

# Virtually Perfect? Narratives of optimism in the theory and experience of ‘cyberspace’

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**ABSTRACT:** It doesn't look like a utopia, it doesn't sound like utopia, and yet people talk about it as if it might be. This paper examines utopian claims associated with ‘cyberspace’, both within the literature and gathered from the author's own fieldwork with *Ultima Online* players, and asks how we are to approach them, both methodologically and interpretively.

Whilst earlier cyberoptimist accounts presented ‘cyberspace’ as a radical utopia, the *Ultima Online* case is more conservative, geared not around programmatic social transformation so much as individual wish-fulfilment through the collective granting of autonomy. The material thus challenges a reified category of ‘cyberspace’ which obscures the diversity of how different people interact with different *cyberspaces*. In this way we move beyond the ‘cyberoptimist versus sceptic’ debates of the 1990s to provide a new object of enquiry. The case also problematises received notions of ‘utopia’ as ‘intentional community’ and suggests that, given the ambiguities that exist within these terms, they are best treated as indigenous categories for the purposes of ethnographic study.

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## INTRODUCTION

As the Internet became widespread in the 1990s, a huge amount of literature was published claiming this technology would transform society for the better. Such literature is easily written off as ‘utopian’<sup>1</sup> – and has since been heavily critiqued using empirical evidence – but a puzzle remains. When I was doing fieldwork in *Ultima Online* (hereafter UO), a medieval-themed metaworld<sup>2</sup>, what I saw seemed to replicate much of everyday life – if anything, it seemed to be more conservative, more individualistic, and more prone to disputes – directly contradicting much of the cyberoptimist literature. Nonetheless, the people that I met there would regularly talk about it as a transformation of society for the better.

This ethnographic puzzle opens up a number of issues. Firstly, can we take these claims that UO is ‘better’ than the real world seriously? I will argue that we can. Doing so, we meet a situation where the narratives of those using cyberspace are at odds with both the utopian narratives within cyberoptimist literature, and the sceptics’ rebuttals of that literature. The case study thus speaks to a number of broader debates in the anthropology of cyberspace, and an interest in understanding the impact new communication technologies might be having on societies across the world. However, as anthropologists, interested in dynamics of socio-cultural change, the nature of this transformation to ‘the better’ is also of interest. I thus bring theories of utopia<sup>3</sup> from within anthropology, geography and philosophy into dialogue with the literature on cyberspace and my field material to show how we might place this case study within a comparative context. Though it might seem a rather grand term to apply to a sophisticated computer game, I suggest ‘utopia’ can be both appropriate and useful in thinking about UO, but doing so problematises some of the received notions of what utopia might involve.

I begin by setting out some of the analytical distinctions within concepts of ‘utopia’ and reviewing the utopian tropes associated with ‘cyberculture’ over recent decades. I

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<sup>1</sup> A term which, as Moore (1990: 31) highlights, has in the twentieth century largely taken on a derogatory meaning, implying naïve idealism and impracticality.

<sup>2</sup> ‘An avatar-based online shared virtual environment’ (Rossney, 1996). In practice this operates as a cross between a role-playing game and a chat room. For a full description see the *Field Methods* section below.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Thomas More’s [1516] concept of *utopia* is actually a synthesis of *eutopia* (‘good place’) and *outopia* (‘no place’) provoking many a discussion on whether utopias can ever be realised. For the purposes of this paper, I follow in the spirit of Mannheim (1966) – not to mention many utopian movements across the ages – who understands utopia to be an imagined or wished for reality which is *imagined* as actually being able to happen.

then introduce UO, discussing the challenges of ethnography in this setting, and how to interpret the utopian narratives I was being offered. These positive claims are placed alongside two instances of dispute that I witnessed during my fieldwork. Hardly congruent with the conventional utopia of ‘prescriptively happy, passive, citizens’ (Hill, 2003: 1) I argue that these disputes, which hinge around participants’ varying hopes and expectations, reveal a shared utopian vision of autonomy and self-realisation, and that in this context, disputes can actually help *make* UO an (idiosyncratic) utopia. This process is linked, but not reducible to, the online nature of the setting.

### ***Theorising Utopia***

“Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia” (Dyer, 1999: 373)

A brief survey of literature on ‘utopia’ quickly reveals immense variation in how the term has been used and applied. At its simplest, a move towards a society based on ‘more perfect principles’ (Hourigan, 2003: 53), what counts as ‘more perfect’ remains open to intense debate. The archetypal social science account of a realised utopia is one describing the ‘intentional community’ – a movement in which a group of people, dissatisfied with the world around them, take themselves out of ‘everyday life’ and structure their new community around a shared ideology. Spiro (1970) gives an ethnographic account of an Israeli kibbutz founded on socialist values, operating against the wider world to the extent that, when problems begin to arise, members located these in the influence of the outside, which they then tried, through political campaigning, to turn into a *kibbutz*-like utopia itself.

However, Parker (2002) suggests that this is only one kind of utopia – the ‘radical utopia’. There remain, for him, ‘mountains of conservative utopias’ (ibid: 5) which are not recognised as such, but rather talked of in terms of ‘practical speculation’ or naturalised as inevitable.<sup>4</sup> Jacques (2002: 31) coins the term *crypto-utopia* to describe this kind of idealised vision of the world which pretends not to be a vision at all, and under this kind of umbrella such practices as the invasion of Iraq (ibid: 31) and

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<sup>4</sup> Harvey (2000: 154-5) discusses how Thatcher’s declaration that ‘there is no alternative [to pro-market policies]’ naturalizes the supreme rationality of the market. One thus either accepts the status quo, or must resort to ‘utopian’ (in the pejorative sense) ‘dreamwork’ – that neo-liberalism is itself based on a particular vision of ‘the good’ is ignored.

securing railway safety (Law and Mol, 2002) are talked of as ‘utopias’ simply because they concern themselves with ‘the good’.

Moore (1990: 14-16) writes that efforts to realise utopia are of great anthropological interest because they represent ‘willed social change’ according to a shared blueprint, opening up a particular set of dynamics for enquiry. But ‘willed social change’, like ‘intentional community’, seems to sit rather uneasily with the conservative utopia. Consider Fishman’s (1987) work on the rise of ‘the bourgeois utopia’ – suburbia – in eighteenth century London. This ‘collective effort to live a private life’ (ibid: x) was spurred on by values the merchant bourgeois were developing, influenced by Evangelical Christianity<sup>5</sup>, placed a value on being ‘at one with nature’ and on the centrality of the nuclear family. Thus we see a move away from the city’s ‘urban pleasures’ and towards the ‘serious-minded paradise’ of villages such as Clapham, just outside the city (ibid: 34, 53). ‘They overthrew the fundamental rules of eighteenth century planning without conscious revolutionary intent. They simply knew what they liked.’ (ibid: 63)<sup>6</sup>.

Such analysis problematises a straightforward notion of ‘intentional community’. Exactly how self-conscious does ‘intent’ have to be? Here there is no explicit programme of reform, but rather an internalised ideology, largely taken for granted. I think we can talk of this as ‘intent’, but a *latent* intent, harnessed by the availability of a new commodity on the housing market. As for ‘community’, this too is problematic: the aim of suburbia is to live a private, not community-based, life – and yet living that private life requires a wider collective effort. In fact, it is exactly this kind of problematic ‘utopia’ that I suggest we see in the case of UO – in contrast to the radical visions of 1990s cyberoptimists, the Internet is, perhaps, rather suburban. In a broader anthropological context, these kinds of discussions subvert the rigid, *radical*, ‘ideal type’ utopia, and flag a need to pay close attention to the roles of hope, aspiration, and utopianism within transformations that may, ostensibly, be anything but revolutionary. Indeed, we see here another shift in approach. Rather than taking ‘the utopia’ or ‘the intentional community’ as a discrete unit for analysis, authors are increasingly thinking of utopia in terms of the process of striving towards a

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<sup>5</sup> As exemplified by figures such as William Wilberforce and Hannah More

<sup>6</sup> This kind of argumentation has been continued with reference to many contemporary contexts, notably by Harvey (2000) in his discussion of ‘gated communities’ in Baltimore, where previously impoverished inner-city areas are turned into leafy areas for the middle-class, surrounded by fences to create what Harvey calls a ‘suburban privatopia’ (ibid: 147-149).

(necessarily unrealisable) target<sup>7</sup>. This perspective is thus not merely about structural process, but the meanings that changes take on in the imagination, both prospectively and *post facto* (Kanter, 1972: 52).<sup>8</sup>

### ***Cyberoptimism***

Though some of the recent cyberoptimist visions are more conservative than others, they are all radical utopias to the extent that they set out clear blueprints for cyberspace that represent a marked departure from the status quo, and are envisaged as shared by the hypothetical users. Beyond this, however, the range is quite diverse. Equally diverse is the array of software formats to which they refer, highlighting the problematic nature of any study that treats ‘cyberspace’ as a homogenous, reified zone, and helping situate the later discussion within a broader context.

While hope of computer technology transforming society dates back many decades, cyberoptimism and the utopian vision of the ‘information society’ took off in the late 1980s, a time which, as Lyon (1988: 143) points out, was generally characterised by pessimism. Cyberoptimism sounded a hopeful note in the midst of narratives of economic recession and post-Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and it was this, in Lyon’s view, that prompted a return to the old vision of a ‘good society’ growing out of the present through new technology (ibid: 144).<sup>9</sup>

However, the enthusiasm for the World Wide Web was and is not as worldwide as some of the literature implies. Internet technology has met with limited success in Japan, where access to information is so constrained that Low *et al* (1999: 133) dub it a ‘control society’ rather than an ‘information society’. Jamaica finds the Internet is just ‘too cool’ (and too expensive) to be anything but an elite luxury, whilst the French prefer *minitel* to the Internet, conceived of as a bastion of American cultural imperialism (Shields, 1996: 5). As a cultural and intellectual movement, cyberutopianism may be unevenly distributed on a global scale, but the trend certainly captured the Euro-American popular imagination, and 5 years after Lyon was published we see such claims as this:

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Nothing enables the killing of utopias so much as absolute realisation’ (Baudrillard, 1994: 104).

<sup>8</sup> Kanter refers to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Harmony Society, which began to share property out of economic necessity, and later introduced a communitarian ideal to justify it.

<sup>9</sup> This dates back to Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* [1626], but Lyon is here referring particularly to the ‘heyday’ of technological utopianism in the US: 1883-1933, exemplified by Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* [1887].

“You are a Netizen, and you exist as a citizen of the world thanks to the global connectivity that the Net gives you... Geographical separation is replaced by existence in the same virtual space... We are seeing revitalisation of society. A new, more democratic world is becoming possible... The Net seems to give people a new lease of life. Social connections which never before were possible are now much more accessible. Information, and thus people, are coming alive.”

(Usenet post by Michael Hauben, 1993, in Star, 1995: 22)

This replicates a number of ideals that have been commonly found in utopias both fictional and realised. Central to his model is a transition to the free and fast movement of both information and (social) persons across geographical space, a vision that has characterised many a utopia (Hourigan, 2003: 56). However this is mobilised in relation to a series of ideas that have been greatly expanded on elsewhere:

*‘A new, more democratic world is becoming possible’*

The Oxford Internet Institute has recently announced that a research priority is to determine ‘how the Internet can be used most effectively to re-engage citizens with democratic processes’ (Dutton, 2003: 13). Such projects see the Internet as a tool in establishing a particular model of citizenship and political action as normative; one in which citizens are responsible and can engage easily in discussion with their MPs informed by the mass of information freely available to them (ibid: 13).<sup>10</sup> Literature on cyberspace can give the sense that everyone has access to Internet technology – this vision is refreshing in placing *access* as a practical priority. Internet use may be rising, but even within the UK, only 43% of households have access to it (ibid: 12-3) – a point to bear in mind throughout the ensuing discussions.

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<sup>10</sup> This kind of mechanism underpins various related visions, for instance ‘e-learning’.

*‘Social connections which never before were possible are now much more accessible’*

Linked to this concept of democratic citizenship is what we might term an ‘e-civil society’, in which cyberspace, formulated as akin to Habermas’s public sphere, allows citizens to become political agents.<sup>11</sup> Heated discussion in Singaporean chatrooms over the conviction of a policeman for receiving oral sex helped prompt discussions of decriminalisation amongst ministers (Reuters, 2004).<sup>12</sup> Vitale (2003) argues the Internet helped garner support from across the world for the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico.<sup>13</sup> Websites detailing authors’ experiences were seen as a way of spreading the word and creating civil society not just as a neo-Marxist trope, but as a reality, along the lines of Anderson’s (1991) ‘imagined communities’. Hellman (2000) critiqued this line of argument by claiming that the struggle is ‘just a cyberwar’ – a media event – from which we see that cyberoptimism is opposed not just by those who might see the Internet as a source of harm, but also those who see it as ultimately inconsequential. We might respond that for Zapatistas, Internet activity is not ‘just a cyberwar’ but consciousness-raising that has a positive impact on the ground (Vitale, 2003) – however, the case highlights a burden of proof – that of significant impact – that any cyberoptimist argument has to fulfil.

*‘We are seeing revitalisation of society’*

The Zapatistas leads us to ask whether other forms of Internet interaction might generate what could be termed ‘community’. The claim has been enthusiastically advocated by Baym (1995) as a result of her ethnographic work with a Usenet message board centred on soap opera *All My Children*. Electronic Communities’ Randy Farmer sees online communities as reasserting community values in the real world (Rossney, 1996) – a use of the concept ‘community’ that reinvokes the

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<sup>11</sup> This is achieved by allowing open and unrestrained discussion amongst citizens viewed as equal, who are more easily able to congregate (in their masses) in cyberspace than in physical space.

<sup>12</sup> Oral sex without intent to continue to vaginal penetration is currently illegal in Singapore. In the case in question, it was later revealed the girl, originally thought to be 16, was 15, and the man involved was prosecuted under a law that prohibits sex with minors. Nonetheless, by the time these details emerged, public repudiation of the law had snowballed.

<sup>13</sup> The movement was sparked in 1994 by the rise to power of revolutionary group EZLN, which is pressuring the Mexican government to reform, particular with regard to redistributing land to ‘indigenous’ peasants. For a far fuller account, see Collier (1999).

mechanical solidarity of times past, and which is characteristic of utopian projects (Conkin, 1964). Others, such as Jones (1997: 16-7) have been more cautious and advocated the use of a notion of ‘virtual community’ which is structurally distinct from a ‘community’ in real life.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, cyberspace is imagined as a place with new and powerful potential to bring people together.

*‘The Net seems to give people a new lease of life’*

The Internet has provoked a huge literature on identity because of the anonymity and ability to create a false persona that it can provide. Cyberutopianism of this kind follows two main (and complementary) lines of argument. – that exemplified by Turkle (1984, 1995) and that derived from Haraway (1991). In 1984, Turkle described the computer as a ‘new mirror’ to help us with our ‘new preoccupation with the question of who we are’ (Turkle, 1984: 319).<sup>15</sup> In 1995, she turned this line of analysis to networked computer games that could ‘multiply the self without limit’ (Turkle, 1995: 185). MUDs<sup>16</sup> provided scope ‘for individuals to express unexplored parts of themselves’ (ibid: 185) and this was seen as having an inherently positive psychological effect. Some working in this vein stressed how experimenting with a different identity (e.g. by switching gender) would allow you to empathise with that group in the real world (Smith, forthcoming) thus building a utopian vision of the restructuring of relations between, for example, women and men.<sup>17</sup> Haraway’s (1991) cyborg, a hybrid of human and machine, provided her followers with a potent metaphor for the subjectivity of going online. For this group, multiplicity of identity is utopian because, in blurring boundaries between nature and culture, and destabilising markers such as ‘male’, ‘female’, ‘straight’ and ‘queer’, such categories begin to lose

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<sup>14</sup> Unlike real life where people ‘belong’ to a community, Jones argues that in the case of virtual community, people feel the community ‘belongs’ to them, based on their own textual interpretation of the group dynamics. Having witnessed many melancholy discussions about missing people who have quit UO or who have died (in which case ‘virtual’ funerals have been known to be held) my own feeling is that Jones’ model is too essentialising, and that ‘belonging’ can be felt across an online group. His model is useful, however, in alerting us to the role interpretation and imagination of online activity may have in creating that kind of ‘belonging’ – and the possibility that it might not develop.

<sup>15</sup> It is not clear when and where this ‘new preoccupation’ is supposed to have appeared. The sense of her text is that it is a phenomenon of ‘late (‘Western’) capitalism’.

<sup>16</sup> Multi-User Dungeons. MUDs are text-based real-time chat environments, often themed, and most usually structured around either socialising or role-play ‘adventure’ (Ito, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> A common utopian ideal. See Moore’s (1990) review of recent utopianism, and Spiro (1970) for an ethnography of this being implemented in an Israeli kibbutz.



their significance, liberating those oppressed by them into a new 'world without gender' (Haraway, 1991: 150, McRae, 1997: 79).

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What we see in this scholarship is a series of distinct utopian threads that combine together into a place called 'cyberspace'. As we move through the claims, we see that they view society on different levels – from the e-democracy vision which has an imagined catchment area of an entire nation state, through visions linked to particular groups (activist organisations, 'communities') down to the level of the individual. All operate on a Fishman-esque model of cyberspace harnessing latent desires within its denizens. Meanwhile, the kinds of environment under discussion vary from an overarching "Internet" to specific instances of software – MUDs, chat rooms, etc. Extrapolating any one of these threads to 'cyberspace' in general is dangerous and all too frequent: in looking at UO it is the latter, smaller scale, utopian visions for the individual and the group that are under the spotlight.<sup>18</sup>

In a welcome attempt to avoid essentialising cyberspace, Smith and Kollock (1999) survey the range of cyberspaces alluded to above, but only in so far as how differences in structural features might affect interaction.<sup>19</sup> This leaves the agency for structuring social action online to rest entirely with the cyberspace environment. Since each particular cyberspace context is approached and designed with specific forms of interaction in mind, I suggest that even before logging on there are fundamental differences between one's expectations of interaction in a chat room, a discussion list or a MUD. These serve to determine behaviour as much as the technology. We thus need to analyse instances of Internet use – as social practice – within their own sociocultural and phenomenological contexts.

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<sup>18</sup> Though the other kinds of utopian claims are necessarily excluded from the scope of the paper, this is in no way a dismissal, or an endorsement, of their validity and importance.

<sup>19</sup> For example, are messages exchanged in real-time, are users in any way graphically represented, how public is the communication?

## THE FIELD SETTING

Between June and September 2003 I focused on a particular piece of software – *Ultima Online*. This is a MMORPG<sup>20</sup>, which, for a monthly fee of approximately £9 allows players to control animated figures within the landscape of a 24 hour virtual world named Britannia (see figure 1). Over 250,000 people are paid-up members (Taxén, 2002: 5) with just over 85% of them being men (Yee, 2004). Distinct copies of Britannia are accessed through one of 29 ‘shards’ distributed across the globe.<sup>21</sup> Practical considerations of language, time zones and reliability of connection led me to work on Europa shard, which primarily serves the UK and Western Europe.<sup>22</sup> The shard also has a sizeable American contingent, who play on Europa when their local shard, several hours behind GMT, is quiet.<sup>23</sup>

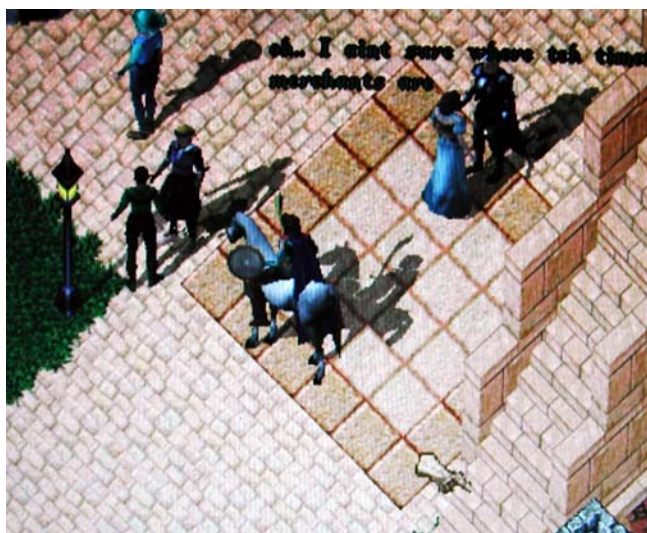


Figure 1: Characters interacting within a Britannian town

I also worked on the Stratics message boards, hosted at <http://uo.stratics.com>. A series of forums devoted to particular shards, types of character, forms of gameplay, and the game in general, they allowed me to see how people talked about UO when

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<sup>20</sup> Massively multiplayer online role-playing game

<sup>21</sup> Each shard is identical in terms of its physical geography, storyline, and (computer controlled) non-player characters. They differ in how the landscape has been altered by player activity (e.g. house building, private shops) and in the individuals that make them up.

<sup>22</sup> The most sizeable linguistic minorities were French (which I can speak) and Spanish (which I cannot). German-speakers seemed to play on the other European shard, Drachenfels.

<sup>23</sup> Given that shards are busiest in the evenings, in practice this means people who are at home during the daytime, most probably housewives/househusbands, the unemployed, the retired, or high-school/university students.

not in Britannia, and, as we shall see, what some of the sources of conflict and dispute might be.

### *More Than ‘Just A Game’?*

‘There are two... types of people in UO: players and inhabitants. There are many people who truly view UO as “just a game”’ (DrDolittle)

‘UO used to be a “virtual reality” – it has now dissolved into a mere game’ (John)

‘I now have a life in real life, and this life is in UO... It fills all social needs that I have’ (Peaches)

The Zapatista case highlighted the need to show significant impact in cyberoptimist discussions. While UO can be, and for many players *is*, ‘just a game’, the quotes above indicate it can be much more, and if that is the agency the game exerts on people – moving them, at the most extreme, to play 14 hours of UO a day – it is a significant phenomenon worth examining.<sup>24</sup>

However, UO is a very distinct kind of (computer) game, not based around a plot or set of central objectives. Rather, one’s objectives are decided oneself. Levi-Strauss’ (1966: 32) discussion of games and rituals emphasises how games produce structure by dividing people into winners and losers. But UO cannot be objectively ‘won’ – and as we shall see, one of the visions underpinning it is its ability to *conjoin* – to ‘bring people together’.<sup>25</sup> One of the most popular activities in UO is joining a guild, a player-run organisation that holds events and shares facilities. I became a member of a guild of elves and elf-friends and found that having done so, other guild members, even those I hadn’t met, would be far more likely to initiate conversation with me should our paths cross.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, when joining the guild, a number of details are asked of recruits to make sure that they are able to play at the same time as most other guild members.<sup>27</sup> This conscious ‘bringing together of people’ is cemented further by monthly guild-organised events, typically ‘elven fairs’ at which members of the guild

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<sup>24</sup> In this vein Bloch (1986) has written extensively about the hope and utopianism, generated primarily through wish-fulfilment, located within equally ‘trivial’ media such as art and the theatre.

<sup>25</sup> In this respect, UO is closer to Levi-Strauss’ concept of ritual, which brings people together through rule-governed behaviour – a *knowable* outcome.

<sup>26</sup> Members of the same guild are easily recognisable as they are highlighted in green on the screen.

<sup>27</sup> Time zone, work commitments, how often they tend to play, etc.

would attend, sell, and buy produce. Being of elven persuasion this produce had a bias towards professions such as music, nature magic, archery, and all the others associated with elves – this isn't just socialising, it's also role-play.<sup>28</sup>

The demands of being an elf include a rigorous spurning of the dark arts and evil – in the guild leader's terms, 'we judge on karma<sup>29</sup> ... we stand against necromancy... those with low karma cannot join.' In joining the guild, all recruits must swear that they will 'serve those of positive karma' – and indeed there was talk at one point of engaging in a 'guild war' with a guild of drow<sup>30</sup>. On the one hand, then, the guild is a highly social space, creating groups and prompting social interaction, albeit under a mantle of improvisational theatre (you need to pretend you are an elf). But on the other hand, its policy towards 'evil' characters is one of both *exclusion*, and (potentially martial) *opposition*. In other words, there *is* a Levi-Straussian 'game' element, with the concepts of victory, loss, and divisions that brings. The rules which generate this, however, are not universal, and other guilds may be founded on very different modes of organisation.

Nonetheless, the example shows that, far from being 'just a game', UO *can* be a complicated and dynamic hybrid of game, society and improvisational theatre, highlighting the ambiguity within the concepts of 'player' and 'social actor'. Nor, then, can it be talked of as 'a society' or 'a culture' in a straightforward sense. Nonetheless, the social dimension is highly developed, and just as popular as more swashbuckling 'gaming' activities (King and Borland, 2003).

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<sup>28</sup> The intensity of such role-play should not be overstated. Most groups, including my own guild, viewed it as 'informal' and 'fun' rather than a serious business of detailed character creation. Many role-play enthusiasts have shunned UO precisely because of potential to democratise and dilute role-play – large numbers of people who can't or don't role-play enter Britannia, making 'suspension of belief difficult' (King and Borland, 2003). Those who want serious role-play often form their own tight knit groups (e.g. the Europa Role-Players Association). For a study of such a group see Taxén (2002).

<sup>29</sup> Karma is a parameter calculated by UO software based on the actions of a character. Doing good deeds, such as giving away money or slaying evil creatures will raise karma. Theft, necromancy, and slaying 'good' creatures (peasants, unicorns, farm animals, etc) lower karma. The karma rating is displayed in one's name – if karma is low, then the adjective describing your character will be pejorative, for example 'The *Despicable* Rebecca'.

<sup>30</sup> Drow (originally a troll figure in Shetland folklore) are a race of 'dark elves' who first appeared in Dungeons and Dragons in the 1960s, created by Gary Gygax. They are, in this context, a race of evil, dark-skinned, elves driven underground by the light-loving elves with whom they are consequently at continual war.

## *Social Relations in Britannia*

The guild can be an important social unit in terms of forging both individual identity and social relations – friendly and hostile – with other players. However, guilds vary in the demands they put on members' time, and players may choose not to join one. What other kinds of social relations are there?

Firstly, there are what we might term 'professional' relations. These are relations that mimic those with service providers in the real world – for example, if you want to buy a sword, you visit a blacksmith. Encounters of this kind are usually fleeting, though a 'regular customer' relationship can develop. More usually, these relations are only remarkable when the 'professional' fails to meet expected standards – by selling poor items at lofty prices to the gullible, or stealing items handed over for repair by the overly trusting, a procedure known as 'scamming'. Since there are no institutions whereby such people can be held accountable, the consequences are largely reputational, and I was often warned of crooked craftsmen shortly after friends of mine had been duped. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social and symbolic capital seems quite appropriate in thinking about this kind of social dynamic.

There are also many less structured encounters – people you meet when wandering around town, hunting in the countryside, or through other friends. These are usually dyadic – the nature of communication in UO, where people type messages which are then displayed above their heads when they press 'Enter', rendering it difficult to sustain a conversation amongst a group of more than three. People may approach you asking for advice, for help (e.g. healing or resurrection) or simply because your name or appearance catches their eye. The conversation may be very fleeting, could go on for a long time, or could result in the exchange of ICQ numbers, or email addresses, to facilitate further conversation in the future.<sup>31</sup> Most encounters, however, are 'one-off' – although the acquaintance will often be renewed should the two avatars' paths happen to cross again, especially if this involves reciprocating an act of kindness.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> ICQ is an online messaging service, allowing people to send each other messages in real time. Typically, a player might see a friend of theirs is logged on to the Internet, ask 'are you here [in Britannia]?' and then arrange to meet in-game. Sometimes, they may just converse on ICQ.

<sup>32</sup> Most UO players will have such tales to tell. An example is the account posted at [http://www.uo.com/spot\\_69.html](http://www.uo.com/spot_69.html) about a player who gave away her horse to a warrior in need, who encountered her in town 'a long while later' and gave her one of his pets in return. Interestingly, the Webmaster's epilogue to this story of a dyadic social relation reads 'it is with pleasure that we present these tales of your *communities* and adventures in Ultima Online.'

## *Methodological Issues*

Ethnographing this kind of context is not straightforward. Indeed, critiques of many of the cyberoptimist accounts we discussed earlier were based around pointing out sloppy methodology: argument was reduced to anecdotal assertion; and in the quest to identify a prime mover, ‘cyberspace’ was reified and considered outside of its social context, both online and offline (Wellman and Gulia, 1999: 170). However, if we take the Geertzian notion of culture as ‘webs of significance that man himself has spun’ and ethnography as the task of their interpretation, we find that his concepts of ‘established codes’ and ‘public meaning’ prove tricky in this context (Geertz, 1973: 5-12). Working within a tight-knit guild, shared meanings can probably be uncovered, as Taxén (2002) has demonstrated. In general, however, the people one meets are in a much more loosely defined group, and may have very different understandings of what is going on.

“Multiple-use interactive gaming will be part of the experience of prosthetic sociality”  
(Stone, 1995a: 402-3)

Whilst cyborg theorists such as Stone might like to think of UO players becoming one with their ‘communication prosthetics’ (computers) and immersing themselves in electronic communities, others remain more sceptical. Jones (1997: 13) suggests the experience of sitting alone at a computer, watching a primarily textual exchange, promotes a sense of ‘reading’ and ‘imagining’ what is happening on screen in a similar way to reading a book, producing a greater diversity of interpretations than would be the case in real life. In practice, I suspect players’ experience wavers between these two extremes. This heterogeneity makes cyberspace all the more interesting, but very difficult to get a grip on – we cannot operate simply at the level of individual psychology, since it is clearly also a social domain, but nor can we take any one individual’s experience and extrapolate it to a generic ‘UO player’.

The fleeting and one-to-one nature of encounters also makes it difficult to elicit how people think about aspects of the game – one reason I chose to adopt a technique of open-ended email interview with willing informants (see below). Finding people willing to help necessarily involves self-selection of those that come forward, and it must be stressed that there are many different attitudes to those expressed by the

people I worked with. Even within the widely shared utopian attitude towards UO, individual nuances were very variable. For instance, Peaches, a disabled woman in real life, found that UO, by letting her run about, be active, and make friends, had allowed her to overcome her disability. Others, such as Grog, valued the experience of role-playing a crafter and being able to take pride in developing his workmanship skills. Elyssar said she enjoyed the sense of accomplishment, attachment and immersion associated with training online ‘pets’. Because of this diversity, my focus in this paper is upon the intersection between individual, idiosyncratic attitudes to UO (as exemplified by what people said to me in interviews) and the broader social context, where these different attitudes meet. It is for this reason that I focus particularly upon situations of dispute, where the nature of the conflict reveals the different hopes and expectations of the parties involved, as well as the processes whereby these contested meanings are negotiated.

Within the context of email interviews, informed consent was straightforward to obtain – I could present myself as an anthropology student gathering information, ask them all to affirm consent for their words to be cited, and offer pseudonyms should they wish them. I then asked a series of questions to all players – on which shards did they play, how often did they play, what types of character did they play, and what did they enjoy most about UO? From their responses I then proceeded with a methodology of ‘open-ended interview’ as employed by Hollan and Wellenkamp (1993), seeking clarification and deeper exegesis of concepts raised in their answers, rather than following a formalised or leading line of questioning. This ‘person-centred ethnography’ approach which ‘encourages respondents actively to reflect on and evaluate their life experiences’ with the aim of exploring ‘the most significant and meaningful aspects of the world of the individual as experienced by him’ (ibid: 3) is, however, rather abstracted from the dynamics of social interaction. To avoid it being entirely anecdotal, the players’ narratives need to be juxtaposed with my own anthropological narrative of participant observation.

Here informed consent was more difficult to obtain, especially in the context of more fleeting in-game encounters.<sup>33</sup> As Mann and Stewart (2000) discuss, how such material should be used is highly controversial. On the one hand, there is not informed

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<sup>33</sup> Although I had put details of myself (an anthropology student doing research on social life in Britannia) on my player profile, in practice this could not be mentioned in all conversations, and the profile was not necessarily looked at.

consent. On the other, the naturalistic character of the observation reduces the degree to which the researcher alters their context, and as such represents a valuable resource. A similar debate pertains to ‘publicly’ posted threads on message boards, theoretically accessible to all, yet where the *intended* audience is a private group, and unlikely to include researchers (ibid: 46). In such instances I follow Turkle – ‘when I use materials from publicly archived sources, I simply indicate the source’ (1995: 342). Regarding data from participant observation, I indicate the context in which the material was gathered, but refrain from giving personal details or information of a sensitive nature without prior consent, my concern in this arena being with patterns of social interaction, rather than personal experience (which I take instead from interviews). In this way I feel that the strengths of naturalistic observation for my study can be capitalised on, without compromising the privacy of anyone involved.

### *Changing Stories*

‘In UO, I’m free from the rat-race of the modern world... In Britannia, the world is always beautiful... who could ask for more than that?’ (Emily)

When I asked people what it was about UO that held an appeal for them, a couple replied in a ‘gamer-ish’ way: they liked the graphics, the flexibility in character skill development, etc. I was surprised by the overwhelming majority who, of their own volition, drew comparisons between UO and real life, be that in terms of transforming the mechanics of ‘the world’ or the realisation of their own potential as individuals. But as Scott (1996) argues, ‘experience’ does not serve as evidence, rather as something to be explained and investigated: can we take these claims at face value?



In most of the cities in Britannia, there are parks, gardens and street corners with benches where players often gather to sit and have a chat – the spaces are prominent, allowing lots of people to come and join them, and increasing the chances of bumping into an old friend on their way to the bank. Topics of conversation vary from planning a big trip into a dungeon, to idle banter and joking, to discussing job promotions in real life. When at a loose end, I would go along and ask them what they were up to, the answer came in general terms: ‘hanging out’; ‘just chatting’; ‘talking shit’. Either



that, or the specific topic being discussed would be set out. Sometimes the conversation would shift onto the fact that I was doing research, and I might ask them about their thoughts on UO. What did they like and dislike about it? It's at this point that cyberoptimist catchphrases might begin to creep in – I'm told to look around me at the 'virtual world', or how my very participation in the group represents 'bringing people together.' Tellingly, I witness no discussions on the metaphysics of cyberspace in groups in which I am not actively participating.

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It's March 2004, 7 months after my fieldwork, and I decide to thumb through the message boards on Stratics. The tone has changed: where people once used to post accounts of their adventures for discussion, threads now announce seasoned gamers cancelling their accounts, and others debating such a move.

'Should I quit?' is the bleak subject heading of one such message. The poster has had enough: 2004 has seen a spate of bugs which have lost him some of his most treasured items and 5 million gold pieces, and after a series of senior programmers at OSI resigned from the team, the future looks bleak.<sup>34</sup> 'Frankly,' he says, as do several others, 'the game just isn't as much fun as it used to be, or as it *should* be.' Responses are mixed. A significant number of people encourage him to leave – he shouldn't pay money if he's not having fun. Others, though, actively defend the world of UO, suggesting instead that the *player* needs a fresh approach. One suggestion is to create a new character from scratch: 'you will experience a *freedom unlike that ever felt before...* [and] get back the magic and fun of UO' (my emphasis). Others suggest he take a break, maybe even play another MMORPG: 'you might find a wonderful new exciting virtual world out there *or* you might even discover that UO was best after all and return'. Several people add that they had tried giving up UO but missed the camaraderie too much. Eventually the poster decides he'll try moving to another shard, and everyone wishes him luck.

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<sup>34</sup> These resignations were prompted by the movement of Electronic Arts (who had bought up OSI) to California.

These observations help us think over questions of the *validity* of the claims I gathered in my research. My intervention in the field, and in email interviews, clearly prompted a series of metaphysical reflections that would probably never have been articulated had I not been there. The problem extends further: in posing the questions *as an anthropologist* do I get a particular kind of response, targeted towards me as an audience who has been imagined in a particular way? Certainly those who were most forthcoming with material were those who shared an interest in sociology and anthropology, and were keen to advance their own ‘anthropological’ theories of virtual sociality – a distinct bias in the data pool. It seems likely that their putting forward such ideas (for whatever motive) might give a distorted picture of how the informants themselves saw UO, either by bringing in extraneous ideas, or factoring out contradictory information.

However, these problems should not be overstated. Whilst I was seen as a researcher, I was also seen as a fellow UO player, and the distinction between the two is not always clear, or present. The discussions about quitting exemplify how UO players may take a reflexive stance towards the nature of the game *with each other*, and while the topic of leaving UO was not one that was discussed much during my fieldwork, the abstract tenor of the discussion is much the same as those I witnessed in 2003. Then, conversations tended to focus more on the ethics of player behaviour – what was and wasn’t ‘appropriate’ in UO, resorting to the same ideas about what it was that made UO ‘special’. Debating whether to leave actually throws these ideas into sharper relief, as it is the value of UO that is fundamentally at stake, and the claims being made – to ‘freedom unlike that ever felt before’ or a camaraderie that will keep bringing you back, are very similar to those I was offered in interview.

I feel then, that my research interventions were tapping into a pre-existing mode of reflection, rather than creating one anew. This renders all the more striking the similarity between the language used by UO players and that present within cyberoptimist literature of the kind reviewed earlier, both in vocabulary and content. That these ideas come up in general conversation suggests that it is not a straightforward case of an *expected* ‘correct’ answer being proffered to the researcher. It would appear that either the cyberoptimist narrative has been to some degree internalised, or that I am reading cyberoptimism into vocabulary which is coincidentally the same. The latter seems unlikely; the claims – ‘freedom unlike that

ever felt before’ – were often quite explicit. By contrast, the idea of a narrative becoming broadly standardised is not uncommon<sup>35</sup>. Plummer (1995) has set out a concept of ‘little narratives’ (e.g. that of an individual ‘coming out’) transforming into ‘cultural narratives’ (*The coming out story*) and thus serving as a scaffolding through which people narrate and make sense of their own lives. All the more so, perhaps, when such testimonies are told to groups, allowing ‘collective identity and/or shared experience [to be] referenced and invented’ (Kear and Steinberg, 1999: 9). Is ‘the Internet changed my life’ a new example of such ‘cultural narratives’?

The cyberoptimist literature, in supporting its arguments with highly specific and personalised anecdotes and testimonies, may have been ‘unscholarly’ but was certainly appropriable, all the more so since popular journalism used such material as a backbone of ‘human interest’ stories (Wellman and Gulia, 1999).<sup>36</sup> The authority of these accounts has been bolstered even further by academic authors writing ‘scholarly’ books aiming for, and succeeding in, the lay sector (e.g. Stone, 1995b) and the use of personalised player testimony by companies such as Electronic Arts in marketing their products – after all, there is a strong economic incentive for them to naturalise the concept that Britannia is somehow utopian:

‘The magic of UO for me is the magic of all the friends I have made, and the new ones I meet every single day!’<sup>37</sup>

Amongst the various claims to transformation I heard, there were two distinct lines of argument. One focused on the specificities of the UO experience – for example, the satisfactions of running a thriving shop. The other, by no means mutually exclusive, situated UO within a wider conceptual framework of ‘cyberspace’, ‘virtual worlds’

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<sup>35</sup> For example, Matravers found that, when interviewing female sex offenders, quite a uniform life-history narrative was relayed to her, typically one which portrayed the offenders as ‘fellow victims’ to those they had abused (Matravers, 2001, and pers. comm.) La Fontaine (1998: 39) has described a similar standardisation amongst victims of child abuse, who had internalised details of others’ accounts of (satanic) ritual abuse – for example, Lauren Stratford’s *Satan’s Underground* (1991) which was later revealed to be a hoax.

<sup>36</sup> And indeed continues to do so – see for instance McIntosh’s recent article in *The Guardian* on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2004, detailing how ‘networking sites’ have allowed people to make contacts and find job opportunities.

<sup>37</sup> [http://www.uo.com/spot\\_19.html](http://www.uo.com/spot_19.html). The end of a testimony by my informant Peaches, posted on the UO website by Electronic Arts for other players and prospective buyers to read and digest. A very similar sentence (‘The magic of UO is the meeting of many people across the world and becoming friends with them’) was relayed to me in an email interview 5 years after the testimony was posted on the web.

and ‘virtual realities’, and their *inherent* properties, such as allowing people to be their ‘true selves’ more easily and ‘bringing people together’. These latter explanations seemed to draw quite heavily on ideas stemming from this cyberoptimist writing, highlighting that, whilst we should rightly critique that literature’s reification of ‘cyberspace’ and focus instead on particular ‘cyberspaces’, the broader concept remains as an indigenous category of thought and explanation, and thus should remain within the scope of anthropological enquiry.

Although such narrative is ‘standardised’ and collective experience is, in Kear and Steinberg’s (1999: 9) words, ‘invented’, the experience is no less *genuine*. Rather, their point is that this invention comes to help structure and define the experience of, and reflection upon ‘reality’: ‘construction through reflexive narrative is the character of *Dasein* in the late modern age’ (Coyne, 1998).<sup>38</sup> So while what UO players tell us and each other about UO is of course partial and situated, influenced by extraneous factors linked to both influences and audiences, and are just one way in which they *themselves* might look at UO, their tales of utopian transformation have not only constructed a rhetorical utopia, but lead people to experience that in their lives. The issue I turn to now is how these rosy ideas play out in the more discordant reality of Britannia.

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<sup>38</sup> *Dasein* refers to the existentialist concept of ‘the-being-of-man-in-the-world’. See Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1962)

## DISPUTING “UO-TOPIA”

### *A Woodland Dispute*

It was a Tuesday morning in July. I was hunting in the woodlands outside the town of Haven, with Amber – one of my informants’ characters. Being relatively new, I was seeking to master the combat system and earn some gold; Amber, a mage/animal-tamer, was out to train her bears to make them more effective in battle. We had reached the stage where we were ready to take on the ettin (fig. 2), the strongest and most dangerous creature in the region, but very rewarding in terms of the gold and items stashed on its body.



**Figure 2. An ettin**

Our tour of the forest was going well. Amber was launching magical attacks from a distance, while the bears and I rushed in dealing physical blows; many an ettin had fallen to this tactic. However, events took an unexpected turn when a third character, Nostradamus, appeared in the wood. Amber and I had almost slain what must have been our dozenth ettin of the morning, when Nostradamus launched himself at the ettin and dealt it a fatal blow.<sup>39</sup> I was bewildered. Amber was not impressed.

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<sup>39</sup> The fatal blow earned Nostradamus the bulk of the fame and karma points awarded for slaying the monster. Further, he alone now had the right to loot the monster’s corpse for gold and items. I encountered examples of this kind of ‘kill-stealing’ nearly every day, and more often than not a dispute would arise.

“Hey! He was ours!” she opened, “you shouldn’t steal. It’s not nice to steal.” Shortly afterwards, a private message popped up for me on ICQ, “what a fucker.”

“Sorry,” Nostradamus replied, “I was only helping you guys out. You were injured.” This was true. There was a pause. Amber was not replying, and I had no idea what to say. Nostradamus continued to explain himself. “I’m a paladin,” he explained, “I’m supposed to help people out.”

“It is NOT NICE to steal!”

“What’s your problem?” asked Nostradamus, “You should be grateful.” Things seemed to be heating up.

“You should HEAL if you want to help,” came Amber’s answer, “so that we can kill the ettin. Instead you STOLE our ettin.”

“I didn’t think to steal!” Nostradamus protested.

“Whatever. But it’s not nice.” On this, Nostradamus appeared to give up, and rode out of the woodland. “Fuck him then,” was Amber’s verdict. I weakly suggested that perhaps he *was* actually trying to help. “No, he was just saying that,” she replied, “or he would have healed.” Neither of us really felt like any more hunting, and so we headed back to Haven town.

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Ultimately, the pilfering of a single ettin is insignificant, and the long-term social repercussions of the dispute were minimal. Amber referred to the incident occasionally when I was about, and if she had encountered Nostradamus again, he would have met with a cool reception. But, like most of these kill-stealing disputes, the matter was soon forgotten. There are more extreme cases. Jakobsson and Taylor (2003: 82-83) describe how an *Everquest* character – ‘Phrank’ – cheated another player out of a valuable enchanted earring.<sup>40</sup> Outraged, the members of his party sent a petition in to the game staffers, swore never to let him hunt with them again, and posted his name to their guilds, warning he was not to be trusted. The character

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<sup>40</sup> In *Everquest* (a largely combat-based MMORPG) valuable items are ‘rolled’ for by all members of the hunting party – the highest roll wins the item. Phrank had looted the corpse, and so was holding the earring while party members rolled for it. However, instead of handing over the earring, Phrank disconnected from his modem, leaving the item on his character ready to wear or sell when he next logged on.

obtained a very bad in-game reputation and, as with ‘scammers’ in UO, found his social capital considerably diminished.

However, it is not the effects of the dispute that are interesting so much as the causes and the nature of the clash. Amber’s fury is initially piqued by what she sees as a moral transgression, and the appropriation of ‘our’ ettin, which we were hunting to boost our skill levels and bank accounts. Yet Nostradamus *also* appears to have suffered an affront – having performed a chivalrous act of rescue, the damsel in distress sees him as anything but a knight in shining armour. One is approaching the situation from a mentality of role-play, one from a mentality of ‘powergaming’.<sup>41</sup> Both find their expectations thwarted by those of the other. As Amber suggested, there remains the distinct possibility that Nostradamus was not role-playing a paladin at all, but simply out for an easy kill. If so, the choice to pretend to be ‘role-playing’ when confronted merely shows the potential incommensurability of these two approaches to be widely recognised! In the context of this particular dispute, a method of making them compatible is offered – healing hunters in trouble – which has now become accepted wisdom across Britannia.

The dispute emphasizes my earlier observation, drawn from interview material, that players’ attitudes towards UO can be very different – and can generate conflict when they meet and encroach upon each other. This hardly constitutes the ‘shared blueprint’ that a utopia, radical or conservative, demands – or that cyberoptimist hypotheses predicted. However, simply dismissing the possibility of ‘uo-topia’ does not seem to do justice to the experiences so lucidly talked about by my informants.

Interrogating the concept of ‘blueprint’ a little further, we see that while the radical utopia may plan out as many aspects of social life as possible (Moore, 1990: 15) in eighteenth-century suburbia, the ‘blueprint’ was less comprehensive – only certain things were explicitly changed, the rest negotiated in the light of those changes via a process of *bricolage* (Fishman, 1987: 40).<sup>42</sup> Indeed, closer inspection reveals even the comprehensively blueprinted utopia to have a substantial *bricolage* component.<sup>43</sup> This strikes me as pertinent to UO in two ways.

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<sup>41</sup> The style of play which focuses on maximisation of personal attributes through training.

<sup>42</sup> The *bricoleur* is a type of handyman with a limited means at his disposal, yet who is able to accomplish the task at hand through drawing on this repertoire (Levi-Strauss, 1966: 16-17). In this context, *bricolage* represents a restructuring of ‘culture’ through rearranging what the new suburbanites already know.

<sup>43</sup> This is so even in an apparently ‘textually based’ project. Twin Oaks was a Virginian utopian commune created in 1966 inspired by B.F. Skinner’s [1948] novel about a utopian community, *Walden*

Firstly, the negotiated character of *bricolage* calls to mind the way in which, through kill-stealing disputes of the sort just outlined, the shared protocol of healing over ‘stealing’ was established as a compromise between the powergaming and role-playing approaches. Secondly, the metaphor’s overtones of construction recall Giddens’ (1992: 30) characterisation of the constructed self as a continuous reflexive interrogation of past, present and future. Coyne (1998) locates discussions of ‘cyberspace transformations’ within this reflexive project, and certainly none of my informants talked in terms of having actually wanted to create a paradise; rather, ‘the good’ was a condition that they retroactively and reflexively diagnosed. Seen in this light, the highly variable *specifics* of the transformations become part of a *bricolage* enterprise – no less part of the overall utopian experience, but secondary to an underlying shared blueprint.

‘Can we form no substantive or positive picture of utopia, short of embracing all the multiple contradictory pictures that co-exist in our collective social unconscious?’  
(Jameson, 2004: 51)

Amber and Nostradamus’ dispute, not to mention the range of perspectives encountered in my interviews (alluded to earlier) give a glimpse of some of these ‘multiple contradictory pictures’. However, they do not just reside in the collective unconscious, they are substantively present within UO. People really can live however they want to live, and it is *this* idea of unalloyed autonomy that I suggest is at the heart of UO – paradoxically, the shared blueprint is that there is no ‘shared blueprint’.<sup>44</sup> The OSI team staffing the game do so on a principle of minimal intervention, encouraging players to find their own solutions and create their own ‘virtual culture’, and when game staffers *do* intervene it is to maximise players’

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*Two.* Originally planned to be self-sufficient and isolated, the group soon found they needed to supplement their income and began weaving hammocks to sell. 5 years later, this was supplemented by members going out into the wider world for several months’ wage labour – the wages would then be shared with the rest of the community (Kanter, 1972: 19) – a clear example of *bricolage* over blueprinting.

<sup>44</sup> Although I am wary of making sweeping claims of what is felt by *all* UO players, the concept of autonomy seems to permeate beyond those I was talking to, or who described UO in terms of a utopian transformation. Those I spoke to who viewed UO as more of a game than a social space, praised the flexibility and range in customising characters that lent the game longevity and immersion: ‘I am limited only by my imagination’ (Chisel). Meanwhile, as Taxén (2002:5) reports, many players who leave the game do so because they find the degree of autonomy, in the absence of a structured storyline, prohibitive.



freedom.<sup>45</sup> A similar logic operates for the players – the ettin dispute stemmed from each player’s freedom to ‘live however they want to’ encroaching on the other’s. Such disputes are thus actually an expression of UO’s utopianism, and the solutions offered, based around compromise, reflect a general social process of moving towards a Britannia with as few encroachments as possible.

Autonomy as a utopian trope is hardly novel in Western culture, and so UO probably qualifies not as a conservative utopia so much as a true crypto-utopia (Knights and Willmott, 2002).<sup>46</sup> It may therefore appear that there is nothing particularly remarkable about it. However, comparison with other online ‘worlds’ reveals that they can have a very different *modus operandi*.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, though concepts of autonomy are present within the cyberoptimist accounts we reviewed earlier, none of those value autonomy for its own sake, as UO appears to.<sup>48</sup> This kind of utopianism is thus neither unique to UO nor a more general character of “cyberspace” – rather, UO represents a specific instantiation of ideals, which draws on the Internet’s structural potential for a wide range of activities that can be carried out anonymously, draws on the cultural narratives of ‘transformation’ associated with ‘cyberspace’, and yet is ultimately determined by the programmers.<sup>49</sup>

The implications of this kind of space are too broad to fully explore here, but we can make an initial probe through the consideration of a second dispute.

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<sup>45</sup> The creation of Trammel and Felucca facets, to be discussed shortly, is a case in point.

<sup>46</sup> As noted earlier, a crypto-utopia is an idealised vision of the world which pretends not to be a vision at all (Jacques, 2002: 31).

<sup>47</sup> For instance, LamdaMOO is a text-based virtual world where the programmers maintained an interventionist stance. They created a ballot system whereby MOO residents could vote on issues, principally the expulsion of other MOO members, and the results sent to the wizards, who would be answerable to this public demand (Dibbell, 1999). It would be quite wrong, however, to suggest that UO is entirely libertarian – behaviour which transgresses the real world law (principally verbal harassment) will result in the termination of that player’s account, as, of course, will failure to keep up with paying the subscription.

<sup>48</sup> ‘E-democracy’, ‘e-civil society’, joining virtual communities and experimenting with multiple identities are all compatible with autonomy in that they respect the individual’s right to, autonomously, choose how to vote, which group to join, which way to explore your identity, etc. However, they allow no conceptual space for individuals to choose *not* to do any of the above. Those who did not would be seen as reaping no benefits. This stands in sharp contrast to UO where people often remarked on how much they appreciated the benefits of being recognised ‘for who they were’.

<sup>49</sup> In fact, Richard Garriott, the designer of UO, originally formulated Britannia according to a ‘bringing people together’ vision of a harmonious and ordered cyberlocale in which people could wander with their friends and meet real people. It was only when disputes began to develop that he decided to abandon this vision in favour of a more libertarian one (King and Borland, 2003).

## *A Murderous Dispute*

In 2000, Electronic Arts decided to split Britannia into two parallel versions, or ‘facets’ – Felucca, where the killing of other players is permitted, and Trammel, where it is not. This was a response to the habitual murdering of new players by more seasoned veterans, an experience that discouraged those new players from continuing to play, resulting in a sizeable downturn in subscription levels (Kolbert, 2001). Despite this spilt, designed to resolve the problem of player-killers encroaching on other players’ liberty, the issue of player-killing remains widely debated. The following dispute began with a new member of Stratics Murderers’ forum profiling one of his characters. With statistics like these, he asked, would you go ‘red’?<sup>50</sup> At first, respondents offered technical advice, or suggested he look at the ‘read me’ thread in the forum before deciding: ‘[the] player makes the red, not the template.’ The following then unfolded:

**Katana:** I’m sure there must be more challenge in actually going after reds, after all reds are going to present a better fight to this char you have made. Of course, 95% of the time my chars are killed in Fel it is by more than one red, it appears my lowly bard or my tamer are seen as such [player-versus-player] gods that reds need to attack me in great numbers.

**Saladin:** Yeah, anytime I think about going out to PK I stop to consider what my enemies will think of me if I decide to hunt with a friend... NOT. Being a PK is not about fairness.

**Katana:** So it’s about being a coward then? Worried that miner might get a hit off on you with his pickaxe so you need backup?

**Barabas:** Worried they may make it away with their goodies intact is more like it.

**Amethyst:** It’s about killing at all cost. Honour be damned... Don’t get me wrong, three on one against a miner makes my innards shrivel. But that proves that I don’t have whatever it is that makes anarchy thrive.

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<sup>50</sup> A character who kills another turns red, and is thus known as a ‘red’ or a PK. This distinguishes Felucca player-killers from those who play on Felucca because they enjoy player-vs-player combat, but without proceeding to mortal blows.

**Katana:** Guess I got too used to Siege<sup>51</sup>, on the most part the reds there have honour. It becomes clear that all the other people's answers to this guy's original question were wrong, the answer should have been: "have whatever template you like, just bring 5 mates with you and rely on them."

[Re: Amethyst] If the idea of ganking<sup>52</sup> a miner with several reds is distasteful to you then you certainly have the wrong mindset...show complete disregard for other players, this is a one player game and YOU are the only player, no one else matters.

**Saladin:** The difference is that we are at war. We are at war with anyone that is not red and steps into our facet.

**Katana:** War? LOL Is that the same way fox hunters on horses with about 100 dogs are at war with a fox?

Arguments similar to this flare up regularly on the Murderers' forum. This case is somewhat unusual in that it focuses principally on an exchange between just two participants – usually there is much wider participation on each side of the debate. The issue, however, is the same, and stems from two incommensurable attitudes, here over what constitutes 'acceptable' player-killing. At first it seems very similar to the woodland dispute – Saladin justifies himself as role-playing a ruthless killer, while Katana is more concerned with issues of sportsmanship and fairness, and how Saladin's playstyle encroaches upon his own: 'YOU are the only player, no one else matters'.

Saladin's argument that 'being a PK is not about fairness' is used as the basis of a personal assault, not on him as a character so much as a *player*. In fact, the distinction between the two becomes very blurred. An opening rubric is that 'the *player* makes the red' – a notion reiterated when Amethyst claims that she doesn't have what it takes for anarchy. When interviewing my informants, I encountered similar claims. 'I don't PvP,' Peaches told me, 'it just isn't my nature!' The attitude extended beyond player-killing: Naomi lamented the difficulties she was having role-playing a character she had decided would be 'a bitch': 'I haven't been able to make the transition very well,' she complained, 'that'd be totally against my own nature.' By contrast, Peaches enjoyed UO because she felt it revealed her gregarious, active self,

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<sup>51</sup> Siege Perilous shard – an 'advanced' shard where player-versus-player combat is permissible in all contexts.

<sup>52</sup> Ganking refers to the practice of ambushing a character with more than one player-killer, so that the odds are stacked heavily against the victim.

hidden in real life by her disability. Grog enjoyed it because he felt he could be recognised as a good workman, a value couched in his own life history in the real world.<sup>53</sup> Dr Dolittle encapsulated the predominant feeling:

‘Our actions in the virtual world may more closely reveal our “true self”, for good or ill, than in the real world... I have to wonder what the pleasure derived from contemptible acts reveals about a person.’

Precisely because UO is a ‘virtual world’ which values autonomy, how people choose to play is seen as revelatory, and a basis for their evaluation. Indeed, pursuing Giddens’ (1992) concept of the self as a reflexive narrative project, it may well prove a basis for *self-evaluation*. Bloch (1986: 345) argues that ‘those who have dressed up in a good disguise have undressed, that is how they look on the inside... [This] is in many cases not dressing up at all, but a small fulfilment.’ The anonymity of UO, and ability to craft any kind of personality and (to an extent) body one wants are such that the metaphor of dressing up in disguise seems to be particularly apt. The wish-fulfilment is what generates the sense of positive transformation, but it comes at the price of being judged on what you wished for. Like wickedness for Kant, these aspects of selfhood are simultaneously presented as freely chosen and innate – only a bad person would choose to be bad (Zizek, 1989: 166), and if you want to live as a ‘ganking’ player-killer, people like Katana and Amethyst will label you a dishonourable coward.<sup>54</sup>

Conventionally, a utopia is based around notions of ‘brotherhood’ and ‘community’ (Kanter, 1972: 46) – a social recognition that all are equals. In UO, I argue utopianism is linked to recognition of difference and individuality – a social ratification of your individual wish-fulfilment. For Grog, working in his shop, this can be achieved through receiving custom. For other kinds of transformation, it is ratified through dispute, where not only the participants’ categories, but also their

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<sup>53</sup> I asked him what he thought it was about crafting skills that made them so enjoyable. He replied: ‘I have always taken pride in my workmanship, whether it is doing machine work or washing dishes. When my father was alive he was determined not to be like his father, so he always let us know when we had done food. I like that sort of attention. I like for other players in UO to know that I can do good work, and I can do that by making things for them. With crafting, I can be recognised as one who plays UO hard, even when I am not around.’

<sup>54</sup> Of course, people play different types of character to explore ‘different parts of themselves’. Their UO character should not therefore be read as a totalising model of the self! Rather it represents a realisation of a particular fantasy – however, the *range* of fantasies you have could well be seen as circumscribed by the limits of ‘the self’.

incommensurability, can be established – for example, ‘good’ only takes on meaning through its opposition to ‘bad’ (see fig. 3).<sup>55</sup> Katana and Saladin’s exchange then becomes about more than the etiquette of player-killing. It also establishes a relationality between the participants. For Katana, Saladin is a bad, dishonourable person, and *he, Katana, is not*. Saladin does not deny the accusation of dishonour and unfairness. Rather, his response is that player-killing is *all about* dishonour, unfairness, and war. Through the dispute, *both* act out their respective roles (which span across both their in-game characters and their own position as gamers) and *both* are recognised within them.

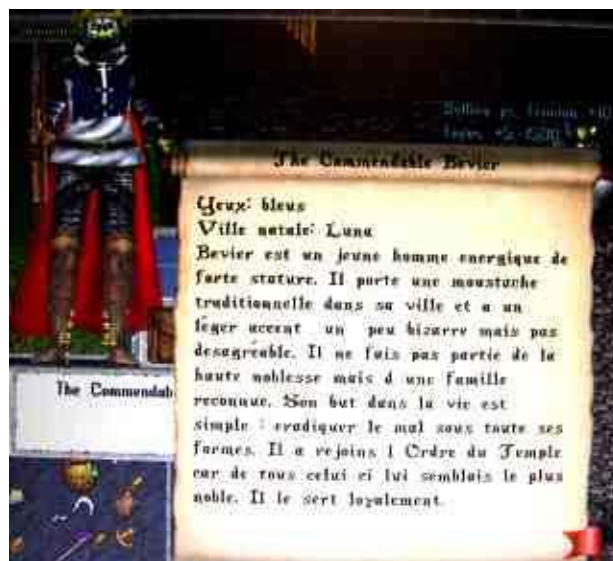


Figure 3. A character self-presenting as ‘good’ and ‘noble’<sup>56</sup>

We can see a similarity between this impromptu dispute and the planned war between my elven guild and the guild of drow, as detailed earlier. Indeed, by renouncing the forces of darkness when joining, I invoked an opposition (good/evil) in order to further establish my social identity within Britannia. That this should

<sup>55</sup> This has implications for how we respond to my informants claims about being ‘unable’ to play as murderers, bitchy characters, etc. In making this claim, they are drawing a distinction between themselves and those who conscience allowed them to continue as an evil character. However, the claim may not be true, but suppressing the fact that they actually enjoyed such playstyles. These aspects of the interviews could thus be taken as a very conscious performance, even role-play, of self. Of course, if this is the case, it only serves to bolster my argument that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (or at least ‘not good’) might be categories that matter to them.

<sup>56</sup> The latter part of the player profile (translated from the French) reads: *His goal in life is simple: to destroy evil in all its forms. He joined up to the Order of the Temple [a guild] because it seemed to be the noblest of all. He serves it loyally.*

happen so often through situations pertaining to conflict is probably not surprising. UO is a medieval fantasy role-play game, set against a background of games and literature that are explicitly organised around certain oppositions – ‘good/evil’, ‘chaos/order’, ‘justice/injustice’, etc (see fig. 3).<sup>57</sup> These are then readily to hand in order to interpret irresolvable conflicts of interest that may arise. Further, an affinity with this genre (which many of my informants had) may determine exactly what disguise you choose to adopt, at least within the context of a fantasy role-play game. This means that far from being ‘just a game’, UO’s status *as* a game may actually contribute to its utopian effect. However, it also circumscribes the kinds of transformation people are predisposed to: it is certainly not a space of *absolute* autonomy.

### *Fantasy and Utopia*

The objection may be raised that utopia presupposes some kind of broader social context – at least a *notion* of ‘intentional *community*’. Indeed, Kanter (1972: 167) classifies Californian ‘hippie’ communes as ‘non-utopian’ because their focus on the individual’s personal fulfilment does not constitute a ‘wider social vision’. In UO, are we not just seeing the fulfilment of individual *fantasy*? In their discussion of escapism, Cohen and Taylor (1976: 84) draw a sharp line between fantasy that remains in the mind and fantasy that becomes socially institutionalised and easily realizable. Fantasizing about adultery is not the same as joining a wife-swapper’s club.

In this respect, I suggest that UO does constitute a utopia in the formal sense because it represents a programmatic effort to realise all participants’ fantasies of how they want to exist, live and/or play online. The trouble, once again, is an ambiguity present within the concept of utopia. Jameson (2004) argues there are two ways in which More’s *Utopia* can be read. One locates the transformation in More’s account of utopian arrangements and daily life – what has been *added*. The other locates it in

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<sup>57</sup> In fact, these oppositions actually influence the architecture of the game – the ‘karma’ parameter ranks characters on a ‘good-evil’ continuum, the city of paladins, champions of good and justice, is light and airy compared to the dark city of necromancers, and so forth.

the banishment of the ‘root of all evil’<sup>58</sup> – an act of taking away (ibid: 36-39). This distinction, he continues, is one between utopia as construction and utopia as wish-fulfilment. Applying this to UO, I am very firmly arguing in terms of construction, though a construction that allows wish-fulfilment!

As we have seen, within UO, the change takes place at both an individual and a broader social level. *Players* devise protocols – which become established – to avoid conflict, as we saw in the case of the woodland dispute. Similarly, the introduction of Trammel represents a change in social (and environmental) organisation in an attempt to solve the problem of player-killing. When a UO player like Grog or Naomi logs on, principally concerned with stocking their shops and rarely meeting other players, the satisfaction found may appear to be in the realm of individual fantasy.<sup>59</sup> But it is precisely because of social structural factors – because the choice of isolated play is located in a post-Trammel system that protects the shops from being raided, or their characters from being attacked, that the fantasy can be realised. ‘I enjoy not having to run away from other players trying to kill me,’ Naomi tells me. Grog agrees: ‘[Since Trammel] the play has been much more relaxed.’ Similarly, their enjoyment of running the shops depends on receiving custom and being recognised for good workmanship, just as online conflicts and disputes, impromptu or organised, allows players to cement their own identity in opposition to the radical others on the other side of the divide.

### ***The Broader Implications***

*Ultima Online* is not a conventional utopia. Nor is it a conventional cyberutopia. Yet it does seem to act as utopia for some of its players, and my discussion has given an interpretation as to how this might be the case, despite its apparent conservatism and conflict. Of course, the cautionary remarks that we apply to early visions of ‘cyberspace’ as utopia apply equally here – ‘UO’ is a far from heterogeneous entity, and there are many different ways of experiencing it that have not been covered here.

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<sup>58</sup> In the case of More’s text, Jameson suggests this is private property, and more specifically the human greed that generates private property as an institution (Jameson, 2004: 36).

<sup>59</sup> For example, Naomi tells me, ‘I tend to play by myself mostly, and the shop takes up most of my time.’ Despite this, she gains a large amount of satisfaction from the game – both through owning and running her shop, and from aspects of role-play. She told me how she would play her ‘Mouse’ character – ‘the most mischievous little girl’ – whenever she was feeling in a silly mood in real life; an approach that can easily be thought of in terms of ‘fantasy’.

What I have documented is a set of experiences that cut across the people and situations I happened to encounter, and whilst this gives a sense of the potential ways in which one might interact with UO, it makes no pretence to be a definitive account.

Nonetheless, the analysis throws up a number of points of wider relevance. Firstly, it problematises straightforward and received notions of ‘utopia’ within anthropology, opening the term up to include a far greater range of projects and, crucially, siting it within the imagination – rather than in structural changes, as Moore (1990) does, or dismissing it as a line of enquiry because utopia is ‘unrealisable’. In this way, a project, conservative or radical, can be seen as infused with utopianism by some within it, if not by all, and still be a utopia – and this is precisely what we see with UO. Simply concerning oneself with ‘the good’ might seem to make the category too broad to be of any use, but I would argue that rather than using utopia as an explanatory category, we instead take it as an object of enquiry, asking how people imagine their relation with themselves, each other and the world around them to be improving, and how this relates to both more broadly held values and the realities of social practice. It is this approach – tracing both how people describe their own experiences when ‘under the spotlight’ and how that fits with day-to-day interaction, that I have attempted to do here. The case study is also particularly troubling to the notion of ‘community’ that is at the heart of utopia as conventionally understood, given UO’s highly heterogeneous nature. However, as I have argued throughout, this diversity and conflict both reveals, and can be integral to, transformation which is, at base, a collective enterprise.<sup>60</sup> All the more reason, then, to start from the claim to ‘utopia’ and work backwards, rather than impose a label of utopia at first glance.

The material also addresses the debates in the anthropology and sociology of ‘cyberspace’. Though radical cyberoptimism fell from grace at the end of the 1990s, particularly regarding its claims to transformation of ‘community’ and ‘identity’, the UO case suggests that, at least for some players, there remains relevance in those theories after all.<sup>61</sup> The distinction is that none of these experiences come *de facto*

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<sup>60</sup> Indeed, this collectivity moves beyond a straightforward notion of ‘community’ to something which is perhaps closer to Callon *et al*’s (1986) concept of the ‘actor-network’. Players are dependent on the compliance not just of other humans, but also of their technology, and healthy functioning of the software code – as indicated by the spate of account cancellations due to excessive bugginess in March 2004.

<sup>61</sup> For example, Peaches’ transcending her disability operates along a similar logic to Haraway (1991) and Stone’s (1995b) arguments about transcending identity categories through technology, a stance elaborated with particular reference to disability in Murray and Sixsmith (1999). She, and several other players, emphasised the camaraderie of UO, appealing to notions of cyberspace ‘bringing people



with the Internet or UO: in fact, both are highly variable spaces, and the category 'cyberspace' is best removed from analytical discussions. Just as there is nothing defining about it, I see nothing unique about it either – the kinds of aspirations being played out in UO are ones with a long history, and which people have tried to enact in various different ways in both past and present.<sup>62</sup> The Internet differs from these, perhaps, in that it allows greater participation, a persistent world that is always there, and a perspective which is at once that of the individual in his/her study and a participant in a social group on screen. The novelty lies in the combination and the varied results it can bring. Exploring and accounting for this variability in the effects of all 'new communication technologies' presents us with many interesting research opportunities at the intersection of individual psychology and social anthropology. This paper makes but a small contribution in suggesting how UO participants might think about their own identities, the behaviour of those around them, and how this relates to their social action.

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together'. Players who play as lots of different types of character may also experience the kind of self-knowledge attested to by Turkle (1995).

<sup>62</sup> We could think, for example, of tabletop role-play games; watching and performing in various kinds of entertainment (Bloch, 1986; Dyer, 1999) cross-dressing, or the inversion of roles associated with the carnival (Stallybrass and White, 1999).

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