," moral role-playing—when the only way to free a princess is to kill an innocent NPC. (Perhaps having to reread Gwino's line of dialogue about having a key every time one enters a castle engenders a guilt-free murder?) The liberated princess rewards us with 500 hit points, pence, and experience points, and—most importantly—directions to the time machine: "She informs thee that thou art now ready for time travel, and that there is a time machine far to the northwest."

We reenter the castle that we just escaped from to purchase additional hit points from the king. Fortunately, there is no awkwardness or bad blood from the bedlam moments before; the jester is fine, singing about a key, and another princess has taken the previous one's place. We max our hit points to 9999 before setting out to the final showdown with Mondain. With the four gems in our inventory, sporting maximum health, and having equipped the blaster and the reflect suit (the game's best weapon and armor) we travel northwest to find the time machine.

We locate the spherical time machine and board it. Following a few, final title cards that describe it coming to life once the gems are correctly placed, we are transported to a single room with Mondain. He stands alone to our right, wearing white robes and holding a staff.

As we approach, we notice a small object in front of him. We try (A)ttacking the object and (O)pening it with no luck. After cycling

through the usual keys, we consult our reference guide and discover that there is a (G)et key. That does the trick. To the best of our recollection, this is the only time this key is used in the entire game. (Why create a keystroke for a single, in-game action?) The gem is destroyed and we absorb thousands of points in damage. Mondain lobs a series of spells at us as we unload with our blaster. He turns into a bat and we chase him around the room. We finally corner him and continue our assault with the blaster. He eventually falls and we are rewarded with a "Thou Art Victorious!" The following information is revealed in a title card that scrolls from the bottom to the top of the frame:

> A rain of silver lightening [*sic*] heralds the death of Mondain. Fleeting glimpses of fates avoided rush through thy mind as the arcane power of the mage's dying screams echoes in thy ears. A thousand years pass in but a moment's time as a strange sleep overcomes thee. Upon awakening thou dost find thyself in new surroundings. A stately youth in violet robes helps thee to thy feet whereupon thou dost see the thousands who gaze upon thee in adoration. "Thy selfless heroism hath saved our people, my worthy one. Should our gratitude alone not be enough to sustain thee, know that I, Lord British, hereby ordain that the entire realm of Sosaria be at thy service for all time hence-forth. So let it be done."

It is a fitting, if telling, conclusion that Lord British injects himself back into our hero's quest. He literally has the last word as our game terminates with this title card on the screen.

Conclusion

Ultima is a landmark computer role-playing game that eventually gave rise to a landmark series. The first *Ultima* is also a virtual time capsule of teenage technical ingenuity and cultural geekiness circa 1980. Garriott recounts the origins of his game's name, saying: "[After *Akalabeth*]

I immediately started work on my next game. Initially it was called *Ultimatum*. That was a completely random choice, like most of the names I choose. I liked the feel of it; it sounded badass" (Garriott and Fisher 2017, 41). Garriott renamed the game after he discovered a boardgame with the same title (*Ultimatum: A game of nuclear confrontation* [J. Michael Hemphill 1979]). But what didn't change was *Ultima*'s unapologetic ethos—its full-throated embrace of Garriott's nerdy passions. Were blasters and aircars badass? You bet. Put them in. How about time travel and space battles? Absolutely. What about monsters, lore, and gadgets borrowed from *The Lord of the Rings*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and *Star Wars*? Yes, yes, and yes. There is something unremittingly earnest about taking all of one's loves and shoving them into a game for others to enjoy. It is this playful and experimental attitude that—pardon the pun—ultimately set the game apart from other early CRPGs.

Ultima is also a game that has its fair share of design issues, as this chapter documents. The game nevertheless demonstrates a willingness and an openness to trying things despite potential complications. Some play mechanics are broken or imbalanced (such as overpowered aircars and blasters), there is needless grinding and repetition in the game's mid-section (like the hit point recovery system and minor quests), and narrative questions, in particular, abound. Why do we need to become a space ace? How would such an arbitrary title convince a recently liberated princess to reveal the location of a time machine? Game historian Jimmy Maher (2012b) reads *Ultima* as a projective surface rather than a coherent story: "Exactly why these presumably benevolent kings are keeping the poor princesses under lock and key is never adequately explained. Indeed, Sosaria is not so much a world as a shadowy projection of the possibility of a world, onto which we can graft our own fictions and justifications." We agree with this interpretation, but we'd also stress that Garriott's idiosyncratic authorship of Sosaria works because it was such an open invitation for the player

to engage in their own authorial practices. *Ultima* invites adventurers to build their own characters and to chart their own paths through Sosaria.

Ultima's skyrocketing commercial success encouraged Garriott and his close cadre of collaborators to expand the game's textual boundaries with *Ultima II*. In the next chapter, we explore how the world of *Ultima* gave way to *Ultima* in the world as its diegetic storytelling became material world-crafting.

CHAPTER 4
Ultima in the World

Introduction: What's in a Box?

By the time Garriott began working on *Ultima II*, he had already made a name for himself as Lord British, and he wanted a game with increased production value. One of the primary factors behind his decision to work with Sierra On-Line on *Ultima II* was based on the company's assurances that the game would be boxed for sale. In 1982, *Ultima II* shipped in a standard box with manual and a cloth map. Later games in the series included additional objects that further reflected and embodied the games' diegetic worlds that drew upon the packaging conventions of the tabletop role-playing game genre. Maps, character alignments and creation systems, medieval-inspired European fantasy lore, and sprawling narrative possibilities were all central to the genre and to *Ultima*'s remediation of it for the personal computer.

For players versed in tabletop RPGs, mapmaking was and remains a key practice, particularly for gamemasters authoring campaigns over sprawling worlds and managing plots that could last weeks if not months (Fine 1983). CRPG makers and players understandably

adopted similar practices for their electronic quests. For computer game players, maps were often essential but only sometimes provided in-game. Players would often draft maps of their own, adding notations and information uncovered through play and using their personal maps as key reference materials (Plunkett 2011). The creation of these homemade maps extends the game's world beyond the electronic screen, leaving a tangible and editable artifact of the player's gameplay—a practice that highlights the degree to which any computer or video game is just one part of the complex techno-social interface through which players engage with fictional worlds.

Although the box, manual, and paper map (included at least in some editions) with the first game should also be considered critically, the cloth map for *Ultima II* was the series' first "feelie." These objects—both feelies and game packaging more generally—were part of a conscious design decision; one that shaped players' encounters with and perceptions of the game. Switching from plastic bags to printed boxes for packaging doubtlessly shifted how players perceived the game, while affecting production and distribution considerations as well. Shelving practices, for example, would necessarily be different, and the cost increase for production and distribution would have been particularly significant for upstart firms and DIY designers like Garriott. Thus, the choice to ship games first in boxes with manuals and later in boxes with manuals *and* custom-produced artifacts reflects a deliberate design commitment that affected Origin Systems' production process and shaped player experiences. Because of this, paratextual objects are essential to consider as they demonstrate the ways the *Ultima* franchise expanded the horizon of how a fantasy universe might be authored and experienced as an ongoing, interactive world of possibilities.

In this chapter, we place the *Ultima* series' feelies and supporting materials in the broader history of computer game packaging. We then consider what these objects tell us about game design and

theorize their impact on gameplay. Documenting these paratexts is, we argue, especially important as access to original releases is extremely limited, and attempts to preserve games—whether through emulation, rerelease, or archival efforts—often fail to reproduce the game as originally packaged. Origin Systems' packaging efforts were central to the studio's design practices and to its historical significance: these components tie *Ultima* to the broader history of RPGs, they reflect the technological constraints of early computer games, and they demonstrate a kind of multimodal, transmedia storytelling practice that anticipates the multiplatform digital RPG franchise that *Ultima* itself precipitates and which has now become a staple of large-scale commercial game production.[1]

Feeling History

Like literary works, games rarely appear in what literary theorist Gérard Genette (1991) would call their "naked state" (261). Rather, texts are presented in constellation with their paratexts. If, as Genette argues, "the paratext is for us the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public," then the gaming paratexts (box art, manuals, marketing campaigns, and other materials) are the means by which rule sets and—in the case of video games—computational code make a game of themselves and propose themselves as such to players (Genette 1991). The writer Jorge Luis Borges referred to the preface of a book as its vestibule, a point at which the reader can choose to enter or go back, knowing there is something on the other side of this in-between place. The game box is thus a Borgesian threshold through which players can choose to enter or walk away. Or, in the case of *Ultima*'s lore, we might call this portal a "moongate." A game's assorted manuals, cases, and other tangible accoutrements are similarly part of that game and frame

the play experience. These paratextual items can and should be considered as essential, meaning-making mechanisms. This is partially why various editions of games meaningfully differ. The cloth map and the paper map, after all, have different affordances as media and different tactile qualities as physical objects. Speaking more specifically about how paratexts shape play, Gordon Calleja (2007) writes about the "packaged experience" of games: "Designers aim to capitalize on these affective qualities by selling a packaged experience that meets the expectations of buyers while engaging the emotions the game aims to arouse" (86). These rich, affective experiences include the entirety of how games come to the player—the shape of the box, the manual's paper stock, the evocative illustrations covering both, and any additional materials like feelies (Calleja 2007). Players form impressions of their games before they have even opened the box, and so the overall gaming experience begins before the package has been unwrapped and the software has been launched.

The physicality of gaming paratexts is encapsulated by the word "feelies"—a neologism that refers, specifically, to physical artifacts packaged with digital games. It finds its origins in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), wherein feelies are multisensory entertainment experiences that contribute to citizens' escapism and disengagement (Kocurek 2013). The nod to dystopian science fiction here might imply distaste, but likely presents more an insider wink and nod for those literate in a particular pop subculture along the lines of asking if someone knows where their towel is.[2]

Although early computer game feelies are commonly associated with interactive fiction powerhouse Infocom, a number of companies, including contemporaries like Sierra On-Line and Origin Systems, packaged games with a range of feelies. For example, Sierra's *Quest for Glory* (1989) came with a brochure for the Famous Adventurer's Correspondence School, an institution from the world of the game; Origin's *Moebius: The Orb of Celestial Harmony* (1985) shipped with a

cloth headband and the sequel, *Windwalker* (1989), included a book of the *I Ching*. Japanese companies also made feelies integral to gameplay. Now Software's *Jikuu Yuten: Debias* (1987) included a decoder necessary to decipher in-game runes, and ASCII's war strategy game *Fleet Commander* (1988) came with a map and plastic ships which could be used to track fleet movement.

Since at least the 1980s, feelies have served a variety of practical functions: to distinguish games from one another, to amplify the games' production value, or even as a means of intellectual property protection.[3] Outside of these instrumental purposes, feelies also served to build and extend narrative worlds, allowing players to touch and use the artifacts belonging to imagined worlds. In an article on the intersection of affect, geography, and embodiment in post-2000 video games, Ian Graham Ronald Shaw and Barney Warf (2009) contend that, "exploiting and manipulating the player's sensory experience is now the central strategy for many game designers" (1332). However, we argue that earlier games often employed similar affective efforts by supplementing the on-screen representation with paratexts. In developing *Deadline* (1982), Infocom "implementer" (the company's in-house title for developers) Marc Blank used feelies both to authenticate the player's role—materials that stressed that the player was acting as a real detective in the story—and to extend the limited space of the game. According to fellow Infocom implementer Steve Meretzky, making potentially virtual items like lab reports and suspect interviews into physical documentation freed up room for interactive content (Rouse 2005, 186).

With the ascendency of digital game downloads, hard copies of games have become less common, and the types of physical objects that accompanied games like *Deadline* and *Cutthroats* (Infocom 1984) are largely reserved for special editions aimed at a limited enthusiast market. For example, publisher Limited Run Games specializes in producing physical editions of games. Their special edition reissue

of the infamous *Night Trap* (2017) included the game, a manual, fold-out poster, cassette tape, and embroidered patch all sealed in a box designed to evoke the game's original 1992 release from Digital Pictures (Kocurek 2019). Capped at 3,000 copies, this special edition was released alongside a standard edition run of 5,000 copies. These limited releases certainly help increase the sense of urgency for consumers, but they also reflect a practical understanding of the current market for physical editions and their higher cost relative to digital copies. Today's physical editions of computer games in particular often occupy a role akin to that of vinyl editions of albums readily available for digital download or those accessed through streaming services. These games are a more costly, potentially more luxurious, and arguably less ephemeral version of a digital product. These are typically intended for fans who are devoted to the material commodity itself and/or to the opportunity to conspicuously display their fandom.

This was not the case in the early 1980s: physical editions were the only editions of commercial games, and feelies came in a variety of games and served a variety of purposes. These items, then, constituted a key part of most players' gaming experiences. *Ultima*'s feelies were often, as Dallas Snell, who was Origin's vice president of product development from 1985 to 1992, has stated, seemingly irrelevant to play:

> Publishing sought to minimize COGS [cost of goods], whereas PD [product development] wanted lots of interesting support material, trinkets and doohickeys. The cloth map and the metal ankh in the *Ultimas* were a source of debate every single time. Publishing would always remind us the product could be played just as well with a paper map and a plastic ankh (or no ankh at all). Richard [Garriott] was consistently adamant about this, and always stood his ground—even if it couldn't be financially justified.
>
> (Varney 2006, paragraph 11)

Publishing viewed the cloth maps, metal ankhs, and other materials distributed alongside games in the *Ultima* series as both expensive and extraneous—an area that might be curtailed or streamlined to reduce costs. Snell himself confesses that although he was a fan of the maps, "[I] can't say it really facilitated gameplay versus a paper map, but it sure added an 'experiential' quality to the product that is seldom encountered" (Varney 2006, paragraph 12). At least some players and critics may have seen these items as appealing but unnecessary extras. However, Garriott saw them as critical to the game, insisting both on their inclusion and their manufacture as high-quality items rather than plastic and paper trinkets. Approaching *Ultima* as a landmark game with respect to world-crafting and storytelling requires not just understanding the game as it occurred on-screen, but as it circulated: in a box, with a manual, with maps (first paper, later cloth), metal ankhs, and other material objects. As Snell suggests, these physical elements of the game added an unusual if not unique experiential quality. High-quality feelies distinguished the *Ultima* series from a number of its market competitors and tied its gameplay experience to tabletop gaming where maps and miniatures were common (Tobin 2018). The packaged experience of *Ultima* is one that is deeply engaged with material culture and with multimodal approaches to storytelling and interaction design. Such a move invited players into an embodied process of co-creation and demanded the use of multiple literacies, asking them to leverage their familiarity with computers, tabletop games, and their ability to read both texts and images.

Ultima as Object

The overall packaged aesthetic of *Ultima* owed a great debt to the visual and material culture of sword-and-sorcery fantasy (specifically the Tolkien-inspired world of *Dungeons and Dragons*, as was examined

in Chapter 2). And the series likewise borrows from the visual vernacular of science fiction. The game's most familiar logo uses a stylized serif font rendered in a liquid metal effect, and the game's boxes feature fantasy creatures like dragons. This is perhaps appropriate for a game that promises to take players "from darkest dungeons to deepest space," and it presents a straddling of genres. This juxtaposition is reflective of the games' deep engagement with science fantasy and what was a broader cultural landscape of geekdom. The packaging for these games often highlight this combination, showing, as on the original box for *Ultima II: The Revenge of the Enchantress*, a gorgon looming behind a portal through which a helmeted character emerges, ray gun at the ready (see Figure 4.1). If the games were deliberate in their nods towards fantasy, they also consciously broke with fantasy conventions, making explicit that this series offers would-be players something more than your standard, sword-and-sorcery tale.

Figure 4.1: This ad for Sierra On-Line's *Ultima I* and *Ultima II* bills the games explicitly as fantasy, while prominently featuring a figure with a ray gun using a portal.

Design elements in *Ultima*'s packaging are often self-consciously literary. For example, the California Pacific Computer Company's release of *Akalabeth: World of Doom* draws from the visual style of the dime novel and similar pulp fiction fare (including RPG publications like *The Dragon* and *Space Gamer* discussed in Chapter 2). A slavering demonoid creature with horns menaces an adventurer who appears in the foreground, his face turned away, his arm flung up as a shield. The game's title and subtitle are shown in a bold display font that shifts vertically from yellow to red. Above, the tagline "Beyond Adventure Lies…" appears in neat white text, and below, authorship is given in a similar style: "designed by LORD BRITISH." The price, "Just $34.95" USD, is also printed on the cover. Origin's release of *Ultima* continues this pulp novel style (see Figure 1.3). On *Ultima I*'s box art, a dragon emerges from a sea of lava, looming over a knight brandishing sword and shield from the back of a black horse. Again, the game's price, $39.95 USD, is integrated into the cover. The tagline "from darkest dungeons to deepest space" appears over the game title, under which the game is categorized as "a fantasy role-playing game." Here, again, Garriott is credited directly on the game's cover: "designed by LORD BRITISH." Further publication details appear on the cover's bottom right. The printed price and author (or in this case, designer), the taglines, and even the typographical elements such as the dramatic title typeface against the more spare informational text all hearken to the standard format for the pulp novel format. This stylistic inspiration is less overt in later editions of *Ultima*, but the broad strokes remain consistent even as Origin Systems' reissues maintain the display style for the title and the other art and design elements.

This direct invocation of literary texts is not unique to *Ultima*. For instance, Marc Blank drew heavily on pulp detective novels in the story for *Deadline* and showed designers several classic pulp novels as reference images for the packaging (Rouse 2005, 184, 186). And while generically *Ultima I* is most clearly an RPG, it was part of a

computer game landscape shaped by the popularity and high visibility of interactive fiction and by the popularity of science fiction and fantasy books among the games' audience. Because of this, the literary aspects of *Ultima* can link the games to fantasy literature in the style of Tolkien, but they also link the games to interactive fiction à la Infocom. Garriott himself cited the text version of *Adventure* as formative to his own approach to game-making: "There was absolutely nothing to look at, but I was mesmerized. I could visualize everything in my mind […] After *Adventure*, I found other text games by luck; there was no place to buy them" (Garriott and Fisher 2017, 17). The emphasis on text and storytelling is multifaceted and they are key elements of the games' fantasy worlds. For example, the manual for *Ultima II* appears not like a booklet but a sacred text. Heavy hinges and metal corners, and even a lock are rendered in a trompe l'oeil effect. The interior pages, true to style, are printed with an image of aged paper. While the manual is slim, its visual design suggests a weighty tome of forbidden knowledge kept under lock and key.

This styling continues through the series, appearing again and again in the games' distinctive packaging. The manuals became more physically substantial and ornate as the series lore grew, but they almost always mimicked the look and feel of books. In at least one edition of *Ultima III: Exodus*, the manual is billed as "The Book of Play," its cover made of textured paper and printed with a seal and title (see Figure 4.2).

The game included two other booklets in a similar format: "The Book of Amber Runes," which provides instruction in runic magic, and "The Ancient Liturgy of Truth," a heavily illustrated religious text that gestures towards the medieval tradition of the illuminated manuscript. *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* includes "The History of Britannia, as told by Kyle the Younger" and "The Book of Mystic Wisdom." The latter, with its rune-inspired cover and gold debossing on rich red covers, is particularly luxurious. These book-styled

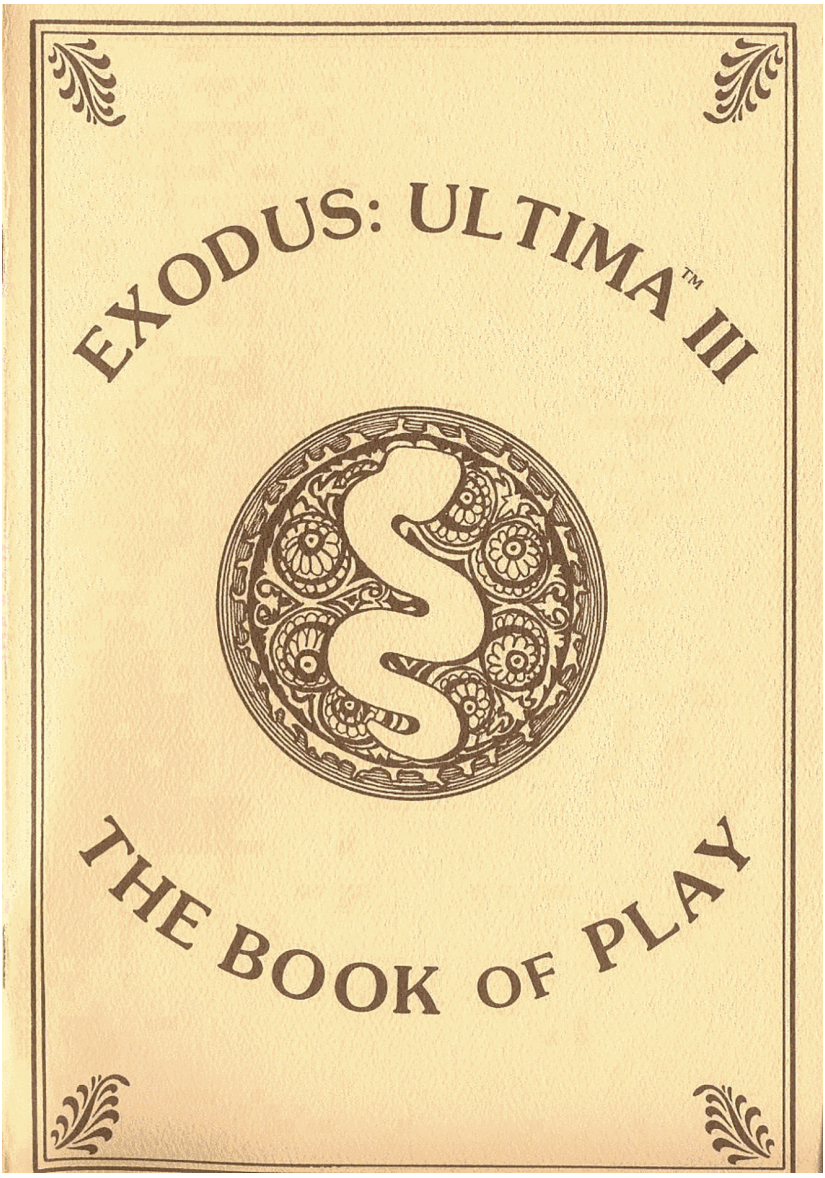


Figure 4.2: *Ultima III*'s manual is billed as a book.

supplements continue across the series. In *Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny* there is "The Book of Lore"; *Ultima VI: The False Prophet* (Origin Systems 1990) has its "Compendium"; *Ultima VII: The Black Gate* (Origin Systems 1992) includes "The Book of Fellowship"; *Ultima VIII: Pagan* (Origin Systems 1994) includes "The Chronicle of Pagan"; and both the "Limited Edition" and "Dragon Edition" versions of *Ultima IX: Ascension* were packaged with booklets that featured debossed icons on leather-like paper covers.

Maps play a key role, both in the design process and in the players' experiences. With no easy way to embed a map in the game for reference, physical maps made of paper or cloth provided useful gameplay aids. The paper map resting on an open desk drawer or taped to the edge of the computer monitor functions for the player almost as a second screen, extending the information available on the monitor and providing important details about the world the player is navigating on-screen. The diegetic extension of fantasy worlds finds literal, material extension in the player's world through these maps. But the maps are not just a tool for better navigation; they are platforms and portals for participation. All of the materials that come with the game are part of that game's environment and meaningfully contribute to the game's visual style. And even those materials that players make themselves—the hand-drawn maps, for example, that many created to play early text-based RPGs and later graphic games like *Myst*—become part of the game's interface as players experience it.

In the case of the games Origin Systems produced, the creators of these materials often received credit alongside other members of the development team. For example, the 1989 "Origin's Software Entertainment Report" (Origin Systems 1989), a magazine-style promotional flyer, provides interviews with game developers, previews of upcoming titles, and information about the development process. Here, the preview for *Ultima VII: The Black Gate* lists Garriott as producer and director, and lists writers, software engineers, artists, sound

engineers, a composer, and others who made the game (6). The pair of professionals who designed the game's box and graphics, Craig Miller and Cheryl Neeld, are listed as well. Miller and Neeld are also credited with box design and graphics for *Wing Commander II* (1991), and David Ladyman, Craig Miller, Deborah A. Nottingham, and Warren Spector are listed under "documentation design and graphics" (8). The preview for *Ultima: Worlds of Adventure 2: Martian Dreams* (1991) recognizes Denis Loubet for his work on the game's cover painting; Jeff Dee, Karl Dolgener, and 'Manda Dee for manual art; Andrew Morris for the reference card and install guide; Jeff Dee and Keith Berdak for map art; and Neeld and Miller for package and manual design (10). In the case of the last of these previews, some of the people working on the game's paratexts receive credit elsewhere, in areas like dialogue and computer art. The fact that Origin Systems didn't simply list these contributions, but included them in promotional materials, demonstrates the significance of these paratextual resources to the overall game design effort, and the place that printed assets had in the eyes of developers. It also gives some credence to Garriott's claims about giving Origin's developers credit and compensation for their work.

The four full-color maps included with *Ultima I* are printed from hand-drawn illustrations that show major landmarks and geographic features along with warnings for dragons, sea monsters, and other potentially troublesome creatures (see Figure 4.3). Like the art of early arcade cabinets, the boxes, maps, and packaging for these computer games provided a representational point of reference for relatively lower-fidelity graphics. Each map features the game's title styled to match its display on the game box, and the colors selected echo elements from the cover art as well. The key and other detailed text on the maps are handwritten in a style that closely resembles the text style of Roman ruins, or that of runes, or alchemical symbols. Runes seem perhaps the most likely inspiration given the role of runestones in the games, and particular in the title of the series' only Game Boy release,

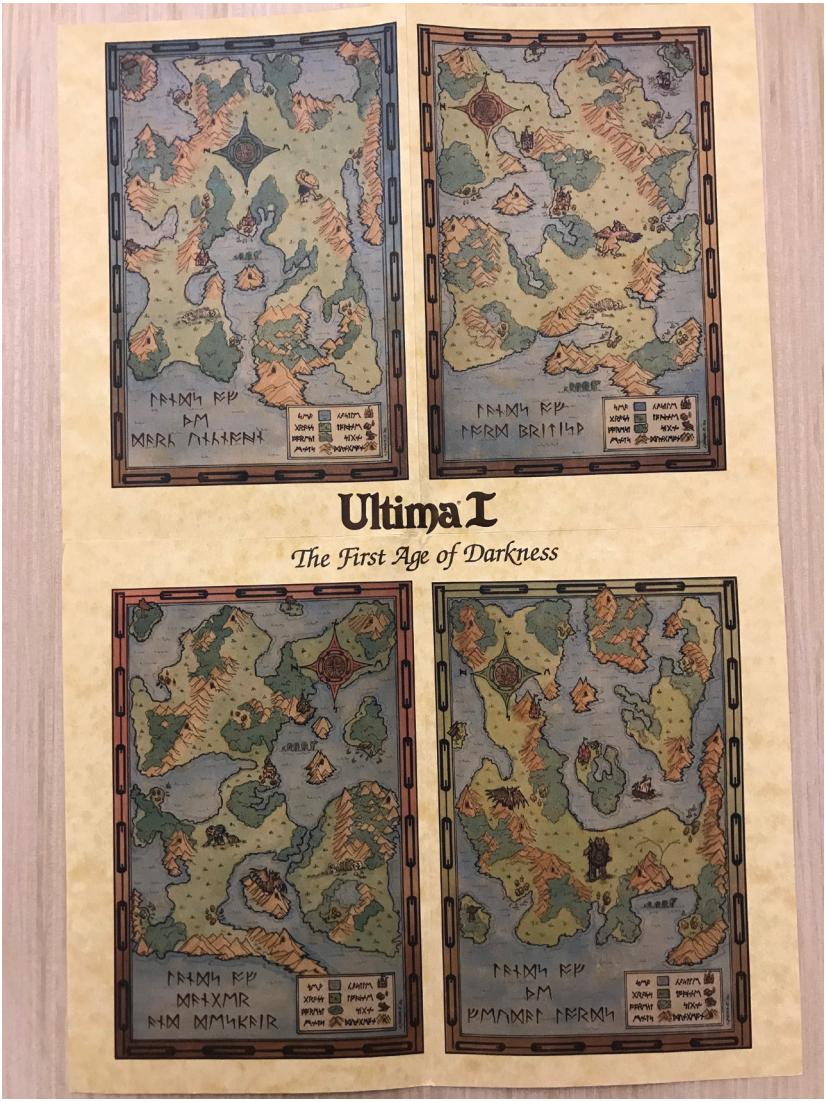


Figure 4.3: Paper maps like this one were included in editions of *Ultima* titles. Image credit: Photo by Matthew T. Payne.

Ultima: Runes of Virtue (Origin Systems 1992), and in the packaging of *Ultima Underworld* (Origin Systems 1992), which included a bag of runestones (Chalk 2015). The use of the rune-ish text on the map for *Ultima I* is evocative of the magical and spiritual belief system of the game world, and the use and reuse of runestones throughout the series carries with it thematic and narrative significance and is part of the game's built world.

Throughout the *Ultima* franchise, maps are tools for gameplay, but they are also important paratexts. Maps are part of *Ultima* the game and artifacts of *Ultima*'s imagined world. Packaged as part of the former, they illustrate and provide a tactile experience of the latter. Even operating within the visual vernacular of fantasy, their realism makes the entirety of the imagined world more believable (Schwartz 2006). Sosaria, the maps suggest, may really exist somewhere beyond your current perception; the computer screen is a camera, a portal, a means to access, and the map outlines the scale and scope of that world and the relationships between geographically discrete areas. Sosaria is four continents containing miles and miles of mountains and coasts, numerous dungeons and castles, and adventures awaiting just beyond the horizon. These maps authenticate, or at least demystify, the largely abstract landscape presented on-screen. They are maps in our contemporary sense, replicating the world at a scale that is portable and useful for navigation. But they are also maps in an almost medieval sense, pictures of the world that are somewhat abstract and that are made for a particular kind of user—a ship's captain perhaps, or a merchant, or, in this case, a player in the role of the heroic Stranger (Harvey 1991). This type of game map interpellates its would-be user as a would-be adventurer; like any effective paratext, it establishes a horizon of possibilities and expectations before players have loaded the game on their computer. By entering this portal, players, like the Pevensie children stumbling through the back of the wardrobe, are walking into another realm. This could be Alice's rabbit

hole or Clara's dream. Wendy and her brothers swooping through the Neverland sky. *Ultima*'s maps are invitations for role-playing *and* are interfaces for managing a sprawling game world.[4]

Magic (Circle) in a Box

The other, non-map artifacts packaged in *Ultima* games contribute to this sense of immersion—you *are* the avatar, the adventurer—by extending the magic circle (to use one metaphor) or stretching the fourth wall (to use another). Pushing back against the common, formalistic deployment of the magic circle in discussions of video games, Mia Consalvo (2009) contends that the concept is overly limiting, excluding a necessary understanding of the complexities of gameplay experience. However, Steven Conway (2010) suggests that when games break their fourth walls in the theatrical sense, the game's imagined world expands beyond the screen, as does the game's magic circle. In traditional portal fantasies the fantastic does not leak and is clearly contained on the other side of the threshold (Mendlesohn 2014), but with paratexts serving as thresholds for games, the magic spills enticingly into the mundane. The magic circle exists, but it is both messier and more dynamic than a strictly formalist approach would allow.

Further, playing via an avatar is always a bit indebted to the sociologist Roger Caillois's notion of mimicry as detailed in *Man, Play, and Games* (2001, originally published in 1958). Caillois identifies mimicry, which he defines as role-playing or acting "as if," as one of the fundamental categories of play.[5] In the game, through the player-character we act as if, and often feel as if, we are the in-game character, sharing the avatar's goals, motivations, fears, and ambitions and existing in their fantastic world. Physical artifacts extend this playful mimicry, inviting players not only to act "as if" on-screen but to act "as if"

while sitting at their computer desks. Players can do this by consulting maps presumably similar to those the avatar uses (or theoretically might use) or by wearing an ankh similar to the one the avatar might wear. These artifacts also highlight the connections between computer RPGs like *Ultima* and other types of role-playing games, including tabletop and live-action RPGs. Feelies in the franchise reinforce the use of magical symbolism and work to extend the on-screen experience into the player's physical environment.

Runes and rune-inspired text serve a defining role in the aesthetic of the *Ultima* series. Runes appear as text, on maps, in books, and as feelies packaged with *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss*, a spin-off produced by Warren Spector and directed by Richard Garriott. Echoing the text style used on the maps for *Ultima I*, the runes and runic text also echo Tolkien, who had adapted runes to modern English in *The Hobbit* (1937). Further, the *Underworld* runestones are evocative of the method of spellcasting used in-game, a method tied both to modern runic divination and to the belief that runes may have served both as a writing system and a type of magic. Aside from being invoked by Tolkien, runes, and in particular runestones as a tool for "runecasting" (divination using runes), exist as a modern cultural practice with quasi-historical roots. As popular culture scholar Paul Mountfort (2015, 16) notes, practitioners are quick to valorize themselves as the inheritors of an alleged tradition dating to northern European antiquity, but the practice more directly emerges from a "quasi-Gothic, nationalistic gestalt […] in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the taint by association with National Socialism" (Mountfort 2015, 19–21). This does not suggest that runecasting in North America is or was necessarily tied to nationalism in the United States, but only that this is a critical historical context, which we would suggest is worth noting given the growing trend of white supremacists leveraging a fictionalized history to justify racist beliefs and the fraught history of racial representation in popular

fantasy.[6] That said, runecasting in the 1970s United States was most closely connected with the types of occultism and neopaganism in and around Renaissance fairs, which likely explains its appearance in the quasi-medieval worlds of Sosaria and Britannia.

Like the in-game runestones, *Ultima Underworld*'s physical runestones are etched with words that correspond with the Words of Power, or the magical language used in Britannia. *Underworld* shipped with a set of metal stones in a pouch that reflect those used in the game. Although similar to the runic script and alphabet used throughout the series, they are used differently and are more reflective of runestones circulating in common use. The runic feelies are small metal tiles with a single rune debossed in each. The runes have a literal weight because of the metal used, and the debossing enhances the sense of the Words of Power as having a substantial, physical presence and, potentially, effect. The British language philosopher J.L. Austin theorized various types of speech acts; among these, performatives are utterances that not only describe but alter social reality. For example, uttering "I do" during a marriage ceremony both describes the situation (you do wish to be married) and performs the action (you are now married). Like Austin's performatives, the Words of Power have literal power, and uttering them is to affect some change, to make or unmake something, to alter the fabric of the surrounding world (Austin 1975, 6–8). The runes as feelies are presented as physical pieces of Sosaria or Britannia, but they are also symbols of the power players are able to wield in the game. Like the metal ankh, they offer opportunities for worldly play, and extend the threshold of the game beyond the computer by offering engaging, portable artifacts.

The ankh is a recurring symbol in the *Ultima* series, appearing first in *Ultima III* and most famously as a symbol of the Virtue of Spirituality in *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*, which also features several ankhs that can give the Stranger guidance. The centrality of the ankh to the game's plot partly explains why *Ultima IV* was packaged

with a physical replica of the in-game ankh. The pewter charm could be worn on a chain—visibly displaying a player's affinity for the game and extending opportunities for mimicry-based play, echoing the practices of live-action role-playing (LARPing) while anticipating the growing popularity of cosplay (Crawford 2012; Newman 2008). A similar metal ankh, with some variance in appearance based on the sales region, was included with the "Dragon Edition" of *Ultima IX*, and an ankh letter opener shipped with *Ultima Underworld* for the FM Towns computer in Japan. These later ankhs differ from the *Ultima IV* ankh in that they were not standard items included in the game, with the *Ultima IX* one limited only to a special release and the *Ultima Underworld* paperknife reserved for a particular platform and national market. These examples are fun collectables and aren't exactly parts of the games. Because of this, they are only distant echoes of the earlier paratexts of the *Ultima* series. The letter opener, for example, while vaguely sword-like and inscribed with runic script (that disappointingly only references the Japanese branch of Electronic Arts that produced the game) has no in-game analog.

All these feelies—cloth maps, metal ankhs, coins, dimensional runestones in a cloth bag—are substantial parts of the tactile and sensory world of the *Ultima* franchise. Enticing paratexts that evoke historical, even ancient artifacts, they transubstantiate the in-game world and reflect the nexus of genres, histories, cultures, and subcultures that formed the crucible in which *Ultima I* and the subsequent series formed. Here we have neopagan runecasting, medieval history and medieval reenactment, and the kind of expansive world-building that requires multiple binders of notes to keep straight. Of course, setting off on an adventure in such a place requires a map. And, while the game could be played with a paper map, with a plastic ankh or no ankh at all, the game's packaged experience would not be the same, and the paratextual threshold that welcomed players in would be significantly different. Objects made from materials that predate modernity, that

could be much older than they are with a minimal amount of imagination added a sense of both quality and authenticity to the games.

The idea of being drawn into a fantasy world through a media experience is deeply seductive. For example, in *The Neverending Story* (both Michael Ende's novel and the 1984 film), Bastian realizes the book he is reading is a portal to a real, crumbling world that he can restore through the power of imagination. In *The Sleeping Dragon* (1983), the first book in Joel Rosenberg's long-running Guardians of the Flame series, a group of college students are sucked into the world of a fantasy role-playing game. In the *Dungeons and Dragons* animated series (Coates, Marks, and Takashi 1983–85), a group of youth are transported to the world of the game via an amusement park "dark ride"—a ride-through attraction that contains narrative scenes. This narrative trope is an apt metaphor both for the immersive nature of effective storytelling and for the seeming magic of fantasy worlds. The box art, feelies, and other paratexts created for and packaged with *Ultima* are a threshold, and they are also a kind of experiential portal, inviting players into another realm and offering, in some cases, an opportunity to carry a piece of it back with them.

Conclusion

Garriott saw packaging and feelies as fundamental to creating the authentic *Ultima* experience, and he partnered with Sierra On-Line and later co-founded Origin Systems at least in part because of the importance he placed on the game's packaged experience. *Ultima* should thus be considered not only as a transmedia, multimodal computer game series, but as a compelling piece of experience design that begins with the game's box and continues through the items inside: the manuals, paper or cloth maps, feelies, coins, and the game. Feelies like medieval-inspired maps or pewter ankhs evoke the developing

culture of the American-style Renaissance fair, the Society for Creative Anachronism, LARPing, and other cultural activities grounded in a fascination with medieval historical reenactment, many of which Garriott participated in enthusiastically.[7] The distribution of Sosarian and Britannian artifacts along with the computer games contributes to a sense of authorial authenticity, extending the world beyond the computer screen and encouraging players to think of the game's world as a real, physical place—one that can be mapped, and where artifacts may be discovered or souvenirs taken. It also encouraged players to further identify with and role-play as the Stranger and later the Avatar, by wearing or using objects similar to those in-game heroes.

The game's world is developed across these materials, presenting a multimodal transmedia effort at storytelling that encourages players to engage in the kind of mimicry that is at the heart of role-playing games. This type of expansive storytelling has long since become a backbone of massive media franchises, including not only those based on games but also franchises derived from other media properties like the *Harry Potter* books or the seemingly limitless Marvel and DC comic book universes. Even as physical copies of games have become less common, the production of and desire for collector's items related to popular and niche media franchises has significantly increased. Today's fan conventions are supported by extensive vendor exhibitions where attendees can purchase everything from action figures to cosmetics, from collectable art prints to fine jewelry. Some of these serve officially sanctioned narrative purposes; all of them boost brand recognition. Contemporary cultural and economic practices encourage fandom as an avenue for the expression of affinity and the cultivation of community. Now mainstream, this type of engagement with popular culture has its roots in various subcultural practices, including those of Renaissance fair participants and tabletop RPG players. The packaged experience of *Ultima* is one that owes a debt to Garriott's personal influences and, at the same time, anticipates a rising tide

of media production and distribution practices that have remained prevalent even as computer and video games distribution has shifted toward the digital.

The degree to which physical artifacts served an integral role in the experience of playing most *Ultima* titles illustrates the complexity of its world-building and storytelling practices. Games presented without their narrative accessories are often worlds without ready-made thresholds, without the kinds of maps that guide players through a designed experience. Throughout this chapter, we have discussed how paratexts complete games and how the *Ultima* franchise leverages paratexts to support affective gaming experiences. In the next chapter, we turn to a consideration of players' roles in the series, suggesting that just as the gaming experience might be incomplete without its packaged paratexts, so too is a game incomplete without players—a point that becomes especially complicated as fans engage as invested authors, creating and nurturing characters, providing formal and informal feedback, influencing production practices, and documenting, celebrating, and preserving the games as culturally and personally meaningful.

CHAPTER 5
Ultima Ever After

Introduction: Lord British-es

In her classic work on human-computer interaction, *Computers as Theatre*, game designer Brenda Laurel (2013) posits that computer games and software programs are not whole systems on their own—they are partial, complete only when they are in use, with the human user essential to completing the system. Alexander R. Galloway (2006) further suggests that games exist primarily as potential:

> *video games are actions* […] Without action, games remain only in the pages of an abstract rule book. Without the active participation of players and machines, video games exist only as static computer code. Video games come into being when the machine is powered up and the software is executed; they exist when enacted.
>
> (Galloway 2006, 2, emphasis in original)

In the previous chapter, we considered the importance of paratexts for the process of world-building—be it for narrative, aesthetic, or ludic

ends. This chapter proceeds from this understanding of what games are and turns towards the role of players and community members in the franchise. Drawing on both Laurel and Galloway, we argue that *Ultima* titles rely heavily on players for their very existence as games. Games, but especially those which depend on players to craft personalized characters who make moral choices and evolve as imagined people, require players to put them into motion. The attract mode on an arcade screen, for example, is not a game but an invitation. It is a veritable call to action that invites a would-be player to consider the game's—and their own—potential.

As the *Ultima* franchise expanded in scope and complexity, with its geographic and narrative worlds becoming larger and more open-ended, the games increasingly depended on players to make them function. In this chapter we consider players' relationships with *Ultima* both as individual games and as a transmedia franchise. We then discuss the afterlife of the series as its games continue to circulate both as a corporately owned intellectual property and in its function as the textual anchor for a community of players, collectors, and other series enthusiasts.

Structurally, *Ultima* titles invite players to think of their in-game experiences as unique and personal, encouraging their investment and sense of ownership. This intimate player-game relationship is integral to understanding the long-standing appeal of the franchise. Personal investment encourages players to create *Ultima* artifacts, stories, and experiences inside and beyond the boundaries of the games; it inspires and sustains fan-driven efforts to preserve and archive the titles; it catalyzes original works made in homage; and it encourages a sense of community as evidenced by the thousands of people who still, today, connect over the games on discussion boards, websites, and social media. These practices are essential to understanding the impact, legacy, and importance of the franchise, and these activities help to explain why these games continue to enjoy cultural cachet rather than

being merely historically interesting. Although these aspects of *Ultima* exist largely outside of what Richard Garriott or his collaborators at Origin Systems could control, they are expressions and experiences integral to the games. Moreover, they raise provocative questions about the intersection between forms of authorship, notions of personal and shared ownership, and the power of player communities to sustain a fantasy universe long after it has ceased to be an attractive commercial property.

Semi-Authorial to Amateur Archival

While a strong sense of ownership can be a double-edged sword—inspiring players' loyalty *and* fostering their desire for meaningful control—it is central to the long-standing success of the series. Further, having a personal stake in the games has animated numerous archiving projects which have ensured that *Ultima* titles remain available and playable. Preservation through community-driven projects is an archival practice that balances conservative and disruptive desires. Fan-driven archives are both conservative as fans work to faithfully preserve or reproduce a beloved artifact, and disruptive as fans claim ownership or at least custodianship of the game. Devoted players and fans occupy a distinct role in the *Ultima* universe by documenting, extending, and analyzing the games with an incredible attention to detail. Game studies scholars Melanie Swalwell, Helen Stuckey, and Angela Ndalianis (2017) argue that the work of game fans can be considered in a variety of ways: "It is time to recognize the impact and centrality of video game fan communities—as a collective intelligence, as a pool of individual creators of games and as interested and engaged parties in the collecting and remembering of game history" (1).

Fan-driven preservation initiatives raise questions about who owns the cultural products of commercial ventures, especially when

titles are abandoned by their legally recognized owners in relatively short order. In the case of the first *Ultima*, original copies of physical game media and packaging are rare, and finding functional solutions for playing the earliest releases on discontinued media formats like the 1980s floppy disk can range from challenging to impossible. The popularity of the *Ultima* series has resulted in a number of reissues and remastered versions, but remakes usually lack the physical artifacts and packaging in ways that substantially alter the original play experience. Fan preservation efforts help maintain evidence of these materials. In this section, we discuss both preservation (including emulation projects) and documentation efforts. These practices illustrate fans' collective sense of ownership and the cultivation and sharing of player expertise. They also make clear the centrality of community to many games, including single-player titles. If, as we suggest, games without players are incomplete, then player communities are indispensable for maintaining and recreating those primary and supporting materials necessary for accessing what the game might have looked and felt like on its initial release and how players may have experienced them. Further, as Anastasia Marie Salter (2009) suggests, the locus of game authorship can actually change over time. Writing about classic adventure games, they note: "Authorship of these games has changed hands: it is now under the control of the fans, the former and current players" (0.1). To some degree, this is true of *Ultima* as well.

Organizations like the Ultima Dragons Internet Chapter (UDIC) and websites and repositories like the Ultima Codex represent game emulation and preservation efforts that breathe life into aging franchises. Some of these initiatives are extremely long running. For example, UDIC was initially founded in 1992 on the online service Prodigy and remains active more than three decades later. (Prodigy, like Origin, was based in Austin, Texas.) The Ultima Codex positions itself as a fan network, offering a rich collection of news items and documentation

related to everything *Ultima*, including an *Ultima*-focused podcast and a vast wiki cataloging all of the *Ultima* titles in great detail. A separate wiki hosted at Fandom.com boasts of 2,994 articles related to the series (Ultima Wiki n.d.). More general repositories of video game knowledge also demonstrate the devotion of fans. The Museum of Computer Game Adventure History, launched in 2001 by Howard Feldman, currently has scans of 49 different editions of *Ultima* games, showing the games' packaging, manuals, feelies, and other physical accoutrements. While this website is substantial, it still isn't as exhaustive as Stephen Emond's *Ultima: The Ultimate Collector's Edition* (2012). This tome spans 826 pages, covering 520 different releases of *Ultima* games and cataloging a total of 955 distinct items, which is unique in its inventory of international editions of the games.

As a genre, RPGs across media invite player engagement in distinct ways. This sense of immersion through player-customized characters in an expansive world complete with its own culture, history, and reality has proven to have exceptional stickiness for those who continue playing and replaying the games for years or even decades. In the case of *Dungeons & Dragons*, this long-term engagement has kept this analog tabletop title—and its many iterations across media—commercially viable for decades. Its current publishers regularly update it, and the game supports an entire microindustry. But in the case of computer games, this longer engagement represents a complicated commitment. Changes in technology can result in games quickly becoming inaccessible. For instance, publishers stop supporting servers needed for online play once a title has faded in popularity or when it becomes financially problematic. Or supplementary paratexts that complete games may be lost or damaged with the passage of time. These types of challenges are understandable at a production level. Maintaining servers and support staff can be expensive, as can the fabrication of physical goods. Even during its initial release, the metal feelies of the *Ultima* universe were borderline cost prohibitive.

Decades later, these titles have become of more niche interest and, as game distribution has increasingly moved towards digital channels, reproducing the feelies would increase production and distribution costs considerably.

However, as we discussed in Chapter 4, these games are incomplete without their paratexts, just as they are incomplete without their players. Ported or emulated games often present a real degradation of the original text. Yet these are also often the most complete editions available for aging series. This point is somewhat inexplicably raised on the *Ultima II* page on the Sierra Gamers site maintained by Sierra On-Line co-founder Ken Williams: "Although the original release of *The Colonel's Bequest* can still relatively easily be found on online auctions, a *complete* original game is considered as a true collector's item, as it contains many goodies which are often missing from second-hand sales, particularly the Laura Bow pen and notebook" ("Sierra Gamers" n.d.). While the location of this information is odd, the point is an important one: games as code often outlast originally issued games distributed on physical media. Preservation and documentation efforts that make, at the very least, information about the games' paratexts available serve a critical role in keeping the games playable and at least passably complete. These projects, carried out through online efforts like the Ultima Codex or the High-Resolution Ultima Map Project (HRUMP) offer a corrective to the type of digitally driven reissues that make up the bread and butter of digital game distribution businesses like Good Old Games (GOG.com). There, games are ported to modern machines and stripped of their initial, physical context—we get the game, but are typically denied the out-of-box accessories and multimodal thresholds. While many editions include digital versions of physical artifacts, these function differently than their physical counterparts. This is what the market can support, perhaps, but it is neither an accurate representation of what the game was, nor is it likely what fans would prefer under ideal circumstances.

Sites like the Museum of Computer Game Adventure History carefully catalog the packaging and other paratexts of numerous games in an act of fan-driven documentation that serves as a corrective to the games' digital decontextualization. Ironically, these otherwise orderly sites also embrace a certain unruliness when it comes to corporate control of commercial products that are formational for communities. They exist as sometimes radical remedies, providing through informal channels something the market will no longer bear. Emulation and reproduction efforts bring this tension into sharper relief. That is, while Electronic Arts *de jure* owns *Ultima* outright, its de facto ownership is much muddier. These types of volunteer efforts are driven by connection, by love—for the games, for the community, for the medium, and for the present and past of all three. If games are only completed with player participation, older games are most completely realized in their fan-preserved incarnations, in collective memory, and in ongoing play; or, in what game historian Raiford Guins (2014) terms, their "afterlife."

Here Be Ultima Dragons

Members of the Ultima Dragons Internet Chapter (UDIC) are at the forefront of these efforts. If someone is involved in anything *Ultima*-related, and if they're using an online name with "Dragon" in it, they're almost certainly a UDIC member. The fan group today boasts nearly 16,000 members on its official website roster, where members are individually listed by their Dragon name, human name, and their UDIC email address. UDIC also lists a similar number of members on its public Facebook group, where members discuss *Ultima*-related projects of their own, ask for help accessing or playing the games, and share a diversity of content ranging from RPG-related memes to science reporting, to Halloween decorating tips ("Ultima Dragons

Internet Chapter Facebook" n.d.). Dragons talk shop about gameplay, share obscure lore, celebrate *Ultima*-related news, make their own series-inspired projects, and meticulously document anything that may be remotely related to *Ultima*.

Their efforts are central to *Ultima*'s afterlife. However, they are also why *Ultima* is experienced as a game series with continued relevance rather than as a retro novelty. The scale, visibility, and engagement of this fan community has long been integral to the series, and the importance of community for what are, at least initially, single-player RPGs might be surprising. Yet, even when games are designed to be played by one person, they are not necessarily experienced alone. Public events, tournaments, conventions, clubs, teams, and other organizations are hallmarks of video game culture, and the *Ultima* franchise is no exception. Where *Ultima* is exceptional, however, is in its fans' long-standing and profound sense of ownership and investment cultivated over the course of several decades.

At the UDIC website, membership is open to those who "have played an *Ultima*, are willing to help others with their *Ultima* questions, and would like to be a member of the Ultima Dragons." Prospective members can join via email or by a short questionnaire that asks for some biographical information, which *Ultima* titles the applicant has played and/or completed, and what their Dragon name should be ("UDIC – Ultima Dragons Internet Chapter" n.d.). On the last point, the site offers this tip: "Don't pick something that's been in an *Ultima*; pick something that ought to be. 'Dragon' will be automatically appended. You may want to check the master roster of current members before choosing a dragon name." A last requirement is made explicit elsewhere on the site: prospective members must provide a "real name." The transparency about membership—the membership roster is public on both the Facebook group and the UDIC website—and the visibility of real names are indicative of the age of the community (as is the site's late-1990s design aesthetics that, once generic,

now convey a distinctive visual style). In fact, providing a real name and having played an *Ultima* game are the only two requirements for joining, and Fallible Dragon offers the following explanation for the name policy:

> First, where it asks for real name, you have to type in your real name. If you're really concerned, you can use your first initial and your last name. But it has to be your real name. The whole thing. "John" alone won't cut it. We want to see "John Doe" or "J. Doe".
>
> This is a question of honesty and respect. You being honest with the rest of the club and respecting us, and the rest of the club respecting you in return. How can we respect you if you don't feel we're worthy of knowing your name? If you really don't want to give out your real name, then you're welcome to lurk and participate in the activities, but please don't waste your time by filling out an application.
>
> ("Dragon Requirements" n.d.)

Research on the implications of real-name policies suggests that they can reduce antisocial behaviors at the aggregate level, shaping community norms and discourse (Cho, Kim, and Acquisti 2012). This policy is, effectively, a community management practice that shapes the UDIC, and the UDIC, as an exceptionally visible group, shapes the collective experience of *Ultima*. Further, the mixing of real names and dragon names interpellates community members through the types of naming practices that exist throughout the *Ultima* universe. Here, you are a person who exists in the real world and as a character all at once. The language of the name policy is reflective of the kinds of values integrated across the series. Honesty, respect, and worth may sound like a heavy burden for an internet community made up of members with names like Rainbow Dragon to bear, but this dual emphasis on personal values *and* a sense of play are central to the series and its community.

Devotees of *Ultima*, like the members of UDIC, cannot help but engage with questions of values because those questions are central to the series. The players understand community behaviors and norms as a matter of values, and they directly and indirectly point towards the games as moral texts. In preserving the games and shaping a community, UDIC exhibits a central concern with integrity—of member behavior and of the game world, which is viewed as something to be preserved and supplemented with careful fidelity. This investment in the *Ultima* franchise can reflect a certain degree of reverence, but it also invites a sense of ownership. After all, many UDIC members are experts on the games, and a fundamental function of the group is to grow and to share that expertise. This use of expertise goes far beyond playing with the games as once published and extends into efforts aimed at preservation and immersion. When prospective members select names, after all, they are encouraged to pick names that "should be" in the games, demonstrating their familiarity with the narrative universe in an effort to insert themselves into that expansive world.

In many real ways, *Ultima* fans are the series' historians and its guardians. Indeed, because the games' original developers no longer have the intellectual property rights to the brand and lack the liberties available to fans as producers of transformative works, fans protect the series' legacy to a greater extent than the original producers. Members of the UDIC assume this role again and again through an eclectic mix of creative projects. *Spam Spam Spam Humbug* is billed as "the unofficial podcast of the Ultima Dragons, and of the broader *Ultima* fandom." The podcast, and the sprawling, exhaustive suite of sites that comprise the Ultima Codex, are both supported by a Patreon campaign (2015). Run by members of UDIC, the Codex also catalogs dozens of fan projects: games inspired by *Ultima*, books about *Ultima*, remakes of *Ultima* games, game engines developed specifically to make *Ultima*-style CRPGs, and even an *Ultima*-inspired ale (WtF Dragon 2018c). While each of these projects is

interesting in its own right, what is most salient is that fans continue to produce elaborate, high-investment projects as a way to significantly extend the *Ultima* experience.

Authorship and Ownership

Fan-driven projects can raise the visibility and usability of historic games, such as those preserved through multiple arcade machine emulation (MAME). While original *Ultima* paratexts and ephemera may be difficult to locate today, fan projects provide and expand on information that can substitute for these missing materials. They can also provide insights into the aspects of the games players find particularly compelling. For example, fan-made tourism brochures reveal a loving devotion to the games' cultural and geographic landscapes. But more importantly, these practices demonstrate the degree to which *Ultima* is for many players a fully-rendered world. In both drawing from and extending the series' narrative universe, fan works participate in metalepsis, a narrative practice articulated by French literary theorist Gerard Genette (1980, 234–236). Tisha Turk (2011), who studies fan videos, describes how these projects engage in metalepsis: "These fan works are both texts in their own right and supplements (in the Derridean sense) to the original source material: fan works supplement texts that are already complete, but always with the shadow meaning, the possibility, of adding *in order to* complete" (83–84). *Ultima* fan works both assume that Sosaria and Britannia are real worlds *and* that they can supplement what is available in the official canon—a process that they first initiate through character-creation. Later, as they become well-versed in the games, players sometimes invest time in producing supplements and utilities they would find useful or those they think will make the games more accessible by expanding the series' spaces and stories. For example, a number of projects meditate

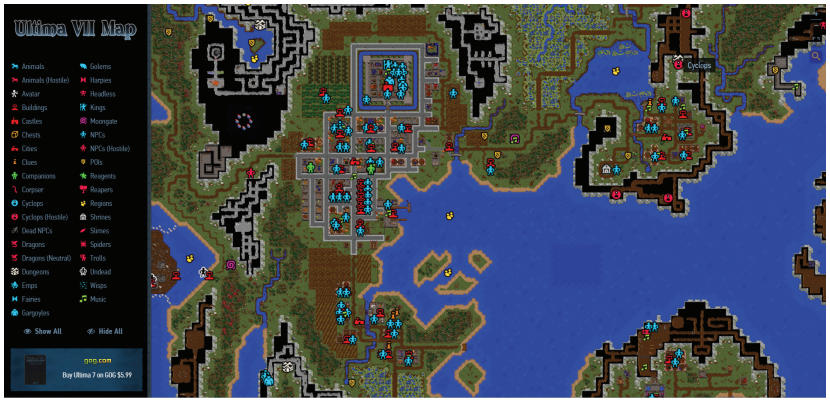


Figure 5.1: kxmode's interactive fan map is dense with information about the landscape of *Ultima VII* (screen capture).

on the geography of Sosaria and Britannia, the importance of which the games' initial packaging made quite clear but which has faded from view in the digital reissues. Ryan Allen as kxmode developed an information-rich "Ultima VII Map" based on the style and interface of Google Maps. Here, the landscape of *Ultima VII* appears annotated with place names, character locations and details (such as whether the character is hostile), points of interest, and even music (see Figure 5.1). Although it lacks the tactile quality of a cloth map, it is a resource-rich rendering of the game's landscape.

While the "Ultima VII Map" project is largely a transcription of in-game information, other projects add to the information available inside the game. Great Siberian Dragon presents a playful riff on the role of place in the franchise, designing brochures to entice tourists to key game locations like Pagan and Serpent Isle through her Travel Britannia project (see Figure 5.2).

In the style of a cruise or group travel brochure, each highlights the cultural, historical, and geographic allure of the chosen location while providing a day-by-day tour itinerary. These brochures imagine the world of Britannia as a vacation destination: "Britannia is a land with a rich tradition of arts and crafts. Magical curiosities, armour

Figure 5.2: Great Siberian Dragon playfully presents information about *Ultima* locations in brochures, like this one depicting Britannia (screen capture).

and weapons, unique homewares, latest fashions, exotic fruit and vegetables—you are truly spoilt for choice" (Great Siberian Dragon 2018). The wry tone is contrasted with the often heavily detailed information. The brochures are a demonstration of skill in writing and graphic design, and they are also a collection of in-jokes intended for a knowing community.

Sosaria and Britannia's geographies and their magical and morality systems are covered extensively in paratexts associated with several *Ultima* titles. They have also proven ripe for fan iteration and expansion. Shawn Michael Hescock launched a deck-building game called *The Language of Magic* based on the magical system of the *Ultima* games. On the page for the game's successful crowdfunding campaign, Hescock (2019) makes explicit that the game is a homage to Garriott's *Ultima* universe:

> *The Language of Magic* came about from my long-time appreciation for the world which Richard Garriott created. Specifically the MMO, *Ultima Online*. As a kid, teenager, and young adult I put many hours into the game and, even though it has been running for just over 20 years, I still go back to it from time to time just to relive the experience. It is a masterpiece of a game that will never get old and my only hope is that we created something that pays the proper respect.

The morality and character creation systems from the series also have their own guardians. Mighty Owlbear (2018), also known as K.G. Orphanides, adapted *Ultima VI*'s Test of Virtues to function in a modern browser, and personality quizzes either recreate versions of the character-creation system or helpfully sort those completing them based on the game's virtues. Through these, portions of the game are recontextualized as standalone artifacts, allowing people to revisit an aspect of gameplay they particularly loved or to participate anew in a niche personality quiz.

Ultima-inspired works also demonstrate players' eagerness for more *Ultim*a games and for playable versions of the original games. More than one *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) server is dedicated to celebrating and recreating the look and feel of *Ultima*'s game world (Darkling Dragon; Unicorn Rampant/Daydream Dragon; WtF Dragon 2015a). A number of noncommercial RPGs invoke the games explicitly. Prose Dragon's *Loto the Avatar* (2018) crosses *Ultima I* with *Dragon Quest I* (Square Enix 1986); *Suomi RPG* (Rayhouse Productions 2015) playfully parodies the franchise; and *The Dark Unknown* (2019) draws heavily from *Ultima* explicitly and 1980s RPGs more generally ("About" n.d.; WtF Dragon 2018a; WtF Dragon 2018b; WtF Dragon 2019). One of the most ambitious of these projects, *Euotopia* (Breedon n.d.), previously known as *EUO* for "enhanced *Ultima* online," presents a multiplayer game with retro-style graphics. In the words of its website, it is "a retro 2D multiplayer online MMORPG inspired by the early *Ultimas*, *Nethack*, *Diablo*, gold-box [*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*], *Magic Candle*, etc." (Breedon n.d.). Garriott and other members of the original development team are often aware of these projects and sometimes offer public support, as when Garriott responded "Looks cool!" to a tweet informing him about *Euotopia* (Garriott 2014).

Some *Ultima*-inspired projects are now decades old. For example, Resurrection Dragon first created a tabletop RPG called *Ultima Resurrection* in 1998 and posted the rules online. A small community developed around the title, and some players even wrote new content for it. The preservation of that game, which was available online until 2004, demonstrates the extent to which *Ultima* is a community-driven phenomenon. When Resurrection Dragon later found his copies of the game's documentation, he established a new website dedicated to making it playable again. That website, online since 2017, hosts Resurrection Dragon's now revised game along with supplementary materials like a bestiary, character sheets, and a quick reference card, some of which were crafted by other members of the community (Resurrection

Dragon 2017). Works like *Ultima Resurrection* demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the world and logic of the games and showcase players' desire to engage with that expansive world in new ways. Yes—fans document *Ultima* but they also iterate on it. Fan works can preserve and conserve the original, world-building efforts. Furthermore, they can also correct, complicate, adapt, and expand those realms. These practices build worlds upon worlds, offering experiences that are anchored in but are nevertheless distinct from the original titles.

Conclusion: Whose Game World Is It?

Many of the expansion, documentation, and preservation efforts of *Ultima* players fall into an awkward status with regards to copyright. These projects are overwhelmingly small-scale and are noncommercial in nature. And while some creators are hit with cease-and-desist letters, most produce works that extend the broader *Ultima* world without incurring the ire of lawyers. Writing about fan practices around adventure games, Salter notes that copyright does not always curtail fan creation because fans either ignore it or because the projects are deemed to be transformative works. In reproducing or expanding the games, fans become creators in their own right. Salter (2009) notes:

> Fan creators of the classic adventure game movement can also be identified as cocreators, as they are in dialogue with the work of the original developers[…]. Fan authorship co-opts material from the existing games without requiring the game itself. A game authored by a fan stands on its own and is playable as a complete structure. It is informed by the original, and may even be an exacting remake of the original, but it is developed separately.

Players, then, pursue diverse activities that preserve and document games. They also engage in metaleptical practices that extend and

conceivably complete the games as well. Through these activities, fans claim ownership of the game world, either directly (as in reproductions or extensions of the *Ultima* franchise) or indirectly (through documentation and preservation). They build on the customization and personalization of game experiences, moving from sanctioned to unsanctioned types of engagement and remaking CRPGs and their game worlds.

Like all digital and analog games, the *Ultima* series present partial gaming texts—systems that are incomplete without players and their gameplay practices. As we discussed in the previous chapter, paratexts provide meaningful, critical contexts for players, both augmenting the often rudimentary screen graphics and serving as a key reference for successful play. Even when these games were new, players created resources for one another. And as the games have aged, fans increasingly claim ownership and actively participate in various acts of authorship. Without fans extending the game experience, *Ultima* would largely be mothballed. Instead, their robust activities keep the games circulating in popular culture. *Ultima* is not unique in having a loyal fanbase—many long-running series like *World of Warcraft*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and *The Elder Scrolls* are sustained due to the devotion of a core group of players. But *Ultima* is unusual for how old it is, how visible and accessible its developers were and are, and how active its community remains. None of the projects or organizations discussed in this chapter are part of the series' official canon, but ignoring them is to ignore a key component of how *Ultima* is experienced by its players and is understood by the broader public. The game's status is owed in large part to the adoring and dutiful work of its fan community.

The *Ultima* titles demonstrate how vital community can be for a game series. The fan community that grew up with the series provided dependable commercial support when the games were first released. But its community has, over time, evolved to become central to others'

experiences of the franchise. Fans like those who join UDIC play *Ultima*, but—as importantly—they also *play with* it, expanding its world with works of their own, experimenting with what the narrative limits of that world might be, and mentoring others in the skills and the knowledge needed to participate in the community. Richard Garriott and Origin Systems built the first generation of *Ultima* worlds, but the series endures and maintains its landmark status because fans have stepped into the creative void as its collective of world-builders and world-preservers.

Notes

Introduction

1 Even Garriott is somewhat hazy on the precise date of *Ultima*'s completion. California Pacific filed for the game's copyright on September 2 1980 (registration #: PA000031750). However, the firm did not sell and distribute the game for the Apple II until 1981.
2 Garriott now goes by Garriott de Cayeux after adopting his wife's last name in 2011. For ease of use and brevity, we will continue to refer to Garriott de Cayeux as Garriott (as he often does) or, where appropriate, Lord British.
3 Garriott's title, *Akalabeth*, was inspired by J.R.R. Tolkien's *Akallabêth*, which tells the tale of the destruction of Númenor. We go into this and other inspirational touchstones in the first chapter.
4 To be clear, the single-player *Ultima* series concluded in 1999 with the long-overdue *Ultima IX: Ascension*. It hit a number of production delays before its release. It was a failure both commercially and critically.

Becoming Lord British

1 Contrary to this dominant narrative, Garriott had combined popular culture and computer programming before, if only cursorily. Before moving to Texas, when he and his family lived near Stanford University where his father worked, Garriott was enrolled briefly in Henry M. Gun High School where he took some basic computer classes. Here, according to Garriott, educators "encouraged you to play with the computer and I wrote some little *Star Trek* games" (Wizards Journal 1984, 1).

2 A few sources state that Garriott and Mayer worked together at the ComputerLand store in Austin. The overwhelming majority of stories, however, point to the store in Clear Lake City, outside of Houston, Texas. See, for example, Maher (2011b).

3 There is a curious wrinkle in *Akalabeth*'s popular creation chronology. As Jimmy Maher chronicles in a post on his blog, *The Digital Antiquarian: An Ongoing History of Computer Entertainment*, Garriott states in multiple interviews that he created the dungeon crawler during the summer of 1979. Yet the preponderance of evidence suggests that he created *Akalabeth* during the summer of 1980. This would've been during the summer break following his first year at the University of Texas. Maher notes that it is unclear if Garriott willfully misled the press regarding *Akalabeth*'s production date, and (if so) what would motivate him to do so. See Maher (2011b).

4 The historical record is not exactly clear on how California Pacific came into possession of *Akalabeth*. Most sources identify Garriott's ComputerLand boss as the person responsible. However, in a 1989 interview, Garriott says that one of *Akalabeth*'s first buyers sent a copy to a friend of hers in California. See Ferrell (1989, 17). A third explanation is that it arrived via software piracy. For more on this explanation, see Maher (2011c).

5 It is worth noting that Garriott is not alone in his praise of Budge's work. In 2011, the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences named Bill Budge as its second Pioneer Award recipient for his 30+ years of innovation in video games and the web.

6 This sales number is also disputed. See Maher (2011c).

7 Another piece of evidence supporting Jimmy Maher's historical timeline regarding *Akalabeth* and *Ultima* being created in 1980 and 1981, respectively, appears in the June 1981 issue of *Softalk* magazine: "The young man—eighteen to be exact and just finishing his sophomore year in college—is Lord British, creator of *Akalabeth* and, most recently, *Ultima*. *Ultima* combines the two lives of Lord British: it goes from the medieval times he loves and studies with the Society for Creative Anachronisms to the Space Age in which his father is a pioneer, and beyond." See Softalk (1981), 80.

8 *Softalk* reveals British's identity in their June 1981 issue, following their contest announcement in the previous month. However, this is not before Garriott pens his first game design postmortem on *Akalabeth* for *The Space Gamer* as Lord British. Thus, while he doesn't enjoy a secret identity for long, Lord British is on record before Garriott.

9 *The Space Gamer* was a publication dedicated to fantasy and sci-fi gaming, which, at the time, was owned and edited by Steve Jackson of Steve Jackson Games, based in Austin, Texas.

10 Contemporary Kickstarter campaigns led by game designers who are featured prominently on the campaign pages and promotional efforts exemplify this framing of designer as author—and to some extent, as consumer good.

11 Addams is the editor responsible for the *QuestBusters: The Adventurer's Journal*, a popular monthly newsletter that published hints and solutions for games during the 1980s.
12 The two would collaborate professionally a few years later when Garriott's newly-formed company, Origin Systems, licensed some of Steve Jackson Games' better-known creations, including *Autoduel* (1985), based on Jackson's popular *Car Wars* (1980), and *Ogre* (1986).
13 Garriott repeats the Remmers/California Pacific drug habit accusation at the 40-minute mark in an interview (gamedevthings 2011).
14 There are two stories about Garriott and Sierra On-Line parting ways which sometimes get conflated. First, and most likely, Garriott wasn't satisfied with his returns from *Ultima II*, and was irritated that he wouldn't be receiving any royalties for the IBM port of the game (Addams 1992, 25). This was a major catalyst behind the launch of Origin Systems, following the urging of his entrepreneurial brother, Robert (Emond 2012, D6). The other story is of Sierra On-Line's production of *Ultima: Escape from Mt. Drash* (1983), which is often cited as being the cause for the professional fallout. However, as Jimmy Maher (2013) discusses on his excellent blog, *Ultima: Escape from Mt. Drash* was in fact produced with Garriott's full knowledge and blessing, most likely as a favor to his friend Keith Zabalaoui, who created *Mt. Drash* for the ill-fated Commodore VIC-20 system.
15 In 1983, Robert's wife accepted a job in Londonderry, New Hampshire when the couple was residing, and Robert working, in Andover, Massachusetts. To reduce Robert's commute, the company relocated its development staff to New Hampshire in 1985.
16 The Austin Britannia Manor is actually Britannia Manor, Mark 2. The first Britannia Manor is located in New Hampshire, which he sold to construct the Austin mansion. Garriott would go on to construct Britannia Manor, Mark 3, adjacent to the Mark 2 house and a Mark 4 Manor in NYC for his spouse who works there. See Garriott (2014).
17 This motto went through some refinement, according to Addams: "In 1990 this approach to game design was initially summed up in the company motto, "Others write software, we create worlds." A year later the motto was abbreviated to "We create worlds" (Addams 1992, 93).

The Road to *Ultima*

1 We discovered only two of Garriott's *Dungeons & Dragons* character sheets from the 1970s at the Videogame Archive at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin.
2 One such example is a painting guide for the miniatures for the *Empire of the Petal Throne* tabletop game, which was self-published by M.A.R. Barker in 1974, and by TSR in 1975; see, Barker (1977).

3 The final online issue of *Dragon Magazine* was published in 2013. In 2015, Wizards of the Coast, the publisher of *Dungeons & Dragons*, launched Dragon+, an app that purported to take the place of *Dragon Magazine*. However, it served primarily as a public relations device for *D&D* and its publisher. It failed to garner a following and was closed in 2022.

4 For more on the formative role women played in *D&D*'s history, see Cecilia D'Anastasio (2017), and for more on the masculinist and exclusionary nature of *The Dragon* magazine and *D&D*, see Aaron Trammell (2018a; 2018b).

5 This became a sore point for Gygax and one that he'd return to repeatedly. For example, see: Gygax (1977b, 5–6, 30; 1978b, 15–16, 21).

6 The magazine's managing editor Timothy Kask underscored *Dragon*'s role thusly:

> "The purpose of this magazine is the dissemination of information. *The Dragon* serves the field of Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Swords & Sorcery Gaming and the enthusiasts of same, in the capacity of information source. If an article is to be considered 'official,' it will be marked as such. There are many forms of designation: DESIGNERS FORUM is one such, an Editor's Note is another. Common sense will tell you that if a piece is written by an author of a game, the game being discussed in the article, you can assume it to be 'official.' In answer to your next question: 'Why is it there if it's not official?'—all I can say has already been said many times before. Fantasy gaming, whatever the generic form, is just that—Fantasy. The majority of the articles presented are alternatives to existing rules and interpretations. If you like one of them better than the original, well and good. If not, [*The Dragon*] has still served another purpose: it has caused you to think about it—it has stimulated your thought processes. Either way, the information has been disseminated, and [*The Dragon*] has served its purpose. Nowhere can you find two *D&D* campaigns completely identical. Not even identical twins have identical fantasies. Knowing this, we don't expect every reader to like every article or every interpretation. I'd be appalled if I discovered anything to the contrary: that discovery would spell the doom of free thought and fantasizing. We don't want to dictate how you play your games" (Kask 1977, 3, 6).

7 It is this lack of absolute directorial control that led famed film critic Roger Ebert (2010) to declare that video games could never be art. A "proper" artistic aesthetic experience cannot be partially determined by the user, according to Ebert. For more on the video games-as-art debate, see Felan Parker (2018).

8 By 1981 TSR employed 130 people and was pulling in nearly $13 million in revenue (Alsop 1982).

9 Interestingly, Garriott discovered an abandoned *DND29* project that he submitted to Ultima Codex, a fan archiving group. When he submitted the images to the group, he stated, "I have no memory of this. I will have (sic) research what this is myself!" This discovery and Garriott's own admission of not remembering it underscore the need for game histories to lean on more than designer memories when reconstructing production histories (WtF Dragon 2015b).

10 The original scan of *DND1*'s 1500 lines of BASIC source code is available at: https://d2sx9mrt4zumaq.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/DND1_Complete.pdf. Its data file is available at https://gist.github.com/bussiere/11137495.
11 This is a rare but not unheard of design choice. For example, one can play the text adventure *Zork* (Infocom 1977) in the military shooter *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (Activision 2010), and *PONG* (Atari 1972) in the fighting game *Mortal Kombat 2* (Midway Games 1993). For additional examples of playing games within games, see Dowling (2014).
12 The playable *DND1* teletype machine is available for purchase for $45, provided your in-game house is large enough to hold it.
13 At the time of writing, these three playable ports were available on their creators' websites.
14 We've yet to find the reason for or the history behind the name "Shavs."
15 Roy Earle's column is partially in response to a previous piece on the viability of using microcomputers to handle calculations; see, Earle (1980) and Krebs (1979).
16 According to Karl Maton (2014), "It is 'structured' by one's past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and educational experiences. It is 'structuring' in that one's habitus helps to shape one's present and future practices. It is a 'structure' in that it is systematically ordered rather than random or unpatterned" (50).
17 Tracing the specific lineage of gameplay mechanics from analog role-playing systems to popular fantasy CRPGs like *Ultima*, *Wizardry*, *Might and Magic*, *Telengard*, and others is outside the scope of this chapter and book. However, we believe that reconstructing that history could prove to be a fruitful and telling genealogy about how game designers translated analog adventures into programming code.

The World of *Ultima*

1 No shortage of methodological questions attend to writing thick descriptions of gaming experiences. Some questions are of a technical nature: Which version of *Ultima I* should we play? Is there a platform that offers a more "authentic" *Ultima* experience than another? Should we play the game on an aging microcomputer such as an Apple IIe or a Commodore 64, or will an updated version running on a modern-day operating system suffice? Other research questions concern extratextual resources: Can we utilize online help guides to expedite our journeys through Sosaria, or should our adventuring aspire to match those playing in the 1980s? Are we playing the same game if we don't have *Ultima*'s various paratextual goodies like its maps, "feelies," and trinkets? Other methodological considerations are more genre-specific: How do we synchronize our virtual field notes and observations given the vast

number of character-creation and gameplay options? Questions abound. Fortunately, we're not the first to tackle these issues.

In their historical analysis of the arcade vector shooter *Tempest* (Atari 1980), game scholars Judd Ruggill and Ken McAllister (2015) note: "Unsurprisingly, due to their inherent multi-medial and multi-experiential qualities, video games are among the most complex 'texts' that scholars analyze today" (12). Like Ruggill and McAllister, we interpret gameplay textuality within larger histories of mediated play and commercial and industrial practices. We believe the textual and contextual dimensions of games are mutually constitutive and are always historically situated.

2 The beginning of the humanistic study of video and computer games is often tied to the 1997 publication of Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* and Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*.

3 The publishing giant Electronic Arts (EA) owns the digital game distribution service Origin. EA acquired the Origin trademark when it purchased Origin Systems in 1992.

4 David Lubar is credited with converting *Ultima I* for the Commodore 64; see Emond (2012, B4).

5 Electronic Arts acquired Origin Systems in 1992, and it later shuttered the Austin studio in 2004 after producing a series of poorly received games.

6 The prominent billing of the Lord British handle is understated when compared to the first collection distributed by ProGame in 1981, a division of California Pacific Computer Company, called the "Lord British Starter Kit" which contained *Akalabeth* and *Ultima*.

7 Our box set did not include the 100-page guide book, but we consulted an online PDF.

8 In *The Video Game Explosion* (2008), Mark J.P. Wolf identifies 1977's *Super Bug* by Kee Games as being the first title with four-way scrolling and a tile based background (40).

9 Players can also earn extra hit points by rescuing imprisoned princesses. However, because the castle guards swarm on the player-character when this happens, it is not a reliable method of gaining health.

10 Players may also discover that food can be gained by dropping money into city fountains, at 5 food per coin.

11 Game FAQs has a useful breakdown of the amount of food consumed by type of transportation in *Ultima*. See Schultz (2017).

12 The entanglement of science fiction and fantasy as genres has a long history, as pointed out by Viviane Bergue (2017) who notes that the genres shared many characteristics "due to their distribution through the same channels, the proliferation of narratives that were more interested in adventures than actual scientific extrapolation and the use of similar visual aesthetics" (6). Bergue further notes that the emergence of comics furthered these connections, and we would argue that genre film and television like the expanding *Star Wars* franchise have continued this trend.

13 Being asked to select between these two vessels calls to mind the "Needle" and the "Wedge," the two competing space ships in the 1962 PDP-1 computer game, *Spacewar!*, developed by Steve "Slug" Russell and his MIT cohort. There's nothing we've found to suggest that Garriott ever played *Spacewar!*, or that this might be a veiled allusion to it.

Ultima in the World

1 These games are multimodal in that they assume and leverage multiple literacies within an integrated media experience, and they anticipate how transmedia properties distribute stories across multiple platforms—particularly digital ones; for more, see Jenkins 2006, 93–130; and Adami 2017.
2 If you are unfamiliar with this reference, the answer is 42.
3 For example, *The Lurking Horror* (Infocom 1987), included a student ID card as one of its feelies. The game required the ID number from the card in order to access the school's computers. By placing essential information on a physical artifact, game companies ensured that digital copies of the game were incomplete if not unplayable.
4 The inclusion of maps and feelies varies with different editions of *Ultima* titles, and is especially pronounced when considering newer, digital reissues. We would suggest that, as in the case of literary works, the varying editions of a title might usefully be considered as distinct texts. Here, we have focused heavily on the initial releases.
5 See also Steven Conway's (2019) consideration of the magic circle in the *FIFA* series for more about "as-if" play propositions.
6 For more, see: Knaus (2005), Perry (2017), Rearick (2004), and Young (2015). The co-option and circulation of history as a tool of the Nazi party in Germany in the period during and leading up to WWII is a serious issue, and one that should not be overlooked. Across platforms, the fantasy genre often assumes a default whiteness under the banner of historical accuracy. However, there is *ample* historical evidence of the racial diversity of medieval Europe, and the affinity for and use of medieval history and iconography by contemporary white supremacists should give us serious pause (DePass 2015; Kim 2017; Kocurek 2021). This falls largely outside the scope of our book, but we recommend the work of scholars including Dorothy Kim (2017), David Perry (2017), and Helen Young (2015), whose research at the intersection of medieval studies and race is critical.
7 As we note in Chapter 1, Richard Garriott often cites his involvement in the Austin chapter of the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) as being a formative influence and a supportive community during his early game design years. For more on the SCA, see Maher (2011a).

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