

# “People of the Oak”

## (an Ultima Online in-game theology<sup>1</sup>)

### A Treatment of a New Media<sup>2</sup> Work<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Following the rising popularity of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), a number of religious communities of various types have emerged within the ‘game-space’ of various systems such as Everquest and Ultima Online. Many of these are simply extensions of existing faiths and ritual into the game-space (Schroeder 1999). Some groups have even used digital worlds as a channel for evangelism – one Christian game review advocates that “[w]e can take forth our God, even in a fantasy world... because the people there aren't just fantasies, they are people with souls. ... ‘Everquest’ is a great place to preach the gospel.” (Proctor 2000)

People of the Oak is an instance of another type of in-game religion – one that originates and is constrained to remain within the game world. The earliest documented example of such a religion was the Order of the Holy Walnut, within the Habitat virtual world (Morningstar and Farmer, 1990). More contemporary examples include the Utherian Congregation (Warcraft) and the satirical Holy Order of the Llamas (Ultima Online). Importantly, none of these religions was built into the game by the creators – they have emerged organically through the activity of players.

Despite the absence of literature and research into the area, a number of areas of theory can be brought to bear when analysing online in-game religions. These areas include the study of social institutions and the discourses that surround and empower them (Foucault 1978), as well as literature on online communities of interest (Rheingold 1994; Turkle 1995), social movements (Castells 1997; Castells 2001; Meikle 2002; Melucci 1995), and the spread of ideas or ‘memes’ (Ayers 1999; Boyd 2002).

<sup>2</sup> The study of new media initially focussed on the technologies involved. Following this first phase, academic research has expanded to examine the social implications on these technologies. One particular area of study has been the emergence of social structures and institutions within ‘virtual’ spaces (Rheingold 1994; Turkle 1996; Wallace 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Work is a term often used to refer to the way in which individuals make their living. It also carries the connotation of a specific ‘calling’ to which an individual is inclined. This is made more explicit in the theological use of the term, where ‘works’ refers to acts of piety performed as part of observance of religious belief. “Now if Timotheus come, see that he may be with you without fear: for he worketh the work of the Lord, as I also do.” (Corinthians I, 16:10)



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These documents<sup>5</sup> are sourced from the “People of the Oak” archives<sup>6</sup> in the Skara Brae Monastic House of Oak<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> A core messianic parable would be a cornerstone of most in-game religions, and the success of a religion would partly depend on the qualities of that parable. “Would-be parable makers tend to fall into hokey oracular cadences or some other highly mannered style. ... Writers of parables often neglect the first necessity – to tell a good story well.” (Stern 1991, p.169)

<sup>5</sup> One of the most significant challenges with developing in-game social institutions in MMORPGs is the lack of textual in-game materials. Environments such as Norrath (Everquest) and Britannia (Ultima Online) tend to be almost exclusively oral cultures outside of a limited set of textual resources created by the developers (such a scrolls and maps) and rigidly defined skills (such as ‘inscription’, allowing scribes to write spells onto blank scrolls).

<sup>6</sup> As a result of limitations to in-game texts, much of the more complex institution building (particularly the development of in-game Guilds) occurs in player maintained websites. These sites are ‘out-of-game’, but often ‘in-world’ through ‘in-character’ content. Such sites form repositories for information regarding social institutions – membership requirements, activities, norms, goals, and so forth.

<sup>7</sup> With much of the detail making up the social underpinnings of the religion existing in an out-of-game site, it is important to identify a central location for the religion within game-space. This forms a point for congregation, and a destination for pilgrimage. Building an imposing physical structure raises the social visibility of the organisation, and the existence of such a structure forms part of the cultural capital of the religion.



## The Parable of the Carpenter and his Daughter<sup>8</sup>

Many years ago, in a small hamlet at the foot of the mountains south of Skara Brae, a carpenter<sup>9</sup> practiced his trade. His mother had given him the name William<sup>10</sup>, for his father, who passed away when the carpenter was but a small boy.

The carpenter lived in a modest cottage with his wife, and their young daughter Catherine<sup>11</sup>. By day the he would make chairs, chests, doors, spear shafts. But every eve he would spend with Catherine, telling her stories of heroes past and carving wooden dolls to amuse her.

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<sup>8</sup> Ernest Bormann's 'Symbolic Convergence Theory' suggests that groups derive a sense of group consciousness from the sharing of common stories (Griffin 1991). Parables and other narrative formats are excellent tools for group formation in that they facilitate retelling, which in turn serves to strengthen the group identity.

<sup>9</sup> The selection of an available in-game occupation is important, as it situates the parable within game-space. Players will be familiar with other carpenters, and may even have carpentry skills themselves. The availability of the skills and objects described in the parables are important not only because they add credibility to the narrative, but because these skills and objects play a part in the ritual practice of worship.

The selection of carpentry also alludes to the story of Christ. The intention here is not to draw comparison between the two, but to 'borrow' some of the significance connected to the story of Christ, subtly helping the reader to experience this as a religious messianic parable.

<sup>10</sup> As a carpenter, owning his own workshop, the protagonist is a 'freeman' or 'freeholder' within the context of the feudal structure of Britannia under the sovereign Lord British. Hence, Free Will is a subject.

<sup>11</sup> One significant failing in most (if not all) MMORPGs is that families and life-stage development are overlooked. It is not possible for players to play a child or to age in any significant way. Familial relationships are not supported within game structures, and while numerous weddings have occurred online, the pragmatic details of living together in game-space in any meaningful sense are a disincentive to forming family groups.

For the purposes of this parable, the use of children is deemed necessary. This clash with game reality is partly mollified by the fact that children do exist as non-player characters (NPCs), meaning that players may at least have come into contact with them.

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Many nights, the carpenter would sit quietly by the fire, watching his daughter at play with the dolls he had carved for her. Then one night, in the second moon of the harvest, as he sat watching her at play, he suddenly saw the Truth.

He saw the doll, in a world of his daughter's making. And he saw the way she smiled, frowned and laughed as she led the doll through adventures crafted from the stories he had told her. He saw the way the doll came to life in her hands, and realised too that the doll had its part to play in his daughter's happiness. He saw all this, and he saw that he too, his wife, his daughter, all were merely dolls to some greater purpose<sup>12</sup>.

The carpenter returned to work the next morn, his head full of the vision of the Truth. His work was hollow, without joy, as he found that he no longer knew why he toiled in the workshop. If he were but a doll to some greater master, surely there would be some purpose greater than the tables and stools his customers required. For seven days he worked, but found none of his former passion in his trade<sup>13</sup>. On the eighth day, the carpenter packed a small set of belongings, bid his family farewell, and set out to the North in find a way to live, in the light of this new Truth.

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<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the in-game avatar is merely a doll to be enjoyed in an incredibly complex game, or perhaps players are buying something more when they pay a monthly subscription fee, some form of expression of themselves, an extension into a world where they can escape limitations they feel oppressed by, a world where heroes still venture forth on quests, and minstrels gather in the firelight to sing ballads of their adventures.

“[A]n avatar experiences *for* a master; it is that prosthesis through which the master feels his or her way through a world he or she cannot physically enter, and feels emotionally the presence of others, a presence entirely mediated through, and therefore entirely dependent upon, the identity of his or her avatar.” (Egginton 2003, p.9, emphasis in original)

<sup>13</sup> This loss of pleasure in his craft (and its subsequent rediscovery) may harmonise with the experience of many MMORPG players who see the game as an escape from the limiting scope of creativity and craftsmanship within modern cultures. “Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to the division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman.” (Marx and Engels 1967, p.87)



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The carpenter travelled for eighteen moons<sup>14</sup>. He worked as apprentice to a scribe in the city of Yew. He defended townsfolk against bandits in the wild lands west of the bay of Minoc<sup>15</sup> and sought audience with priests at the shrine of Justice. In the heart of winter, he fed the poor and infirm in the slums on the island city of Nujelm. Yet none of these filled him with the sense of rightness that he had felt that night watching his daughter play with her dolls. His greater purpose eluded him. In his heart he knew that, in the heavens, a being far beyond what he could understand guided his path, but that it was his work to strive to live by the way of that being. And the path was not yet shown him.

By the end of the following harvest, the carpenter has lost hope. Too ashamed to return to his family, he made his home in an abandoned shelter under a tall Oak tree by a small lake to the West of the shrine of Sacrifice. He spent many days sitting by the great Oak, mourning the loss of his path, when in his heart he knew the Truth.

One morning, as he sat by the lake, a young girl approached him to bring bread from the nearby town. He thanked her, and offered to tell her a story of Lord British's conquest of Blackthorn in return. The girl sat with him by the lake, and as he told the story, he whittled a doll for her out of a cast off piece of the great Oak that gave them shade.

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<sup>14</sup> The journey is a traditional narrative arc for messianic stories, as well for stories generally. "It's an ancient idea – life's a journey, a pilgrimage, a trip. It's only natural that stories take this shape, and that readers like to be taken along." (Stern 1991, p.36)

<sup>15</sup> The use of established in-game locations reinforces the 'reality' of the story. These are locations that players may have visited, or heard other stories about, and thus the parable is knit into the world of Britannia. "*Place* situates the story in your reader's mind. Fiction that seems to happen in no particular place often seems not to take place at all." (Stern 1991, p.174, emphasis in original)



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As he shaped the doll in his hands, he felt the grain of wood under his course fingertips. His humble tools shaped the wood, bringing forth the form of a doll, which the carpenter knew from many years work had lain dormant in the wood from the beginning<sup>16</sup>. And as he carved, he felt himself fill with the sure knowledge that this was indeed his calling. All else had been folly and distraction, for he was a carpenter. It was this, that the greater being who guided him wished. There was no single great answer, he suddenly knew, but a path that each must find for themselves<sup>17</sup>.

That day, after the girl had returned with her doll to the town, the carpenter packed up his belongings and began to retrace his steps back southward. With him he took several pieces of the Oak tree. And when he had occasion, he would stop and dwell with those he felt were ready to understand the truth. He would teach them of the greater beings that looked over and guided them. And he would teach them of their need to repay this debt by striving to find the true calling that was the desire of that being. Many scorned him, but some stayed and listened. And in each place, where he had planted the seed of the Truth, he would leave a doll, carved from the wood of the Oak.

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<sup>16</sup> In understanding the appeal and relevance of this theology, it is necessary to appreciate the blurring of traditional distinctions between the subject (assumed to be the player) and the object (the avatar). The two can in fact be seen to form an ambiguous assemblage, a notion present in many religions where divinity is described as acting 'through' believers. "[A woodworker] is conscious of the grain and is directed by it. She reads and interprets it. What she reads are signs. ... The woodworker brings certain qualities of the wood to a certain expression. ... Although the activity of the woodworker may seem to occur on a conscious level as a 'will' or 'intention' translated into action, it is no more subjective than the sign was merely objective." (Massumi 1992, p. 11)

<sup>17</sup> Players come to games such as Ultima Online with a diverse range of personal goals. Unlike prescriptive games, where the objectives are clearly defined, many MMORPGs provide a breadth of possible experience. What one player finds rewarding another may find tedious. When players find a rewarding activity, they become immersed in that particular aspect of the play – whether it be slaying dragons or tanning hides. This immersion has been analysed in video games by Sherry Turkle (1984), who describes a "highly focused, highly charged state of mind" (p. 83) that players achieve during play, where they experience a direct connection with objects in the game space – a continuity between mind, body, and game (p. 85). Brian Massumi (2002) suggests that intensity of experience is a self-affirming quality, that we experience a belonging within the world through our embeddedness and immersion (p. 242). Such ideas begin to indicate why players find certain activities within MMORPGs so fulfilling.



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Arriving back at the hamlet of his youth, he greeted his family, and life returned to the way it had been. The carpenter still carved dolls for his daughter, who grew taller with each passing season. He still spent his days in the workshop, crafting the works of the everyday needs of the town. But every so often, a stranger would come to the town, and visit the workshop. And the carpenter would sit with them at the hearth, and speak of the search for their calling, and the Truth of being.

And the works of the carpenter were created with an artifice rarely seen, as his hands were guided in the true way by the greater being that looked over him. He learned ever more of the patterns that lay in the wood, and the ways of calling forth their form. His creations, simple benches, tables and stools, were much praised and in demand throughout the land<sup>18</sup>. And to this day, while the carpenter is now but a distant memory<sup>19</sup>, it is said that when Lord British sits to dine, he drinks from the wooden cup of a humble carpenter.

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<sup>18</sup> Relics (or 'rares' as they are often known) are of considerable importance within Ultima Online. By creating such physical remnants of the messianic parable, the veracity of the story is reinforced. In addition, such relics serve as both status symbols for members of the religion and as possible objectives for quests.

<sup>19</sup> While it would be possible to create the carpenter as an actual character, it would be more advisable to generate the impression that the religion was an established institution. To do this, the founding story is placed in a vague but reasonably distant past. Lord British provides a viable link to this past as an essentially immortal character.



## Leading a good life<sup>20</sup>

In our lives, shall we find each our own true calling, shining from the greater being who guides our path. And in accordance with the way of the carpenter, we, People of the Oak shall teach and live by the ways of the Truth;

1. In our hearts and with our hands shall we belong to the People.
2. The craft of each of us shall bring forth the form of the doll<sup>21</sup>.
3. When we are shown the Truth, we shall set forth to travel for twelve moons<sup>22</sup>, to discover that purpose for which we have been brought into this world, and that purpose shall we make our worship<sup>23</sup>.
4. We shall spread the word of Truth, that more may understand<sup>24</sup>
5. Our workshops shall be our temples, and each shall worship there, by the wheel of the potter, the oven of the baker, and the fields of the shepherd.
6. At the door of our temples will we show the sign of the doll, and thus will we be known to others of the Truth<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> A set of precepts such as these provides guidelines for living within the game. While this may seem limiting, it also gives a framework to the role-playing, as a shared set of social norms. ). Erik Davis alludes to this need when he asks whether “we identify with our online selves because they are as liberated as we want to be, or because they are as constrained as we really are?” (1998, p.221)

<sup>21</sup> In this way, the doll manufacture (through various means) becomes a technology proprietary to the group. Ideally this could be established through the creation of a process that could be implemented by players in-game (perhaps in the form of a customised ‘macro’).

<sup>22</sup> Much play within MMORPGs derives from quests that the character must complete to progress in various ways. The notion of a pilgrimage (particularly with a specific goal or destination) forms an ideal way for players to become involved with the religion. In a very real sense, this type of quest gives ‘meaning’ and ‘structure’ to their game-play experience.

<sup>23</sup> The notion of empowering players to worship in a diverse range of forms will appeal to the various natures of play within Ultima Online. It will also challenge the creativity of players. A good meme (a transmissible belief or idea) will be participatory – “a simple concept that [is] easy to execute yet allow[s] for rich elaboration.” (Boyd 2002, p.371)

<sup>24</sup> A key part of any successful meme is a motivation for self-replication. Within many religions, this takes the form of evangelism. To be successful, a meme must be “mobile, easily replicable, and well suited to the particular vectors of the media ecosystem that it has to travel” (Boyd 2002, p.373), it “must eventually take on a life of its own, demonstrating self-sustaining and self-evolving properties.” (p.375)

<sup>25</sup> In this way, the doll becomes a symbol for the group – part of the shared semiotic system around which the community is built.





## Carols<sup>26</sup> for Carpenters

(public notice on display in carpenter's workshops around Skara Brae)

When Birds Suddenly Appear, at the first harvest moon, People of the Oak will gather at the Carpenters Workshop by the Old Mill.

Service shall be led by Master Carpenter<sup>27</sup> O'Donahue. There will be carol singing, and gifting of dolls<sup>28</sup>.

This is a time to gather<sup>29</sup>, to have others of the faith Close to You, to share the stories<sup>30</sup> of the Truth and your own worship, to work the Oak with others, and to celebrate the joy of finding your true calling.

All are welcome.

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<sup>26</sup> Oral ritual forms an important aspect of play in MMORPG. An in-game religion should provide opportunities for ritualistic behaviour – both individual and collective. Alberto Melucci (1995) uses the notion of developing 'collective identity', a process whereby a 'collective actor' (such as an activist movement or religious group) is formed through a shared language and cognitive model, a set of relationships allowing interaction and communication, and a degree of emotional investment. Rituals, gatherings and norms are important factors in the formation of a collective identity.

<sup>27</sup> The process of gaining experience (or 'levelling') is key to game-play. To facilitate emotional investment in the community, various levels of status could be constructed, along with a process for progression. Again, this provides the framework for goal based in-game activity that players can engage in.

<sup>28</sup> Leveraging existing celebrations and forms of ritual is a straightforward way of quickly building a set of norms and behaviours within an online community. The ritualised exchange of goods is another form of communication that can solidify the communal nature of the experience for players.

<sup>29</sup> Physical gatherings in defined game spaces are an important aspect of in-game communities. Choosing appropriate venues is important for this as the architecture of the venue can have a significant affect on the flow of behaviour (Heim 2001).

<sup>30</sup> Sharing such stories brings the community together around a shared set of narrative forms. Lisbeth Klastrup (2003) suggests that a major function of online game-spaces is to provide "a stage for an experience of [a] shared lived world." (Functions of World, para. 8) Further, this experience becomes a series of compelling stories, the telling and exchange of which "seems closely related to the experience of the emergence of a social space" (para.8) such as the communal network of an in-game religion.



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