

ULTIMA (AND I, BRIEFLY) ONLINE

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Let's open a chest and pull a book from the shelf before we venture into Britannia.

I found myself in the woods, and chopping down trees was what I would have to do.

I have no idea what I'm doing, but I want to have a great time doing it. I'm going to start in Yew because that's where a bowyer would get their start, so let's chop some wood, listen to the sound of crushed leaves, and grab a few feathers -- oh my bad, hold on a second there we can't because we don't have a weapon. We do have our bare hands, so let's go beat a chicken to death -- after all, they have feathers, right? Once we have our feathers it's time to craft some arrows and thus we have begun **life as a bowyer in Britannia**. Looking inside the backpack, you can hear the shuffle of something the sound engineer was messing with to emulate the real sound a backpack would make, and you see it. There's a beautiful bow, represented by several hundred pixels of yellow and white, that you've constructed. And you can move it around and it rests in your backpack beside your bolts and your arrows. The first time you finally craft your own heavy crossbow and a nice stack of bolts it registers in a way that every video game that legitimately gives you that tiny reward that a good video game is known to do. Ultima Online was dense with those moments.

Anyway, now we have a weapon, but not armor -- I want to take a moment, to just relax and listen to the sound of the gong - As I **smith some ingots** and make some chain mail in a world where you can be a baker among thieves (aka, PK's), I have to ponder -- how am I possibly going to defend myself? Of course this is a regular role playing world, and the usual pieces of equipment are here, I'm sure. I don't know this, though, because I only have a t-shirt and some pantaloons (I think).

Well, wait, is that a t-shirt Or is that a doublet? It resembles a pillowcase that's been converted into something that's meant to go on my upper body! I would call it a shirt but it's so pillowcase in appearance and so tacky that I won't insult shirts with the comparison.

Fashion aside, this initial smithing is as memorable to me as as sipping my first martini on the 12th story balcony of a fancy Holiday Inn at Myrtle Beach on a vacation I paid for myself, and just as significant -- I'm smithing beside the isometric, SVGA blue water in Britannia, and my backpack is empty because I've just used every piece of ore I carried

with me from the mountains just outside of Britain. I don't care though, the passing players and the garish but likable Ultima Online font floating above their heads (and trailing off at the southwest corner of my screen) are reward enough for now.

At some point I finally acquired my first pieces of armor, and I think that the buzz of having come into possession of a little bit of bone armor offset the sinking feeling that would accompany getting slaughtered by every and any creature that could go hostile. It was embarrassing enough that the sound of a spell fizzling sounded like a not-so-gently escaping fart, but to be slaughtered by a squirrel in the middle of my failed "Kal Vas Flam"? Le scoff!

For now though, I wasn't thinking about the hunt I'm going to have to engage in to find a wandering healer, or the items that were most likely going to end up as the loot for someone passing by. I was thinking about how awesome I looked with a skull for a helmet. The experience of this single set of armor was as far as Ultima Online went to break armor convention was a wonderful drug, and it seemed that Ultima Online was going above and beyond in its promises, as even the skeletons you killed could be turned into armor. What about dragon scale armor? Or troll skin armor? How about stone armor? Oak armor? Nope, that was all missing. It was leather, chain, plate, and bones.

Now, it was at the bank that I first discovered bone armor, and it was at the bank that the bar for success was raised in my eyes -- I wanted to be just like those literally tankish tin cans walking around with their full plate, and having their character names coupled with titles such as "Noble" and "Lord". It wasn't just this that sparked the fire that drove me for the next few months, it was the thought of having some real estate and a castle fit for someone as "Glorious" as I.

I can't remember when I realized looking forward to a castle was a delusion for someone like me, but a tower or a keep seemed more within my reach. I settled on a keep as my object of desire, and in fact, the keep would be named after my character -- Donais Rath -- and the keep would be called "**Rath Keep**" (how creative and original!). In the back of my mind, this is all playing out towards such a scenario in the future where I DO have "Rath Keep", and it IS enough to keep me chasing shiny piles of coins and stacks of ingots.

As I ran across the paths, the stomp of feet accompanying me, I would occasionally hear a **slow thump thump off in the distance**, or closing in. It was common to run into healers along the way, as they provided the much needed service of resurrecting you out in the wild, although I wonder how useful it was seeing as if you were out the wild, you were most likely getting looted. These slow thumps defined the charm of the game for me, they were the sounds of the plodding, never-sleeping NPCs in the world. It wasn't long before the dissimilarities of Ultima 7 began to show themselves, and the lack of NPC activity that resembled anything realistic was probably the biggest thing. However, this was a very minor thing that didn't detract from my enjoyment in the long run. It was Ultima 7 that vaulted me into the world of Britannia, and it was the experience of Ultima 7 that propelled me into Ultima Online, but I think the biggest draw was Richard Garriot's famous claim that "**You can be a baker!**".

Being a baker for me was the main expectation of Ultima Online, and I think that I held onto this until the very end, and it was most likely the absence of professional britannian bakers that led to my leaving the game. Being a baker meant that in this online world, you could gamify and get the same amount of enjoyment from the mundane task of baking, same as you could from wizarding, barding, or knighting. I think that I wasn't the only one who played Ultima 7 and was completely blown back by the fact that we could bake bread and make money doing it. Yet, "you can be a baker" was the epitome of the draw, and it was surprisingly the only thing that was really championed in this way. Not a jester, a tailor, or a blacksmith -- you could be a baker. I want to note that as a funny aside, being a Jester was a possibility, at least clothing wise -- a shame they didn't add juggling as a skill!

Anyway, I didn't really want to be a baker, but it was the notion that I might interact with some bakers, or that I might spend time with some people doing baker like things while I pursue near baker levels of bakerdom. That is to say, I was ready to enter a world where people were going to do normal people things, and at the time, this seemed to be what we were entering into. It seemed possible that such a thing could exist, it didn't seem technically unavailable. **Besides, I had I spent an entire six months coding C++** in what was probably a warez'd Borland compiler, so I knew the technical capabilities of the time!

Doug "The Eagle" Dragon was a lighthouse of the Ultima community, a lighthouse of silly patterns and yarns that made Ultima 7 not a tale of chaos, order, and how not to

become an automaton, but a hilarious jaunt through a broken and buggy world where Buccaneers Den was just a carpet ride away and before you could say "memory dump", you were on the tail end of acquiring who knows how many hundreds of thousands of gold pieces through the magic of the in-game Ultima Cheat Engine.

Doug, "The Eagle", who we will simply refer to as "Doug" (or, "TM, for 'The Man' – I suppose Britannia's own "The Dude"), had programmed his own version of Ultima 6 (well, at least the part where you eat at the Restaurant at the End of the Universe, which was canon in my AU, sorry Douglas Adams), and it seemed not outside of the realm of possibility to code my own version of Ultima 7. I could do it, besides, I had a warez'd copy of Turbo Assembler, Turbo Pascal, and for some reason the free Visual Basic clone called "Envelope". I had the tools, and I had all the experience of a kid with too much free time, way too much ambition, and a glimpse of what was possible -- an online world where NPCs followed schedules, players logged in and completed mundane tasks (like owning a Jewelry store, or baking bread), and the entire world was supported by this player base.

Of course, that's not at all how it turned out, even if it were technically possible to create such a world. You needed willing participants, and as enthusiastic as I was about walking around Britain at a snails pace because that's the "rp" thing to do, that's not how the game was played when I first walked into it, and that's not how the game was played from the very beginning. I think it's comical to imagine that what we're looking for here are people who want to treat Ultima Online as a second job – the effort required to roleplay as such characters would certainly have qualified as such. It was going to be a shock to me to witness just how detached from the dream the reality was of Ultima Online as it stood, but it didn't matter to me. Even though there were not any full time bakers (that I knew of at the time – for they did exist!) and there was no player economy in the sense that I would go to someone's shop and buy reagents (this isn't entirely true, but the experience I'm talking about was absent) before they ran out of this or that specific kind – I didn't care. The theme from Ultima 8 was playing and I was walking down the main street of Britannia (decked out in my dyed wizard robe and carrying a requisite staff) as much a citizen as Chuckles the Clown or Lord Blackthorne, or even Finnegan from Ultima 7. Just some guy making his way through the Britannian Universe!

It's rather comical to think how the dev team themselves experienced the shock of how this virtual world would not quite work out how they had originally intended. They created and programmed an entire system that simulated a global ecology where predator and prey roamed the wild, while players like me walked around not concerned with mere forest creatures save for the realism that such a system brought to the game. Yet in the end, the players that came online slaughtered every last animal without regard for where it sat in the ecology. An entire system built by the same team that intended to make a baker-friendly fantasy world rendered pointless by the players they wanted to entertain.

Perhaps not all the players they wanted to entertain, however it was in their original vision, given that Richard Garriot, the creator of Ultima, was a renaissance faire man himself. He knew what kind of audience was going to eat this virtual world up – the same people who would take the time to carry sacks of flour from Thurston's mill, all the way to Cullin's bakery in downtown Britain just to make bread by hand. That's the kind of player I was, and it didn't take me very long to transition from that mode of thinking to the kind of thinking that would actually carry me through Ultima Online – the game itself, the thing that was, the world that really existed online.

I never did give up the part of me that wanted to role-play in UO, however, but that story is the focus of the second part of this book, because I eventually did find myself living out some Dungeons and Dragon fantasy along with many other players who also enjoyed such a thing in UO.

I believe that at this point I had acclimated to what was the inevitable outcome of every playthrough in UO, and it was a rough road to the exit ramp, but I didn't take forever to finally realize that I was going to have to power game like every other normal human being. I was going to learn about min maxing, combining skills that only made sense in a gameplay mechanic sense, the location of every player run reagent a potion stand on the shard, and how to do everything other than play a wise mage who filed away books on the top floor of Rath Tower. I was going to have to learn how to maximize my time in this game world – after all, I had a bit of real cash money invested up to this point, and besides, the shiny gold piles were so enchanting.

Speaking of "ooh shiny"'s, I hope I'm not the only one who got a taste for digital treasure hoarding first in Ultima 7. Anyone who had also had their first taste of open world freedom in Ultima 7 may have pulled off their first digital robbery as well. Way before the far inferior Grand Theft Auto came along, Finnegan's jewelry shop was a point of interest that players were not required or suggested to approach in the manner of debauched thuggians, but it certainly smelled like McDonald's. By that I mean that there's a scent at McDonald's that just draws you in and requires you to begin thinking

about Quarter Pounders, and Big macs, and French fries. Finnegan's jewelry shop was, for one, ran by an NPC with a day and night schedule. Two, Finnegan's jewelry shop was packed full of "ooh shiny"s. The first time I saw Finnegan's, I had already spent a good amount of time slaughtering the citizens of Britain, Paws, and Trinisic, so this sort of brigandry came naturally to me, I'm sorry to say. I'm sure TM would be proud (let's just call him "TD" hereafter, sorry Jeff Bridges). So to summarize, if you already had a taste of the Quarter Pounder, the smell of it made you immediately want to pull over and ask for the super size combo.

Alas, thus began the UO career of Donais Rath. The once was and never to be mage who would strike fear into random passerby at the crossroads of Britannia, only to be stopped 6 months down the road in Earth-time by a player run band of knights. Long live the UO dream.

Having come to terms with the death of the dream that valuted me into Online Britannia in the first place, I put on the costume of leet fencer and began to train up some skills and figure out what this thing called a mule was. I mean, the concept made sense, but accepting this took some time because It was a slow drive from the house of "Donais Rath the Magelord" to "Donais Rath, cookie cutter power gamer" and a full understanding of the concepts required to build a character whose sole purpose was to supply goods for your main character without losing essential combat and game abilities.

I think it really surprised me when I realized how engaging just doing the activities in themselves could be. It's funny because I don't think that Origin, at the time, was in the business of milking their players dry and simply were out to make a fun online experience. So for the act of mining to be fun in itself and not linked to microtransactions or any sort of greedy baronitis astonishes me at this moment (although I am most definitely not euphoric, I want that to go on the record, laughing in the open) as it's this activity that usually gets the thought train going when I reminisce about my time in UO.

The process of mining ore was a simple one, you only had to double click a pick axe and move the mouse over the spot you wanted to mine from.

I think that anyone who spent more than 5 minutes at it immediately put their mind to work thinking how to automate it, but I was glad to find an activity that I could both use to my advantage as a power gamer, and feel superior about having followed the rules. I was never going to macro mine, because I simply didn't have the capacity to follow instructions at the time. Had I been able to understand how it worked, I would have

macro mined the entire mountain range of Britannia, but thankfully for me and my ego, I was unable to.

Again, astonishing is a good word to apply to my perception of the activity of mining and the elements of mining in UO themselves. This was my first experience with something like a MMORPG, and the accumulation of raw material left a satisfying feeling inside that kept me mining well past my bedtime and on up to the time where my parents would just shake their heads (internally – my dad never shamed me for spending 8 hours mining virtual ore and being unemployed at the same time, and my mom simply wanted to make sure I enjoyed dinner). The sound of the virtual rocks as they fell to the ground, and the sight of the pile that was gathering at my feet is so burned in my head I could probably start an entire art series based on it given its mental presence and artistic accessibility. While in real life I was physically rather weak and could use to lose a pound or two, in the game I was a bare backed ore mining machine that could carry 10 tons of solid rock back to Britain for smithing (or perhaps right around the corner – I think that Chesapeake's Britannian mountain range was home to a GM placed forge – or perhaps one that was built into the shard, I can't recall).

I considered the chainmail armor I was making to be the rarest and most sought after chainmail known to man – there was something about its presence in my backpack, as if I had crossed some sort of gaming boundary. I was becoming part of the UO world, and was getting ready to take part in the mix of dungeoneering and PvP. Owning a pack mule constituted a major shift in my ability to gather resources and climb the Britannia power ladder. However, getting that pack mule from the mountain to the forge meant a slow plod from here to there, and I think that at some point I really did just toss in the towel when it came to smithing.

I suppose smithing might not have been my thing – I kind of wish it had, though, because there was something that always amazed me about those vendors on the side of the road that would have these rainbow colored packs of plate mail. So nicely laid out, so appealing to the OCD part of me. They REALLY knew how to make spaces for items, and I could spend hours just looking at the way they sorted their warez. Come to think of it, "spaces for items" is such an integral part of Ultima I need to divert our attention to it at this moment before I come back.

I think that hoarding items was a hobby I picked up because of Ultima 7. In fact, I think that the word "hoard" became part of my vocabulary shortly after I started playing Ultima

7. It was there that I truly understood the value of picking up everything in the game world that wasn't nailed down by code.

I want to say that I eventually did finish Ultima 7 legit, but for many, many years, the extent of my experience with Ultima 7 was simply gathering and hoarding masses of items that needed spaces to hold them. Ultima 7 didn't just let you put stuff in a backpack though, it let you put stuff in a backpack that was in your backpack. It let you put chests inside of backpacks inside of cargo holds. I think the most wonderful time of my life was spent figuring out how to sort my gold and runes amongst the bags that held the backpacks that contained the chests that stored my dressers full of gold.

Spaces for items is more than just three words strung together, spaces for items is a call to action, it's a statement about something that's missing that should be there, like seeds from a hamburger bun, or rims for tires.

So Ultima 7 gave me a taste for spaces for items, and when I found my way into Ultima Online, I had found the end of the rainbow. A thousand jolly leprechauns welcomed me into a whole new world of spaces for items, with chests and bags and barrels and boxes and satchels – all ready to hold everything and anything I wanted to sort, and in all the colors that SVGA could provide (maybe, probably more, who cares, this is the end of the rainbow so focus on what the central issue is at the moment – the fact that there are thousands of leprechauns right in front of you).

I think that it was the rune libraries that top my list of “best ways to go OCD in Ultima Online”. **Rune Libraries** were beautiful sandtraps of places, where you could double click on a bag of towns and find yourself clicking on bags of color coded shops, with a jewelry box full of dungeon locations you could go to once you purchased all the reagents in Britannia. Rune Libraries were a thing that never should have existed in this game world, because there was no reason a mass transit system like that should exist, but I had thrown out RP'ing Britannia about 4 pages ago (maybe?) so it didn't really matter. Aesthetics did, though, and seeing these rune libraries was one of the awesome parts of playing Ultima Online.

I mean, for real, imagine just how many rune libraries could exist? 100,000? 1,000,000? There's no telling, because the limit of rune libraries is the limit of how many places you can go, sorted by their purposes, and that's a sorting game that no human being should play, at least not one that only lives 70 or 80 years (perhaps even more Lord willing – not Lord British, though some have often remarked that he held himself in that esteem, though I think him a bit humbler than that – and he can reach out to me at my email address to send me the autographed copy of the first UO disc upon reading my glowing appraisal of his character).

In fact, the roadsides of Britannia had become a giant shopping mall, with every item under the sun available for purchasing, with rare items available if you knew where to look. Of course, very rare items, like items that were supposed to have been “nailed down” by game code yet able to be stolen by players – those items went to auction or private sale online.

As I think back to just how far we had wandered from the original vision of the game I had in mind, I have to chuckle given just how readily I accepted mass transit, shopping malls, and ATM machines in this online fantasy world. We had went from “I shalt chop thine head off thy head when I see thee ruffian” being a highlight of my future gaming experience, to “VENDOR BUY BANK GUARDS” being something I did automatically as part of my recreational time every day (right before I sorted through the loot in my bank vault full of oooh shiny’s I had acquired from various sources).

And while we’re on the subject of just how different the reality of Ultima Online was from the original vision of a digital renaissance fair, let’s consider a couple of other things, such as mass potion production, reagent hoarding/selling, and quick-gold escort quests. Escort quests may have been something that popped up later in the game, as I don’t remember them being something that I took part in early on. This may have simply been because escort quests were something that required you to be able to cast the “gate” spell, as well as have a rune to the location the NPC requested you take them. Of course, you could literally escort them to their location, but this is Ultima Online, so what is called an “escort quest” is simply a medieval themed cash grab for higher ability mages.

I do remember slightly cringing at the interaction that took place for the escort quest to proceed – and this is in no way throwing shade at the developers, they put blood, sweat, and tears into a territory that had never before been wandered into, and they were trying to uphold as much of the original vision as they possibly could. So the inclusion of these “escort quests” had to meet some kind of requirements of medievalness, and it involved one phrase – “I will take thee”. Of course, the notion of escort quest was pretty legit for the game world, it was the presence of “thee” that gave it the UO middle ages touch. So you would go to spawn point where an escort NPC would emerge, and you would wait for them to make their request, after which you would respond “I will take thee”.

And here we have our public transportation system, as many players would gather up 4 or 5 escorts at a time, snapping them up as fast as they could, like pigeons grabbing popcorn at the park. Imagine several pelicans clad in mage robes shouting “I will take thee” over and over again, like the scene from that movie about the clown fish where

they are repeating “Mine!” endlessly, and you have something worthy of a chuckle (not Chuckles, because it’s a lame joke).

I felt absolutely ridiculous picking up 4 or 5 NPCs at a time, like I was some kind of minibus driver picking up senior citizens and dropping them off around town. It was a great way to make gold, and for someone like me who never quite nailed the PvP route to riches, or the dungeoneering way to wealth, it worked.

Perhaps if I had went the roadside vendor way, I could have cleaned up, but being a roadside vendor required a considerable gold investment, not to mention a time investment to work out the existing player market. For instance, who were your competitors? What did you have to deal with locally? What could you find on the messageboards? What was the going price for a full suit of plate mail? I just didn’t have the time to look into it.

There was certainly a considerable amount of gold to be made through vendoring, though. If you could clear out the mage shops of the reagents every time new reagents spawned, you’d certainly have a reason for people to come to your shop. Then, once they found you, and you provided, there’d be a good reason for them to keep returning.

I always thought the “adventuring packs” were pretty cool – sometimes people would throw out a backpack full of backpacks, each containing a full suit of platemail, a reagent bag, and a full spell book, all for the low low price of idon’tevencareanymore. Need some potions for your next adventure? This week there’s a deal on barrels of 100 major heal potions.

Forget about the necessity of heading into the local shop every time you needed something for your next adventure. The shops were there to be gamed themselves – when do they spawn, what hours should I visit them, and how do I buy faster than the other people who are trying to buy at the same time? I remember, with no fondness, the feeling of trying to purchase a meager 10 black pearl only to find that the power gamer next to me has bought out the entire stock of reagents using some macro program. “You can be a baker” indeed – in fact that’s pretty much the only route to go at this point, since being a mage is obviously out of the question. That is, unless I’m willing to sacrifice the part of me that wants to go the full RP route. Why bother RPin as a mage in the first place? Besides, the world of Ultima Online was home to one class alone that mattered – the tank mage.

Oh the tank mage. Where do we start with the tank mage? I think that the “tank mage” was a concept I was familiar with but not to the degree that it had been given a name. The funny thing is, being a “tank mage” was something that I was very good at, however I never really noticed that I was aiming for that. I had power gamed my RPGs for as

long as I had been playing RPGs that allowed you to go outside the confines of traditional class-based constraints (or kept those class-based constraints, albeit hidden under appropriately named gear that served the same purpose), and naturally being a “tank mage” was something that resulted from this.

Ultima 7 allowed you to play the de-facto tank mage – the Avatar – although Ultima 7 is probably not the first RPG to involve a character who could master all skills associated with the different classes you might find in an RPG. It did give you the power trip that being the best spellcaster and the best swordsman (not to mention the best defended swordsman, since you were rocking a full set of plate mail) allowed you. Even then, I still don’t remember thinking this as odd or undesirable. In fact, I most likely saw myself finding the shortest path imaginable to that end. In a way it’s funny to consider what RPG’s have become as we ponder the cultural ubiquity of Skyrim,.

It wasn’t until the RPG world I had been waiting for to offer me the Dungeons and Dragons fantasies my socially awkward self had been denied was seen as home to a central, unlabeled class which excelled in every combat skill that mattered to a degree that single classing and partaking of PvP was pointless. I mean forget about being a baker. The world of Ultima Online was unkind to all but everyone outfitted in a tin can carrying a halberd. In a way the tank mage did resemble a tank, the halberd being a fitting analog for the kapow blaster **what is it called???* of an actual tank. All that they would have need to do was animate the halberd into a sort of magic wand as the wizards of Ultima Online cast their “corp por”s and their “kal vas flam”s. The tank mage ruled Ultima Online and there was no way to get around this.

The skill system inherently made tanking a viable and attractive option. At least as far as I can remember. I do believe that as time went on, new skills and restrictions were put in place to give the game more variety, much like the game world itself was split into a “Trammel” and “Felucca” in order to give PvP and PvE players their own place to have fun. But Ultima Online, as it began, and as it is probably best remembered, was ruled by the tank mage.

The tank mage, that robed menace that walked around in the coolest shades of plate mail #lookthisup and commanded attention. It was comical to see these characters cast spells, because the gauntlets seriously resembled kitchen mits. Perhaps this is a bit of poetic justice after all, as the tank mage actually becomes a baker and we come full circle.

The tank mage, and the seventy thousand million levels of wrong that comes with it, and the ache in 1997 me’s stomach as I try to work out whether or not I want to continue role playing my weak mage who has a knack for fencing and is just about to

scribe a few scrolls (which has a lot to do with self-imposed systems of restriction from personal RP rules that were sometimes enforced), or whether I just want to forget it all, grab a halberd, and figure out what color of dye I want to use to make my character at least somewhat unique.

I have to admit, the sheer variety of situations that resulted from the mix that was Ultima Online was pretty fascinating. There were plenty of ways to style your character and make your mark, to have your own unique style in the world that you were known for.

I can still see that wonderful selection of colors that each dye tub offered, and there were black dye tubs as well. What was incredible were the hues that were unattainable – I spent my entire Ultima Online career searching for a certain azure blue hue robe that never materialized (but it kept the dungeon train running). Jet black was kind of boring though, it was the details that came with shades of dark colors that made certain things stand out. And there were colors that some people could get ahold of that others couldn't.

What of **houses**? We could sit for a good while and discuss what it meant to have a house in Ultima Online. In all honesty, this somewhat resembles Tolkien's hobbits, but beyond the hoarding, we have urban sprawl. The **urban sprawl** was something to behold. I can't remember when "Rath Keep" fizzled away like all the other grandiose dreams I let go of while figuring out what I could never accomplish in ultima online, but I always enjoyed seeing the houses pop up on the literal radar.

At first, what seemed like a quaint way to bring a little bit of Britannia or Yew to the online world became a game of "where can I place my house?". The dream of player run towns would live in on in some ways, and I'm sure the devs had ideas about nicely laid out neighborhoods where players would bake to their hearts content. But an epic mishmash of all the treasures you could ever want (since what was in houses could be revealed if you stood in the right place) became a nice way to sight see when boredom crept in. Give me a shard of Britannia and 10 minutes, I'll take that over 10 minutes of the funniest random Tik Tok feed any day.

I **remember the day that the vendors could be looted.** I knew that it would be temporary, but I went from house to house, taking the house key from the vendor (leaving the house key was an efficient and safe way to store your key since vendors couldn't be looted, which is a laughable concept in itself) and wallowing in piles and piles of all the treasures that I could never have. It was fun for a few minutes though.

Vendors left their mark on me though, because it was vendors that I ended up spending a lot of my time at. I mean I've went on and on about "spaces for items" and

how cool it looks to see bags of runes within bags of runes, but there was just something welcoming and satisfying about stopping by every vendor and hearing that backpack sloshing sound go off as I wondered if I would ever get the gold to buy that Vorpal sword with 5 charges of lightning.

It's funny to reminisce about how I wasn't one of the ones who lost everything – a lot of players experienced quite a bit of grief at the hands of player killers. I never really was a mark worth hunting, though, however I did cling to my recall reagents and my collection of town runes pretty tightly, and I did end up losing them a time or two. I know for a fact that I ended up running into someone who was obviously a player killer, throwing up my hands and typing “Just do it already” as they “corp por”d me into doom town.

There were a lot of skills in the initial release of Ultima Online. You could tell that the devs had imagined players jumping headfirst into the implications of a game world based on Britannia. For instance, there is a camping skill, which allows you to log out immediately if your skill is high enough. That way, you can avoid getting attacked by either player or non-player. I never got the impression that much of Ultima Online was filler – as I said you can see where there was this vision for what the game was the settle into that the devs had in mind. I can see how in the enthusiasm of making Ultima Online, they imagined that camping might be a skill that would set other players apart, something to reward players for pursuing and allocating the finite skill points a player could invest that would sit in their skill set as necessary and important as swordsmanship or magery.

You can also get this impression from the “taste identification” skill. Again, we have a skill that seems to have been born out of the notion of scenarios that would arise where it might be useful to evaluate whether or not something you were given was poisoned. My experience with Dungeons and Dragons is limited, but there are all sorts of skills that are used in this manner. I am certain that taste identification made its way into role play scenarios, but I don't think this had much to do with the possibilities offered by the world of UO. I think it had more to do with the twinge of sadness that came from seeing skills you knew the developers had actually spent time and effort building become useless.

I experienced this myself, as I felt as though the developers of Ultima Online deserved to have their hard work rewarded. This was a profitable game and it was of course a product built to make money, but it was rooted in a real desire to fulfill a vision and offer hours and hours of enjoyment for a wide variety of players from the incredibly diverse world of fantasy role playing. You eventually got over it, but every time you saw these skills you wanted to make use of them because you knew no one else was, or

you wrestled with the implications of seeing them removed from the game. To remove these skills was to move the game away from what you considered role playing to just another combat oriented competitive game.

Nevertheless, I adopted what was most likely the most common playstyle in the whole MMORPG: The Preparation for Imagined Adventure. Imagined because it never actually happened, it was simply something in my mind that motivated me onward. Up to that point I had never really considered what was called “The Grind”, and now here we were, my first MMORPG, and I quickly learned that the skills I needed to raise to take part in what I saw as the actual meat and potatoes of the game were not going to be gained through normal gameplay. Now, perhaps this wasn’t the case, but it’s hard to imagine gaining enough magery (the skill that dictated spellcasting success and spell effectiveness) or magic resistance #fixthis before one finally got bored with the game and moved on.

For me, the grind never ended, and the adventure never started. I think, and I do not think I was alone in looking at things this way (and this is of course a common state of mind adopted by people who play both single player and MMORPG’s today) – “Am I ready?” And of course, I was never really ready. I’d grab my equipment and evaluate the prospects for that day’s adventure, but I was still overwhelmed by my unfortunate encounter with either a skeleton or a PK in the Britain Graveyard that I would go, “Wait, we need more swordsmanship”, or “Wait, I just started casting ‘Energy Bolt’” (which I’m sure anyone reading this knows energy bolt was kind of the bread and butter combat spell for mages). I was still telling myself to “wait” when I finally started casting the gate spell.

I just couldn’t put it out of my mind though. I can say with certainty I kept paying \$9.99 a month (or was it \$19.99?) because I was expecting that at some point, I was going to finally go out, maybe get PK’d a time or two, PK in revenge twice over, and make it to the fourth level of Destard for starters. Now, why I wanted to make it to the fourth level of Destard eventually went to the same place my desire to see what was in the middle of the giant hedge maze went – wherever there was an interest in exploring this world to find its secrets (which Ultima would reward you for), there was the disappointment of realizing that it was simply set dressing. What set dressing it was though! I have to give the design team great credit for creating atmosphere – it just seems that there was potential for mystery and exploration that was never realized, and it could possibly be said that there was much planned in this same vein, but it just never made it into the game. We were left with simply a hedge maze and a dungeon full of carefully placed vials, cauldrons, and candles that were outside the room of a nameless lich.

We could venture to the other dungeons of Britannia, Shame, Hythloth, and so on, but all we would find would be more set dressing and a host of high level monsters. Again, we have all of this potential for in-game lore and storybuilding, but such a thing requires willing participants, and I have to applaud the dev team for going to the extent they did to try and create some kind of shared reality through the in-game events that happened on each shard.

Thinking on things now, I suppose that the right player could make something of this, and perhaps that's really where I went wrong. I think that nowadays the playstyle I've come to accept would have found a home in Ultima Online. PK's kill me? No matter, I'm not basing my sense of pride on whether or not I get killed in UO. I know how long it will take me to recover the basic goods to go back into the fray, and it's not that long at all. I can't really identify what it was that prevented me from grasping that mindset at the moment.

The right kind of player, though, would come into a world where their modest housing held riches gathered through regular dungeoneering, and the day offered plenty of challenges with high level creatures providing gold and material rewards that would have made the investment worthwhile. The tin cans who didn't care that their full plate knight could cast the energy bolt spell just as easily as they could swing a halberd. On top of this, they could hold their own against a PK, and the hoard of treasure they had accumulated through this patient process of playing Ultima Online the way it came to be played ensured that it wasn't long before they were back at it again. They even had enchanted weapons to replace the ones they lost in the rare event that they were unprepared for those kinds of encounters.

I imagine that the game Ultima Online became offered quite a bit in the way of reward for those who were legitimately invested in it. It would be really something to come across some data that would allow us to figure out just who would be able to take part in the Evolutionary Ultima Online, the game that it became. How many ingots would they have to smelt? How many suits of armor would they go through? How many healing potions would they consume in a given week? These questions would explain a lot. Donais Rath was certainly not consuming many potions every week, or smelting much iron, because Donais Rath was always telling themselves "Nope, I'm not going to leave Britain today, let's hang out around the bank and just randomly spread good cheer and glad tidings to other players in the form of random randomness". I think I even distracted myself from actually playing the game by chopping up corpses in front of other players. It really wasn't as bad as it sounds, and anyone reading this would probably know exactly how it would look in the first place. A little on the silly side, a little on the edgy side, a little on the "that dude is really just wasting his time" side.

Most likely it wasn't on any side because that sort of thing was just par for the course anyway and chopping up corpses in to ritual patterns was as common as a dandelion in a field on a warm summer day – no one noticed.

I think, also, that the fact this was some kind of version of Britannia kept me settled in whatever town I went to. Imagine stopping off at Jhelom after dropping off four or five escortees and after deciding that you don't want to play the game any more (for the seventy fifth time), you decide that the tarot cards on the table in the so called "inn" have a certain look about them, and you just want to take another run around the city for old times sake. That stomping sound you hear fuels your veins with determination, and before you know it you're sorting your magic wands again and finding yet even more spaces for more items, because you have decided that today is not going to be the day to quit. Four hundred hours into this, and you are more invested in this than you ever have anything in your life. You will venture outside of the walls one day! You will make friends besides the 1 clomp per minute NPC tailor you keep buying spools of thread from. You will go on a quest and put all of these powerful vanquishing items to use.

Or not.

PART II – A MINOR PART OF PAX LAIR, BRIEFLY

So where power gaming and going along with the flow of things, according to the meta games and the power games of the moment went, I decided that role playing was what I wanted to spend my time doing. That was the whole reason I started playing Ultima Online in the first place. I've made references to the various characters I created, "Donais Rath", and "Shadax", and so on. Those characters were my chance to live out

these Dungeons and Dragons fantasies online, in a place I thought I could live them out. I think that I was really underprepared for such a thing, because what held me back in real life is what held me back in the online world, and I had to come to terms with it eventually. I simply did not know how to interact with people. I didn't care to, and I didn't want to. But I wanted to be Donais Rath and I wanted a keep and I wanted the online role playing world to know that I controlled some portion of the world at that time!

I can somewhat remember where I started to RP in the Pax Lair world, because it was a significant shift from power gaming. I had wanted to role-play, ever since I started playing the game, the only thing I was aware of for about the first six months was pretty much what the first part of this book was about. Then, I started to find out about them on the forums, and I think I was intrigued as everyone else when I found out that role-playing in the sense that I originally came to UO for was very much alive and well, and thriving enough to make it something you really COULD spend your time doing in the game. I think it was in these player run communities that "You could be a baker" was certainly fulfilled as much as possible, and not just a baker, you could be a bar patron, a barkeep, a town guard, and even an orc, if you wanted to go that route. It was here that the closest equivalent to the stories I had been drawn to in my brief Dungeons and Dragons sessions really came to life.

I had dabbled in role-playing in UO during my brief stint as a l33t power gamer, and I had varying degrees of fun, even if it was one sided. I remember taking up residence in some towers and writing short snippets in books, playing out the "mage in a tower" fantasy I had pursued in the beginning. Perhaps these were carry overs from my time reading the "Dragonlance" series of novels and my fascination with the character Raistlin. I also created my character "Shadax" with the intention of playing a potion-crafting mage, taking part in combat enough appropriate for a character whose only weapon was the equivalent of a pipe-bomb, which the in-game mechanics and setting fully supported. "Shadax" was a reference to the main character of the puzzle-game "Solstice", which I had probably spent more time playing than my time (briefly) spent in UO!

One character in particular was named "Voltaire Demure". I don't know where I got that name from, but I know I wasn't very interested in literature at the time. There's no doubt that I did not pick that name because of a love of the classics – it just sounded cool! Then again, Voltaire is so specific that perhaps I had come in contact with it at some point before, who knows.

Voltaire wasn't really meant to be anything special, but that name carried with it the weight of role-playing – at least it did for me. And I was going to make sure that Voltaire never put on a single piece of platemail, didn't have a point invested in magery,

and was the fastest fencer on the whole shard of Chesapeake. I believe that an encounter with an evil bird dashed that fantasy, and I'm pretty sure that my bags of purchased runes and dyed cloaks (the signature outfit I chose) got put to good use by the looters who most likely found

I brought up Shadax, and that was my attempt to simply exist as a potion grinder that had a considerable library of scrolls. Problem with that is you need a lot of items, and consequently a lot of spaces for items (like a two story house level spaces for items), and you need a lot of time. Funny thing is, Shadax was actually a popular character on every shard I went to, but not because he was an interesting character, it's because there was a lot of demand for potion making, scroll scribing mules. When I was confronted with this, I lost interest in the possibility of making a character like Shadax.

It wasn't that a potion making scroll scribing character wouldn't be fun to play, it's just that I was constantly reminded of the place in the world a character like Shadax was supposed to occupy. I think that I just gave up on the possibility of Shadax falling into any sort of group or roleplaying collective, as there just wouldn't be any need for that sort of character, nor would they really bring anything to the table if they were as limited as Shadax was. I just didn't want to dedicate several hundred hours of my life to standing around and macro grinding reagents and speed scribing scrolls for my prospective guild's war effort.

Now, I was certainly drawn to the notion of owning a large house full of barrels and barrels of potions, and the "kusha kusha kusha" sound of the mortar and pestle being the only song I sung all the live long day – in a way I think it would be like owning a brewery, and you'd have these bombastic large containers of alcohol sitting around you, except in the world of Britannia, this would have been the downtown DIY beer tap equivalent of an apothecary. Imagine having in-game merch! In my town there's a brewery that sells mugs, steins, and shirts with their logo on it – in Ultima Online, although you couldn't have your own graphics, perhaps they could lock in a color for you from the color palette players couldn't access, and put a label on it – "Shadax's Apothecary"!

As an aside, I imagine that if I had taken the time, I would have found a lot of amazing characters to interact with, roleplay wise. It's undoubtable that there were scores of "Drizt Do Urden", and "Elminsters" on the shard. There were probably a thousand Gandalfs (likely given that the player based reached 250,000 at it's old school peak, and certainly 2.5% of the population would have been familiar with, and wanting to play, a wizened old "good" mage from the Lord of the Rings series), and probably not any Frodo's or Gamgee's (I can't imagine how someone would have role-played a

hobbit in UO), but I do recall the role-playing band of Orcs borrowing names from those mentioned in Tolkien's books.

There was also just my lack of ability to socialize that made easing into the UO role-play community difficult. I have to admit, the role-playing community has a reputation for being open and accepting of outcasts for good reason. It would have been the perfect place for a kid like me to find their way into. However, I had some socially awkward features that made it really difficult to make my way into these communities even. At the time, I was like any other typical male who spent his time on the internet – I spent a lot of time looking at women who I could never be with (nor would I want to be with for several reasons good and bad), and quietly sending out signals that I was a very mysterious person because after all, all that silence, right? If I could have filled in that silence with some simple character exposition, Ultima Online would have been a lot more fun, I imagine.