

Re(g)ifying Lord British

Lord British is one of the most renowned figures in the computer gaming industry. Born Richard Garriott in Cambridge, England, and raised in the United States, he developed his first fantasy computer game at nineteen. He went on to found Origin Systems, and develop the hugely successful Ultima series, culminating in Ultima Online. He now lives in Austin, Texas – in Britannia Manor, a custom-built castle complete with moat, dungeons, and a celestial observation dome.

Lord British is a traveller from Earth, who passed through a dimensional gate to arrive in the mediaeval realm of Sosaria. Through virtuous heroism he built the kingdom of Britannia, over which he now reigns. A benevolent monarch, possessed of immortality and divinity, his public appearances are widely attended and celebrated. He resides in a castle complete with moat, dungeons, and a celestial observation dome.

Lord British is a player-driven character in Ultima Online, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game, where he reigns over the persistent digital world of Britannia and digital subjects, numbering in excess of two hundred thousand.

Lord British is a creative product, intellectual property of Richard Garriott. This product has been licensed to Origin Systems for use within the Ultima Online gaming environment, following Garriott's departure from Origin Systems (now owned by Electronic Arts). The details of this agreement are proprietary.

From this overview, it becomes apparent that unpacking the nature of Lord British is not a trivial task. At first glance, he appears to be plural, multiple, and fragmented. It is perhaps useful to consider British as an assemblage of disparate organs somehow forming a whole. Lord British is partly some aspect of Richard Garriott, partly a piece of the Ultima Online system and community, partly the intellectual capital asset of Origin Systems.

This raises the question of how such borrowed organs constitute a body of any type, particularly when they do not appear to be spatially (or even temporally) coordinated. What are the relations between the social, legal, theatrical, physical, and digital elements of British that create coherence, and what are the processes by which these relations come into being – how is Lord British reified?

While he is (at least partially) instantiated using new media technologies, Lord British draws on a cultural heritage of feudalism and royalty. He also seems at first glance somewhat theatrical, and informed by our recent notions of celebrity.

Perhaps the apparently fictional Lord British can be compared to the far from solid flesh of Prince Hamlet. To do so would suggest that British is merely a role, one that has been 'performed' both online and off by Garriott, and will perhaps be performed by others at Origin Systems in his absence. Such an interpretation is challenged by the lack of a defined text – the performance is composed extemporaneously as British is 'lived' from moment to moment, more analogous perhaps to contemporary theatrical workshopping.



RE(G)IFYING LORD BRITISH – Brett Rolfe (2004)

A alternative comparison would be to the Prince of Wales (at present Charles Windsor). In distinguishing between the Prince of Wales and Charles Windsor, it becomes necessary to ask many of the same questions as when distinguishing between Lord British and Richard Garriott. Should Windsor abdicate, and renounce title, he would still exist, as would the Prince of Wales. They would simply no longer coincide. This is similar in many ways to the departure of Garriott from Origin Systems, and their negotiation of the 'use' of Lord British.

To find another possible foil for British, we need to step closer to the throne and move from the Prince to The King (Elvis Presley). While the persona of The King was arguably derived from the 'natural' stage presence of Presley, that persona lives on in the plethora of performers paying tribute to his legend. And if today's impersonators merely rekindle the nostalgic glow of the real King, the same could be said of his own latter concerts, where Presley appeared to be striving to recall or sustain a character that he himself had created.

Central to each of these comparisons is that Lord British is constituted through a series of performances that are seen by observers to be consistent. Importantly, this is not dissimilar to "the plain, old, everyday self [which] is an actor playing an ordinary role in the ordinary way" (Massumi, 2002, p.48) - the distinction between a 'real' and 'contrived' performance is an ideological dichotomy (Goffman, 1959, p.77-78). In his performances, Lord British implicitly asks others to believe his character, and to accept the resultant identity as real (p.28). Further, British recognises himself in the recognition of his subjects (Massumi, 2002, p.48) – the monarch is a creation in the minds of the people (Ponsonby, in Goffman, 1959, p.75)

Enacted over time, in various spaces, using various performative technologies (from clothing to written dialogue), British's repeated performances invoke a body. This is a body as Butler describes, "not a 'being', but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field" (1990, p.177).

Such causality challenges the traditional understanding of the individual as an internal, stable locus of agency, from which various social roles and performances arise (Buttler 1990, p.22) a notion that Bourdieu observes is facilitated by "all sorts of institutions of integration and unification of the self" (2000, p.299). To reverse this is to suggest that corporeal social discourse is poetic, that it in fact fabricates and sustains the very identity which we presume it expresses (p.173).

Such an approach defamiliarises both the notions of 'person' and 'body', as well as the relation between them. Our identity becomes the result of discursive practices, arising from cultural performances inscribed on the surface of a body that remains nebulously defined. This identity becomes real through social consensus, through the belief of others in our performance. Perhaps it comes as little surprise then, that like Tinkerbell, Lord British is at our mercy – without our belief he is nothing. What may not be so readily apparent is that the same is true of each and every one of us.



RE(G)IFYING LORD BRITISH – Brett Rolfe (2004)

References

Boudieu (2000) 'The Biographical Illusion' in *Identity: A Reader* (eds. P. du Gay, J. Evans & P. Redman), Sage Publications, London.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, London.

Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, Pelican Books, Middlesex.

Massumi, B. (2002) *Parables for the Virtual*, Duke University Press, Durham.

