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Together

Richard Garriott flopped onto his bed in the small, two-bunk dorm room at Oklahoma University and surveyed his options. There didn't seem to be many. His parents had dropped him off here, seven hours from his home and high school friends, so he could attend a seven-week summer computer camp. He could think of more tedious-sounding things, but this camp was already high up on his list. He was used to summers full of weird art projects and near total freedom, and the little bit of programming he'd previously experienced hadn't captured his imagination. He kicked the bag he'd flung on the floor as he'd come in, a new feeling of dread washing over him. Already, this felt like a lonely place. He was trapped for seven weeks with computer nerds.

The 16-year-old was actually looking forward to tinkering with the machines using his rudimentary programming skills, but he didn't think it was worth losing almost his whole summer. This was the summer of 1977, and while computers were still out of reach for most of the country, Richard's parents had wanted to make sure he was on the cusp of the technological revolution. The family—and really, most of the kids that Richard had grown up with—already lived in something that looked a little like the future, with rocket scientists and astronauts as their neighbors in suburban Houston. His own father, Owen, was an astronaut and had temporarily shared the title for the longest space flight any human had ever taken. Owen had taken his whole family to Palo Alto, California, for a year of study at Stanford University in 1976 (Richard's parents had gotten the

computer religion after this). Richard had done some work on the computer terminals that had been placed in every classroom in Palo Alto's technologically savvy high school, but he hadn't been nearly as impressed as his parents.

Despite his trepidation, the Garriotts packed their son off to O.U. The other camp kids didn't share his mixed emotions. Before long, there was a knock on his dorm room door. He roused himself and answered it. A small group of boys was there.

"Hi," one of the boys said.

"Hello," he replied, a bit intimidated but determined to make friends while he was here.

"Did you say hello? Nobody from around here says hello," one of the boys said, frowning a little. "You must be from Britain, so we'll call you British."

Richard had been born in England, but his parents had moved to Houston when he was a baby, and he had no discernable accent at all. He had no idea what the boy was talking about. This certainly wasn't helping to quell his desire to run down the hallway, down the 10 flights of stairs, and out on the highway toward home.

"Okay, you're British, then," the boy said, tagging him with a nickname that would follow him for the next 26 years. "Welcome to camp."

He realized what was happening. It was a welcoming committee, and simultaneously a naming committee. In this group, he'd be known as *British*. Fine. The group moved on to the next door, repeating the sequence. Knock. Answer. Bestow a nickname. Move along. Resigned, Richard followed as the group made its way down the boys' corridor, through the main lobby, and into the girls' corridor. By the end of the circuit, everyone had a new name.

The rest of the day was taken up in meetings. Meetings about rules. Meetings about courses. Meetings about the campus. The day, which had started miserably, had begun looking promising when he'd met the girls, but had turned sour again until he found himself in the common area after dinner. There he noticed a small group of students huddled together at a table playing some kind of game, surrounded by soda cans and crumpled candy wrappers. He was intrigued. He'd already decided that the way to

make the best of his time at programming camp was to try to make a game, and it looked like these others might be allies.

He sauntered over but didn't say anything, hovering for a minute behind the person who appeared to be leading the game. This boy had a stapled pamphlet laid out on the table in front of him, and he was slowly describing a landscape and scenario. The other players responded in turn, describing actions—exploring, opening doors, even fighting monsters. Every once in a while someone would roll some weird-shaped dice that would resolve some conflict. Richard was confused. There was no game board or little pieces to move around. If this game had rules or an immediate objective, they certainly didn't seem obvious. The players were simply talking about fighters, dragons, dwarves, elves, and magic. It sounded a little like the books he'd read earlier in the year, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

After several minutes had passed, Richard leaned down, tapped the leader on the shoulder, and asked him what they were doing.

"It's Dungeons & Dragons," the boy responded, not looking up. "It's a role-playing game." That didn't help much. Richard had never heard of the game, and he associated role-playing with his occasional acting in local theater. He stuck around for a little longer, listening to the game unfold, while the Dungeon Master—that was the leader's title—wove the tale. Other students drifted over, too, and before long the original group had to stop and explain in more detail.

Richard soon joined a game, and others did as well. By the second night, the little lobby was filled with several gaming groups, all telling each other stories of dragons and skeletons and orcs. Girls were as eager as the guys to play, and they threw themselves into playing their characters with just as much bravado. The role-playing helped them talk to each other in ways that shy high school kids might have had trouble doing otherwise. It was a little silly at first, pretending to be a dwarf or elf or magician, and "British" Garriott exchanged embarrassed grins with other players more than once, but once the stories started flowing they lost themselves in these magical worlds.

After the initial social awkwardness faded, other barriers fell. Among the first to go were the rules imposed by the gender-segregated halls. The

college-aged chaperone tasked with keeping boys and girls apart moved one of the female students into *his* room, and the other girls and boys quickly paired up. One enterprising student figured out a way to jimmy the locks that kept them out of the closed half of the dormitory, and soon the theoretically off-limit rooms had become hideaways or clubhouses for couples and gaming groups. Richard and his summer girlfriend laid claim to a particularly choice room with a door labeled "The Crypt," written in dripping, blood-red letters, and an interior with a full-room mural depicting a swamp creature about to abduct an oblivious half-naked woman.

Programming, though, was the reason the teens were there. They were learning to control computers. They worked in the FORTRAN computer language, feeding punch cards into the big machines as a means of programming them. The programs they learned were simple, certainly not enough to fulfill Richard's vague notions of writing a game, but they hinted at a vast potential power.

Just as powerful was the shared social experience. People spoke the same language here. For the students, it was the first time experiencing this sense of community. They shared an implicit understanding that computers, programming, technology, fantasy, and role-playing games were okay. They weren't nerdy, dorky, or strange. The group just accepted these as perfectly logical and natural parts of their day, in the same way athletes practiced after school or cheerleaders did routines between bells. For Richard, the environment would prove to be deeply influential and bitterly hard to give up at the close of the seven-week camp.

"It was a summer of programming and girls," Richard would say later. "It was one of those pivotal moments. A lot of firsts happened there."

This series of collisions and discoveries would echo in the back of Richard's mind for the next 26 years, and in the process would help him transform the course of computer gaming as much as any other single figure in the business. The mix of computers, community, and game play he found in Oklahoma was a heady one, and the moment he left campus he resolved to mesh them further. He vowed to use his newfound power over the computer to create dungeon worlds as rich and frightening as anything Tolkien or the teenaged Dungeon Masters had come up with. The history of his efforts to repeat and extend his experiences here would ultimately shape the history of computer gaming and gaming communities.

It would take only a few years before "Lord British" was one of the most widely known figures in the young computer gaming pantheon, and his work would become only more influential from there. Large communities of players and programmers would build around his games. He, like other developers, would give game players a common language, give them a sense of shared and individual mastery over their environment that was often missing from their everyday lives. As computer game players grew from scattered pockets of programmers and computer hobbyists into sprawling global communities, his games and influence would be felt throughout. If his own profile was ultimately eclipsed, it would be because his experience and passions had become assimilated by the wider world.

He would play with the elements discovered in that 1977 summer camp—programming and role-playing—for the next quarter decade. But he was already familiar with the feeling of community he found here. It was no accident that this would be a running theme in his life and in his work. It had been a part of his life from the beginning.

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Richard grew up in a Houston neighborhood just a hop and a jump away from Johnson Space Center, where the National Air and Space Administration (NASA) influence could be felt everywhere. His father, Owen, was a former Stanford physics professor and Navy officer who had been tapped by the manned space flight program in 1965, and the Garriott family had quickly become a part of the tight-knit NASA circle. Their own immediate circle—Richard's two older brothers, Randy and Robert; a younger sister, Linda; and Helen, Richard's free-spirited artist mother—was even tighter. They'd all shared the national spotlight briefly in 1973, when Owen went up in Skylab 3 for 59 days, doubling the amount of time any human had been in space. Growing up in that kind of environment tended to undermine any kid's sense of the impossible.

The Garriott household had long been a mix between a mad scientist's laboratory and a surrealist artist's studio. Richard's father, a thin, mustachioed man with an angular, serious face, had routinely brought home expensive government toys from NASA headquarters, tinkering with them for days on end and taking them apart to see what made them work. When

he emerged in the evenings from his study, he often brought with him the coolest science project imaginable. In the mid '70s, years before weekend warriors would know what night vision goggles were, he brought home a prototype that the boys immediately strapped on and used to chase each other across the dark lawn outside.

One night, Owen appeared with a pair of glasses with special prisms that reversed the wearer's vision, flipping the world 180 degrees. If someone reached out their right hand, the glasses would make it appear as though the person were reaching with their left. The distortion was mind-wrecking for a time after the wearer donned the glasses, making it impossible to accomplish even the simplest task, like grabbing the handrail on the staircase. The space agency was using cats to test the glasses, studying how long it took the mind to adjust to radical vision problems, but Richard and his brothers were happy to serve as unofficial test subjects.

"It was like magic," Richard said later. "There was always something at our house. I didn't realize that this wasn't necessarily true in other places."

It was rare that Owen had the time or the inclination to work closely with his youngest son. Robert, Richard's serious-minded older brother, was closer to the reserved astronaut. When Richard and his father did work together, the results were impressive, however. Late in Richard's high school career, the two teamed up on a science fair project they dubbed "Wave Propagation with Computer Analysis." Owen had taught and studied electromagnetic theory and ionospheric physics, and he showed his son a little about how light and radio waves moved though air, water, and other substances. Richard, by that time, knew enough programming to create a fairly sophisticated simulation of radio waves' motion on the computer. Their combined efforts helped Richard win the U.S. National Science Fair and place fourth in an international competition.

If the practical-minded Owen was forthcoming with his scientific knowledge, he was decidedly less so with his own experiences, at least with his boys. Despite constant questions, Owen seemed reticent to talk about his trip into space. "My dad has never told me anything about being in space," Richard said, leaning back in his office chair years later and shrugging his shoulders slightly. "He once said it was kind of like scuba diving, but he never said anything with any kind of emotion."

The young Richard was much closer to his mother, an artist whose interests took her from pottery to silversmithing to painting and well beyond to conceptual art. Her garage workshop was always open to the kids, and Richard in particular took frequent advantage of the open-door policy, working with his mother on clay sculptures or little metal designs of his own. These were the little diversions, however—Helen thought big, and she wanted her sons to be just as ambitious. She taught the boys to be totally committed to their projects, a lesson the brothers willingly followed.

"I like to think that I do big projects," Richard said. "But I definitely acquired that drive from my mother."

There was the time, for example, that Helen helped Richard and his brother Robert with their Boy Scout model building. The trio decided to build an airplane in the backyard, starting with two-by-fours, shaping the skeleton, and then paneling the sides. They rigged the wing flaps with a pulley system so they could be opened and closed using a handle in the cockpit, which also came with a working gearshift and a movable steering stick. That was good, but it lacked a certain realism. They had completely jerry-rigged the entire plane, using what little knowledge they had about planes and their overactive imaginations, but it didn't fly—a fairly important prerequisite for planes. They wanted to build something that did more than just sit and look impressive.

The inspiration for something better came at the dinner table, where the boys would on rare occasions get a glimpse of life at NASA. One evening, Owen mentioned tests astronauts had to endure before being allowed into the cockpit of an actual spaceship. One of the toughest tests involved a G-Force accelerator that simulated the crushing effect of gravity several times stronger than Earth's—similar to what they would feel as their capsule catapulted out of the atmosphere.

At that point, a light bulb went on in Richard's head, and "The Nauseator" was born. Four feet long and two feet wide, the structure was built to spin whoever climbed into the little box 360 degrees, with the motion meant to be controlled by motors. They built the controls, which consisted of two joysticks that would in theory guide both horizontal and vertical motion. At the time, the boys believed they could turn this into a game, in which the "astronaut" could control the movements.

The engineering for the electronically controlled joysticks turned out to be far beyond the boys' capabilities, but the project wasn't a total waste. Brute force still worked where technology had failed them. Their friends would climb in, strap themselves down, and then with the help of three friends, the boys would spin the device in all directions, giving the astronaut the dizzy feeling of a plane spiraling out of control. In the anarchistic realm of childhood, this was something like the ultimate game. There was no point, other than not to throw up, and by those standards there weren't many winners. In the end, the thousand-pound behemoth took up much of their garage and was, in Richard's words, "staggeringly dangerous."

"We'd just spin the rings and you'd come out and recover feeling pretty good," Richard's older brother Robert said years later, half-giggling at the memory. "Then you'd get this stomach thing going after about 10 minutes, just when you thought you were going to be fine, and you'd just throw up all over the place. It was really staggering. Ten minutes. Every time."

These were the elements to which Richard added when he came home from Oklahoma with a newfound desire to make computer games. It proved to be a short step from the Nauseator to games that would sweep up dozens of people in his neighborhood, and put him on the path to a starring role in computer game history.

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With summer nearly over after the camp's end, Richard spent his waning free days building bike ramps and tree forts with his sister Linda and friend Keith Zabalaoui, who lived in a house behind the Garriotts'. But Richard couldn't shake the feeling he had had while playing D&D with his fellow students.

When school started up, he decided to start a group of his own. That first day, he tracked his friends down one by one, pitching them on the idea of a weekly role-playing game. He cornered Bob White. Then Elizabeth Froebel, Chuck Bueche, Rene Hans, and Zabalaoui. One by one, they said yes, although few had any idea what the game Richard was chattering about entailed. But, like Richard, they were a bit geeky and they lived close

enough to get to his house easily. They agreed to come over Friday, four days away.

Amped, Richard paced around the house on Friday evening. Word had spread throughout the school, and his small gaming group was now closer to a dozen. He'd spent the week huddled over his notebook paper, mapping his fantastical world. His mother, in particular, had loved the idea, and she prepared dinner and snacks. As the gamers arrived, Richard led them back to the formal dining room table, which the family rarely used. It was large enough for everyone to stretch out and eat while Richard wove a fantastic story. Hours passed, and the group continued playing, laughing, and talking, oblivious to the dawn sun peeking through the curtains and unaware of their heavy eyes.

Monday morning, the weekend gamers found each other before the school day began, anxious to relive their weekend game and plan the next one. Throughout the day, they'd see each other in the hallways, classes, and at lunchtime, and conversation turned to the game. Other friends overheard and poked their noses in, asking questions. Richard preached the game's virtues, as did the others. The next Friday, several more gamers showed up. The week after, another batch. Before the end of the first month of school, two games were underway—one in the formal dining room and one in the family's living room.

Word continued to spread throughout the school, first to the science and math geeks, and then, oddly enough, to other social cliques. Throughout the day, people would wander up to Richard and ask if they could spend the weekend with him. He was more than happy to have them. By winter, games were being played throughout the house, eventually forcing Helen out of her garage art studio. In its place, she set up two large ping-pong tables, minus their nets, to accommodate more gamers.

The Garriott home became ground zero for weekend gaming. Adventures would stretch into early Saturday mornings, and after brief rest periods for food and catnaps, they'd slowly pick up again in the afternoon. With so many players, the weekend gaming sessions took on a diverse personality. What started as a small group of hard-core geeks turned into a social cornucopia. By early 1978, parents started showing up with their

kids. The front porch became the recreation area for smokers and drinkers. The group garnered enough attention that the notoriously conservative Boy Scouts even asked Richard's eclectic group to become part of their organization.

The games quickly gained Richard a new reputation. He'd never been unpopular, but he didn't participate much in school activities outside the science fair. Athletics didn't much interest him, and social clubs weren't really his bag. He was one of the ordinary students that roamed the Clear Creek hallways, desperately trying to get through the day so he could go on to more interesting events. The weekend games changed that. He was Lord British now.

The stars of the weekend games were the Dungeon Masters, the storytellers who devised the adventures. The best game leaders could transport a room full of players sitting in a living room in Houston back in time to an ancient place where anything was possible. The only limitation was the imagination of the players, and these gamers, in particular, had grown up in a place where the impossible was already routine.

Richard didn't excel as a DM; his interest lay in other areas. Every Friday, he'd take his spot at the formal dining table, ready to follow Bueche or White's lead, his mind drifting to the computer. He'd already started writing computer games at school, scribbling programs in his spiral notebook, and he based those on the stories and characters that developed in these weekend games. They might have been simple single-player computer games, but they carried the echoes of his friends and his own community from the very beginning. It was the interaction of players that had made his D&D games so powerful, and he wanted to replicate that somehow.

In that desire, Richard had hit on an essential truth: Even if he spent long hours alone in front of his computer writing code, the games he was starting to create were essentially social in nature. He'd spent his life in a family and a wider community of friends and neighbors who supported each other in the craziest projects they could come up with. His weekend role-playing games and the computer games he based on them created their own tight communities. As he grew older and his games touched hundreds of thousands instead of just dozens of people, those communities would be replicated on a larger scale.

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As Richard began programming in 1977, the same inspiring collision of influences—Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series, Gary Gygax's Dungeons & Dragons role-playing game, and the power of computer programming—was being replayed across the world. In a way, all three influences were about magic, even if the last was a technological wizardry. Fantasy novels immersed readers in worlds where evil and good both had significance. It was an increasingly compelling idea in the late 1970s, when Vietnam and Watergate and the rest of the real world's disillusioning events had watered down the idealism of the previous decade with cynicism and discontent. Spreading from college students outward to other communities, Gygax's game in turn gave people a way to act out the roles of the fantasy books they loved.

Computers added a new dimension of power to the mix, giving players the ability to use their own imaginations to drive the game. Computers allowed people to control this new digital environment, and the games gave them the ability to wander through fully formed worlds, without interruption from a Dungeon Master. Even the earliest games had an incredible power to grasp people's wondering attention and spit them out hours later, wholly unaware of the passage of time. It could be something as simple as Pong, batting a blob of light back and forth across a digital field that barely qualified as the representation of a ping-pong table. It could be the later adventure games like Richard's that let people delve into the worlds of dragons, orcs, and treasure.

The weekend D&D games in Richard's house, low-tech as they were, contained all the seeds of later computer gaming communities. Like any community—a family, a neighborhood, or a collection of gamers—they fed off the diversity of their members. The storytellers created the worlds. Others, from Richard's mother to the people who brought their books and dice, made the games run. The players then lived in those worlds.

The later computer gaming communities fell into much the same mold. They would have their urban planners in the persons of the game creators and storytellers. Those creators' worlds would work on the same principles as any city's new neighborhood: People would visit if the worlds

sounded interesting, and if people liked them—if, in the case of games, they were fun— then people would stay.

These virtual communities would have their architects and construction companies. In game worlds, these infrastructure builders would be the hard-core coders, the 3D modelers and graphics engine programmers, even the T-shirted guys happily stringing wires to connect computers so that people could play together.

Ultimately people would wander in to look at the new neighborhoods, to test out the infrastructure to see if it was a place they wanted to stay; if they liked what they saw, they'd settle down and start playing. They'd put down roots, make friends, form groups that could be as tight as family. They would develop their own mythologies and oral histories about the people who had been there before them, and about people who had heroic adventures as defined by their adopted community's standards.

What would make the computer game communities that developed over the next 25 years so dynamic would be the feedback that occurred among all of these groups—planners, builders, and players. For the most part, the games wouldn't be like Monopoly or poker, where the rules were set, the implements of the games were handed down from above, and the games went on as they always had. Computer game worlds would constantly evolve, pushed by new advances from the technology developers and by new ideas from the players themselves. Years later, it would not at all be unusual to find little pockets of settlers in a game world using it for something wholly different than what its creators intended.

These colonists would be among the first to establish communities that were wholly digital, that interacted and fought and loved and had sex and killed each other all virtually, first through text alone and later with the help of increasingly realistic graphics. Gamers wouldn't be the only people to found digital communities, certainly. But they would consistently test the boundaries of whatever digital media they encountered. They would be the immigrants, off to foreign shores to find a better world, even if for only a few hours a day. They would take what they came across and build something new, impose their own rules and lifestyles on it, and the worlds they found would change them right back.

For Richard, all this would start simply, with 1500-line programs running on a new invention—the Apple II home computer.