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Legend of the Red Dragon

Before there was Everquest, before there was Dark Age of Camelot, before there was Ultima Online, there was one multiplayer online role-playing game that dominated its competition. It didn't have fancy 3-D graphics or digital sound. Actually, it didn't even have any graphics at all. This game made a name for itself by stimulating players' imaginations and immersing them in an interactive, storybook world. This game was Legend of the Red Dragon (LORD).

In 1989, Bulletin Board System (BBS, a dial-up communications and file sharing system) operator (or sysop) named Seth Able created the idea for the game and programmed LORD in C on an Amiga computer. LORD was a "door game", a text-based game that the BBS software executed at the users request. Door games were a popular method for sysops to attract more users to their BBS, and LORD was definitely the most successful of any door game at accomplishing this objective. As the word "door" implies, LORD was like a doorway to another world.

Able broadcasted LORD on his BBS, and immediately the game was a hit. Able's BBS got so much traffic that other sysops requested a copy of the game for their own board. As Mr. Able recalls: "It was created just for my BBS, and eventually I got a lot of requests for it so I made it public." (2. Able Robinson interview) As Able distributed it to other sysops, news of the game spread like wildfire in the BBS gaming community. As

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Eric "Uberhund" Schwimmer, administrator of the official Legend of the Red Dragon

website and sysop of The Darklands BBS, recalls:

> "LORD was most likely one of the first "viral" phenomena. In an
> age where the number of users a Sysop had meant everything, LORD
> was a catalyst that brought in users by the hundreds. As soon as
> LORD gained popularity on Seth's board, there were dozens more
> Sysops clamoring to register the first version he released." (1.
> Schwimmer Interview)

In fact the game was so successful that between 1989 and 1997, 4 updated

versions of the game and numerous IGMs (In Game Modules) were created. Also, other

sysops and programmers created many similar games such as Usurper and Falcon to try

to capitalize on LORD's popularity. However, none of these spinoffs were able to capture

the mystique of the original LORD.

Good things rarely last forever, as was the case with LORD. As the popularity of

the internet grew and internet gaming became more and more accessible, BBS gaming

started to decline. Although many BBSs are still maintained and operated by their

original creators, many of the players have disappeared from the playing field.

Nevertheless, the characteristics that made LORD so appealing have been

incorporated into current popular online role-playing games. The feeling of immersion in

a whole new world and the high level of human-to-human interaction that LORD offered

is what most game designers today hope to achieve in their end product.

LORD brought players to a fantasy world where they took on the form of a

medieval character (either a knight, a thief, or a sorcerer). A player's character could

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shop for weapons and armor, attack forest creatures, find magical items, train against a level master, gamble at the tavern, or explore the LORD world through many secondary storylines that the game engine would present during each level. Through fighting enemies and exploring storylines, a player would gain experience points. When a player had enough experience, he or she could challenge the level master to a fight, and, if successful, would advance a level. When a player reached level 12, he or she could search for the Red Dragon and try to kill it. Killing the Red Dragon was the main objective, but there were so many other intricate objectives in the game that more advanced players would write player guides and FAQs at the request of less skilled players.

Part of the magic of LORD was the storybook nature of the gameplay. Even though the controls were limited to a few predefined commands enumerated in text menus, it was still incredibly exciting to go into the forest and find a note from a damsel in distress, a group of fairies bathing, or a talking decapitated head. These seemingly random occurrences gave the player a feeling that they were actually taking part in a storybook fantasy. These intricacies are what made the game more than just random fighting sequences, and since the LORD had no graphics, without these events it would not have captivated players and achieved the popularity it did.

```
Legend Of The Red Dragon - Town Square
-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=
The streets are crowded, it is difficult to
push your way through the mob....

(F)orest                        (S)laughter other players
(K)ing Arthurs Weapons          (A)bduls Armour
(H)ealers Hut                   (V)iew your stats
(I)nn                           (T)urgons Warrior Training
(Y)e Old Bank                   (L)ist Warriors
(W)rite Mail                    (D)aily News
(C)onjugality List              (O)ther Places
(X)pert Mode                    (M)ake Announcement
(P)eople Online                 (Q)uit to Fields

The Town Square   (? for menu)
(F,S,K,A,H,V,I,T,Y,L,W,D,C,O,X,M,P,Q)

Your command, Ryan? [544:21] : █
```

The favorite side story of most male players was the "Flirt with Violet" option at

the Inn. Players could flirt with Violet, the bar maid, in the following ways, where the

letter in parentheses defines the key that produces that action:

FLIRTING WITH VIOLET		
ACTION	NEEDED CHARM	[Experience gained]
(N)evermind	0	0
(W)ink	1	5
(K)iss her hand	2	10
(P)eck her on the lips	4	20
(S)it her on your lap	8	30
(G)rab her backside	16	40
(C)arry her upstairs	32	40
(M)arry her	100	1000

```
"You need to have a certain charm to "get away" with the action.
Trying it without enough charm will get you rebuffed, and you'll
lose varying amounts of HP. If you have enough charm to get away
with taking violet upstairs you won't lose any HP but you won't
always be successful either. If you are successful you will get
credit for a lay. The other options always work if you have
enough charm." (5. Elson website)
```

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Flirting was like a whole other game inside LORD itself. It took charm, wisdom, and luck

to flirt successfully. Male players gained a special sense of pride from successfully

"carrying her upstairs," especially since the statistic "lay" was displayed on the public log

so all other users could see. However, "marrying her" was the most practically useful

option because Violet would bear children. When a player gained a child, the child would

follow him around until, inevitably, it got in the way during a fight. When this happened

the child would die, but would "wipe out 1/2 of [the] opponent's remaining hit points

before getting killed." (5. Elson website) This was quite beneficial when a player was

fighting a high level enemy, especially the most feared enemy of all, the Red Dragon.

Female players were not able to flirt with Violet, but instead, they could flirt with

Sethable (a conjunction of Seth Able), the bard, in a similar way.

Another important feature of the game was the capability it presented to interact

with other live, human players. Players had several means to form alliances with or battle

against other players. Also, players could see how they ranked in comparison to the skill

level of other players. This created a sense of pride in building up a high level character

and motivated players to fight each other to gain more experience and steal each other's

money. As LORD's popularity grew during its early days, sysops actually found that the

human-to-human interaction in LORD actually began to replace chat room interaction

because it offered the same capabilities plus more:

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You can do all the things you can in normal chat, plus you can
send "romantic messages" and have fights with other players,
pitting your online character against theirs. (1. Schwimmer
Interview)
```

Players could form alliances by giving advice, lending money, or even forming

marriages with players of the opposite sex. Lending money was the most effective way to

help another player because the items a player bought affected the attack strength and

defensive capabilities of their player as much as the level of the character itself. A low-

level player with a 400,000,000 gold piece Death Sword would have a significant

advantage over a similar level character with a 200 gold piece Stick. Loaning out money

was a sure way to protect an ally's character.

However, player-to-player battles were more fun and often times more rewarding

that player-to-player alliances. A successful attempt at killing another player would earn

the victor all the opponents' gold he was carrying and some experience points; however,

a loss would cause the defending character to gain similar rewards. Player-to-player

battles created long lasting grudges and offered the most incentive to develop the skills of

one's character. These battles could be accomplished in two ways: via a fight challenge

or an assassination attempt.

The fight challenges were fairly straightforward; one player would pick his

opponent from the list of available characters. These characters were either the characters

of currently online players or players who had logged off and left their character out in

the open. Players would then exchange attacks until one died or one successfully chose to

run away. The winner would gain the spoils and the loser would get a message when they

next logged on that a certain player killed them.

```
           Legend Of The Red Dragon 4.06 - Player Rankings

      Name                 Experience   Level   Mastered   Status
     ============================================================
  F T Lady Death                484      3                 Alive
    T Ryan                         1      1                 Alive

     Slaughter Other Players
     (S,L,E,W,R)  (? for menu)

     Your command, Ryan? [541:31] : S
     Who would you like to attack?

     (full or PARTIAL name)
     NAME: lady death

     You mean "Lady Death"? [Y] Y

     You hunt around for Lady Death...YOU FIND HER!
     She is brandishing a dangerous looking Short Sword.

     Attack Lady Death [Y] :Y


     ** PLAYER FIGHT **

     You have encountered Lady Death!!

     Your skill allows you to get the first strike.

     Your Hitpoints : 20
     Lady Death's Hitpoints : 45

     (A)ttack
     (S)tats
     (R)un

     (T)hieving Skills     (1)

     Your command, Ryan?  [A] :
```

Players who did not want to come back the next day and see their character dead

quickly learned to pay the innkeeper for a room; however, this did not protect them from

assassination attempts. The innkeeper could be bribed for the right amount of money to

give a player the key to another player's room. Killing players in their sleep was a costly,

but effective way to wipe out the competition.

Seth Able designed all these features to give the game a lasting appeal, even after

months of play, so that it continually attracted users to his BBS. Because he designed

LORD to run explicitly on the BBS platform, LORD's user interface was limited to text

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menus. Able found this tradeoff most favorable because text-based menus, not

uncommon to the gaming world in 1989, minimized the hardware requirements necessary

for playing LORD and forced the users to use their full imagination to really experience

the LORD world. Actually, the text-based nature was a critical factor in LORD achieving

the widespread popularity it did.

Text-based game play was perfect for BBS gaming because it did not exceed the

capabilities of the average hardware available at the time. Because only simple logical

structures were needed in the code, the game was not very CPU intensive, which was

good because the CPUs available in 1989 were extremely slow by today's standards.

Modems were also slow back then, so the text-based nature was crucial for players to be

able to play LORD in real time. Also, text-based menus made LORD available to a larger

segment of computer owners since there was no need for a fancy graphics card to play.

Also, the text-based nature of LORD caused players to fixate their attention and

imagination on the game world. This style of gaming requires the user to exercise more

imagination than a graphically intensive game because all the graphics in text-based

gaming occurs inside the players mind:

```
Well, imagine it like reading a book versus looking at a picture.
When many people read something in a book, they transpose
themselves as the active character and "imagine" the story
setting around them. This is much the same thing that happens
with L.O.R.D. Even jaded players, who have been belated pressing
the "L" for years, do it unconsciously. (1. Schwimmer Interview)
```

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LORD was similar to Eric Robert's "Mirkwood Tales" in this sense. LORD, like the

"Mirkwood Tales" was designed to have a fairy-tale feel and for an audience that

appreciated using their imaginations. Both games were solely text-based. Both games

required the player to use great imaginative powers to really experience the game fully,

and because of this, they both built loyal fan bases. This explains why there is still a

small minority of computer users who love to play LORD. Just as books have never lost

their audiences, even as Hollywood produces more and more elaborate, realistic special

effects, LORD might never lose its audience because it takes more imagination to play

than a modern game with elaborate 3-D graphics.

Also, Able's choice of producing LORD for the BBS presented him with

distribution options that directly increased LORD's popularity. BBSs presented a large,

cost-free distribution network that precisely reached the audience necessary to spread the

game, BBS sysops:

```
The game was distributed mostly through the filebone on FIDOnet,
a worldwide network of BBS systems which communicate with each
other via dialup-modems... Whereas most current "gamers" can just
visit a website or go to the nearest Electronics Boutique to get
their fill of the latest and greatest games, LORD was very much
self-perpetuating.  New LORD players were recruited almost
strictly via word of mouth, as playing the game required BBS
access, something relatively "hi tech" in the early 1990s. (1.
Schwimmer Interview)
```

Because of LORD's success on Able's BBS and because it was readily available, other

sysops saw the obvious incentive in running the game on their BBSs. Essentially, BBS

distribution took almost no effort on Able's part, and in return he found that other sysops

were pushing LORD heavily on their boards. This fueled the already growing hysteria over LORD that fixated BBS gamers for years to come.

Even though LORD has now lost most of its widespread following, the role-playing games that achieve the same level of success in today's video game market borrow heavily from the aspects of LORD that made it so successful. LORD was one of the first multiplayer games to allow players to actually live virtual lives. Players were not restricted to just fighting monsters and buying items, they could perform many of the actions they would in their normal lives in the virtual game world.

> The first mega-popular door game released (and most likely still
> the most popular), LORD was the FIRST of the "online role playing
> games" and might possibly have played a role in the development
> of such giants as DikuMUD (the first Multi-User Dungeon), and
> other later online role-playing environments (Diablo, Everquest,
> etc). (1. Schwimmer Interview)

The main difference that separates multiplayer role-playing games like Everquest and Ultima Online from current games of other genres is the attention and importance place on events that occur in normal, everyday life. LORD was the first game that placed such importance on these characteristics. In LORD, players could chat at the tavern, gamble, and do other activities that involved virtual interaction with human players. Similarly, in games like Everquest and Ultima Online players can choose to partake in virtual activities that they also might perform in everyday life. Whether it is playing board games with other members of the gaming community, reading virtual books, or even baking virtual bread for online friends, current multiplayer role-playing games are putting

more and more emphasis on all the regular aspects of daily life and less emphasis on

fighting. While the activities available in these games are different, the attention to

community oriented play likely originated from LORD.

LORD also played a crucial role in widening the demographic of computer users

who used BBSs, and in doing so, may have had a small influence in setting the stage for

widespread internet use. Before LORD was introduced in 1989, expert computer users

who needed access to file-sharing or message group capabilities mainly generated BBS

traffic. Most recreational computer users either were oblivious or apathetic toward BBSs.

When LORD was released by Able in 1989, the situation began to change:

```
LORD added an element of entertainment that had been missing from
bulletin board systems, which previously had consisted mostly of
message groups and file bases.  LORD paved the way for the myriad
of door games to follow, which would be one of the reasons while
bulletin boards are still sustained today… Door games gave the
BBS demographic a complete makeover (often bringing in some
rather immature people).  Where people had been using BBSs solely
as a group communications method, there were now a lot of people
that were just there for the games, which increased the level of
competitiveness on most boards and decreased the amount of
serious discussions. (1. Schwimmer Interview)
```

LORD brought users who were more interested in the entertainment capabilities of BBSs,

and in doing so, it expanded the user base that generated BBS traffic to include people of

all ages and gender. Many of these users were getting their first taste an online

atmosphere: "Indeed, I believe that most BBS users were not aware of the Interet

(DarpaNet) at the time of its birth, let alone the few years of growth it experienced later."

(Schwimmer Interview) They were learning what it was like to chat via computers and

how to interact in competitive online environments like door games. The capabilities and

resources they found on BBSs helped to define their expectations of an online

environment. As the internet became publicly accessible, it sparked interest in the already

tech-savvy BBS users:

> For the most part, I believe that BBS users were able to
> transition over to the web more gracefully than a new user was
> able to comprehend it… While the development of BBS's and the
> Internet were fairly independent, I believe that that BBS's did
> have an influence on the demand for a global internet, albeit a
> small one. For the most part, I think BBS users were content
> with what they had, and when the web came along, it was more of a
> happy coincidence, instead of something that they had been
> pushing for. (1. Schwimmer Interview)

BBS users were presented with another communications medium that was far more

commercially expandable and sometimes much cheaper (BBS were dial-up, so the cost of

being online sometimes equated that of a long distance call), and also offered far more

flexibility as an entertainment medium. Because of this, BBS users began to migrate

toward the internet. Many of the players who found their interest piqued and their

creativity stimulated by LORD have either grown out of their gaming phase or turn to

more 3-D intensive games that have multiplayer capabilities. BBSs are now becoming a

relic of the past. In fact, much BBS traffic is now dependent on the internet:

> The future of BBSs is DEPENDENT on the internet, as most bulletin
> boards today receive the majority of their calls via telnet, and
> transmit their InterBBS mail packets via SMTP (Simple Mail
> Transfer Protocol). (1. Schwimmer Interview)

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By now, only the die-hard BBS users actively use BBSs on a regular basis: the

superior flexibility of the internet has caused a massive shift in communication medium.

Many of these die-hard users still prefer the close-knit nature of BBS to the vast

wilderness of the internet.

```
BBSs have and continue to be a very social and close-knit
community. Everyone has a username, and just about anything you
do reveals your username to everyone who can observe your
actions, so you can't be an anonymous specter like you can on the
Internet.  With this exception, though, the Internet is basically
superior to BBSs in most ways, being technologically more
scalable, more culturally diverse, and better suited to business
needs. (1. Schwimmer Interview)
```

These communities are comfortable and secure places to chat compared to internet chat

rooms, but the other uses that created widespread appeal seem to have gone out of

fashion.

LORD was quite influential in the development of multiplayer role-playing games

and made its mark on the history of communications medium, yet, most computer users

nowadays remain unaware of its existence. Like BBSs, LORD's day in the sun has

passed. However, there is no denying that LORD represented a crucial step in the

evolution of game design. Even today, LORD retains its loyal following, while other

games that benefited or exploited LORD original and creative qualities dominate

multiplayer online gaming. These followers appreciate the imagination required to enter

the text-based gaming world.

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Comparing LORD to a current online-role-playing game (i.e. Ultima
Online) is a bit like comparing a book to a television show of
the same genre.  Where a game like UO provides all the graphics
for you and pretty much defines the world your player exists in,
a text-based game such as LORD allows you to use your
imagination, allow each player to suit the game to their own
desires.  Give the choice between playing a intensely graphical
game such as UO, or a text based one such a LORD, a surprisingly
large number of people still prefer the text based games over the
graphical ones. (1. Schwimmer Interview)
```

Even the LORD players who prefer the 3-D environment of current games to that

of LORD remember LORD with a special sense of nostalgia. Even though LORD seems

to be a part of the "past" of game design, it surely deserves credit as the predecessor of

modern role-playing games.

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