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Guilds: Communities in Ultima Online

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the massively multi-player online role-playing game Ultima Online. Because of the large number of players, the evolution of sub-groups, or *guilds*, are very common. This document contains a general description of Ultima Online and an analysis of a particular guild. I show that the guild can be classified as a virtual community and discuss the importance of its rules and regulations. Finally, I argue that these rules and regulations give rise to mechanisms that are fundamental to the long-term appeal of the Ultima Online game.

ULTIMA ONLINE

Ultima Online is one of the oldest graphical massively multiplayer online role-playing games in existence. It can be seen as a continuation of a series of single player games that was published by Origin/Electronic Arts under the Ultima title between 1981 and 1999, but it also draws heavily from the MUD/MOO and traditional real-life role-playing game traditions. Its creator, Richard Garriott, describes Ultima Online as "a living breathing magical place, where people [can] forge true alternative lives" [4]. The game is an attempt at simulating a whole world containing computer-controlled people, animals, monsters and thousands of items that can be manipulated in various ways.

Game overview

Figure 1 shows the main game windows. The game window displays an isometric view of the player character's immediate surroundings. Objects, monsters and other characters are shown here. Most of the game manipulation is done by clicking and drag-and-drop in the game window.

The inventory window displays the character's current inventory. Game objects can be picked up and dropped by dragging them to and from the inventory window, respectively.

The paper doll window displays an image of the current character and displays its health, stamina and magic health. This window also contains a number of push buttons for accessing different options. Double-clicking on any game character will open its paper doll window.



Figure 1. Visiting a lavish dining room in Nujel'm. On the top right is a window containing the player's inventory and on the bottom right is the paper doll window containing an image of the player.

Communication between players is mediated through text chat. Text entered on the computer keyboard will show up over the player's character. It is also possible to *emote*, i.e. display a written description of non-verbal communication. Emotes are shown between asterisks above the player's character, e.g. **cough**, **raises an eyebrow at the ogre that just walked through the door**. Finally, there is a range of pre-defined animations that can be applied to characters, such as bowing, dancing and pointing.

Item manipulation in Ultima Online often mirrors real-life activities. For example, to create a roll of bandages that can be used to heal wounds in battle, the player must first shave the wool off a sheep by using a knife. This will create a pile of wool that can be spun into thread on a spinning wheel. The thread can then be woven into a roll of cloth by using a loom. Finally, the cloth is cut up into bandages by using a pair of scissors.

The geography of Ultima Online is similar to previous Ultima games. The game takes place in Britannia, an imaginary world with one main continent and a number of islands (figure 2). The geography is divided into three main types: towns, wilderness and dungeons.



Figure 2. The Ultima Online world.

The towns are where characters go to buy and sell items. Town shopkeepers are always computer-controlled characters. They understand a small number of phrases, such as "shopkeeper, buy" or "shopkeeper, where is the bank". Asking a shopkeeper to see his/her list of goods will open a window where items can be selected for purchase. The towns are also the home of other computer-controlled characters that has the ability to train player characters in different skills, in return for money.

Most of the larger towns contain official buildings such as guildhalls, theatres, banks and churches. Sometimes, these buildings are the location of user-initiated events such as theatre plays, weddings and public trials.

Each of the twelve main towns has one corresponding dungeon. These contain most of Britannia's monsters and are organized in order of difficulty. The dungeons are mostly used to train the combat skills of warrior-type characters, but sometimes players will also venture into dungeons to search for treasure and magic items.

The wilderness between the towns consists mostly of forest. Here, most of the non-aggressive game creatures can be found, such as cows, goats, pigs, cats, dogs and horses. Sometimes, computer-controlled brigands and monsters also appear in the wilderness. Roads run between most of the larger towns. The wilderness also contains open areas where player housing can be built. House deeds can be bought from architects, and when a suitable spot has been found, the deed can be converted into a building. The character that bought the deed is then considered the owner of the building and may furnish it as he/she wishes. It is also possible to hire computer-controlled characters as shopkeepers, so many of the player-constructed buildings contain shops that compete with the official town shops.

Beginner players

After the game has been installed and a character has been created (figure 3), beginner players are given an interactive tutorial where the graphical user interface basics are described (movement, interaction, combat and inventory manipulation). After the tutorial has been completed, the

character appears with a dressing of clothes and a thousand gold coins in the city of Haven, which is designed as a training area that is accessible only to beginners and experienced players with special invitation. Here, monsters are easier to defeat than in other parts of the game world and items bought from shops are less expensive. Since all new players begin here, there is also plenty of opportunity for social interaction.



Figure 3. The character creation window. Here, the character is given a gender, hairstyle, skin color and clothing colors. In the following screens, skills and attributes are assigned to the character.

For the first twenty hours (effective game time) after a new Ultima Online account has been activated, the characters created by the account holder are given the title *Young*. Monsters or other characters can never attack young characters without consent. Also, when young characters die, they do not lose their inventory items, as regular characters do. They also have the option to be resurrected immediately whereas regular characters have to find a magician or a healer that can resurrect them. Young characters can also teleport back to Haven at any time.

Apart from the brief playguide that is available at the Ultima Online web page [12], there is little information available to new players. Different game mechanics, such as how to manage the complex skill system, often have to be discovered through the help of other players. It is possible that the game designers made a conscious choice to limit the publication of game information in order to encourage player interaction and to make the time it takes to develop new characters as long as possible (since Ultima Online is a subscription service). I have not been able to confirm this, though.

The original series of Ultima games were very goal-driven in the sense that the player always had a sense of what to do next and that he or she was part of a storyline. In contrast, Ultima Online is open-ended with a very loose overarching world history. Here, the player is free to pursue any activity he or she wishes, be it tailoring clothes or fighting monsters. However, since the range of choices is virtually limitless, many players have reported that they find it difficult to find a sense of purpose with the game and that the lack of a clear storyline also makes the game

less dramatic and somewhat static [6]. The game developers have responded to this by introducing a game world storyline that progresses in steps. Fictional stories and reports surrounding the storyline is published on the Ultima Online website. Typically, each storyline step involves a battle of some sort or introduces a new monster or item type.

It is also possible for players to embark on quests. These can be initiated by computer-controlled characters, in which case they typically involve escorting the character from one city to another or rescuing the character from an attacking monster. It is also common for Ultima Online players to construct quests for the benefit of other players.

Since Ultima Online was initiated, it has been plagued with the so-called player-killing problem. Because of an initial lack of challenges for experienced players, many took up killing less experienced players and stealing their money. With the abundance of such player-killers, it became very difficult for new players to establish characters in the game and as a result, many chose not to extend their game subscriptions [5]. The game developers responded by introducing a set of consecutive game rule changes, most of which failed to improve on the situation. Finally, the decision was made to split the game into two *facets*, Felucca and Trammel. Both facets share the same storyline and geography. On Trammel, it is impossible to initiate player-versus-player combat unless both combatants give their consent, whereas on Felucca, player-killing is allowed as before. Characters can travel freely between the two facets. The split seems to have been largely successful.

Ultima Online has over 250.000 subscribers [4]. Even disregarding time zone issues, the number of simultaneous players is very large. Since playing the game involves exchanging information with a game server whenever an action is taken (such as moving a character or manipulating an item), allowing all players to communicate with one server would require an enormous amount of bandwidth. Therefore, Ultima Online is topologically divided into a number of *shards*, or server groups. Each shard consists of a number of servers that each holds the game information for a part of the game map. Each game character is tied to one shard. It is not possible to move characters between different shards. Each player can have up to five characters per shard.

PLAYER ORGANIZATIONS

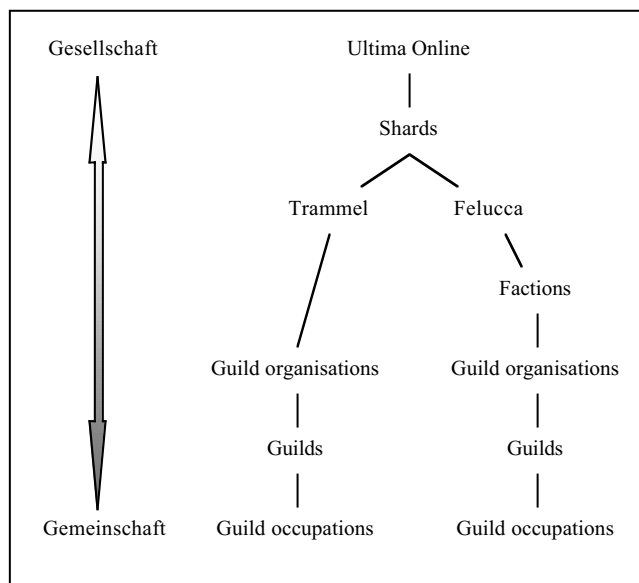
Ultima Online can be regarded as a paid-membership based group that consists of about 250.000 persons that log in to the game from about 100 countries across the world. The group is governed by a central authority, Origin Systems/Electronic Arts, and is subject to a number of official rules and regulations. The relationships between people in the group as a whole are often transient and instrumental, and its development is largely managed by Origin Systems/Electronic Arts. In this sense, it has many similarities with *gesellschaft* as described in [11].

However, the characters that are controlled by the players are organized in a complex hierarchy, where each sub-group has its own set of rules and regulations. As we move down

this hierarchy, we find an increasing number of community-like features. Figure 4 shows an illustration of this hierarchy.

Figure 4. An overview of the Ultima Online player group hierarchy.

The Ultima Online player group



Ultima Online has both a terms of service agreement that is similar to most other computer software products [13] and an official set of rules for players [14]. Origin/Electronic Arts reserves the right to immediately terminate the account of any player that breaks these rules. The rules mainly deal with harassment (they make no explicit distinction between players and their characters in this respect), violation of real-world laws, and cheating.

Harassment is defined in three different ways [15]:

- "Flagrant misuse of game mechanics with the intention of distressing and offending other players."
- "Any behavior that is incessant, inescapable, derogatory and directed specifically at you or your group."
- "Derogatory and/or hateful comments that are sexual, racist, religious, or related to gender or creed."

Harassment can be reported either through a special tool that sends a message to the game publisher containing a recent log of the interactions in the particular area the player was in, or by summoning one of the *game masters*. A game master is an employee of Origin/Electronic Arts that can act as a judiciary in conflicts relating to harassment, and also has the ability to sidestep the game mechanics in certain cases (e.g., to teleport a player from one location to another).

Punishments for breaking the official game rules include

- Spoken warnings (by a game master in-game).
- Written warnings.

- Lowering of skill levels.
- Deletion of a game character.
- Suspension of the game account.
- Termination of the game account.

The main game website provides bulletin boards to facilitate high-level communication between Ultima Online players and between players and the game developers. Most discussions tend to be transient and deal with technical issues, although it is possible that community-like groups can be found among the bulletin boards. However, I have chosen not to investigate this issue further.

In a sense, the Ultima Online website also serves as the management facility for the player group: it is here that game updates and enhancements are announced and storyline progressions are published. The website also contains the current official set of rules for players. Each player is, according to the rules, personally responsible for keeping up with any changes.

Shards and facets

Because of network lag issues, players seem to prefer playing on shards that are physically close to their computer. There are 11 shards in North America, 2 in Western Europe, 5 in Japan, 2 in South Korea, 1 in Taiwan and 1 in Australia. Each shard shares the same overall game storyline and geography, which means that the same set of cities, item types and monster types are available on all shards. But since the players and the actions they take are different across the shards, the item distribution and player-made buildings are different across the shards.

User-initiated events are often held on the different facets. These are typically open to any interested player/character and are often organized by one of the game guilds (see below). The Ultima Online website publishes a calendar of these events. Even though some websites exist that deal with issues relating to shards and facets, it would probably be incorrect to describe them as virtual communities, since their rules and regulations are part of the official Ultima Online rule set.

Factions

The Felucca facet contains an interesting subdivision into four opposing *factions*. The factions lie somewhere between Tönnies' *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft* in the sense that each has its own agenda and set of official (and unofficial) rules [11]. Each faction has one commander, one sheriff and one finance minister, all appointed through public elections. The factions also have one permanent stronghold each and typically war for control over cities and the right to demand tax on any business that takes place in them. Guilds that are formed on the Felucca facet normally also join a faction. It is also possible for non-guild-member characters to join a faction.

Since several authors have reported on the difficulties of achieving direct democracy in MUDs and MOOs in the past [1][7], it would be interesting to analyze the mechanisms surrounding the public elections of the faction leaders. It would also be interesting to try to analyze the

different community and non-community features of the factions. Unfortunately, since I haven't been able to develop a character skilled enough to survive on Felucca, I have been unable to pursue this issue.

Guilds and guild organizations

Each facet on each shard contains a number of *guilds*. There are over 41000 Ultima Online guilds in total and the Trammel facet on the Europa shard contains roughly 2500. There exists a set of general game rules for guild members that are enforced by the game itself, e.g., guild members are allowed to loot one another's corpses. However, the guilds are often associated with a specific goal or geographic location, which often results in an additional set of rules and regulations. The guilds are typically governed by a combination of informal and formal rules.

Any character with enough money to buy a guild token can start a new guild. However, an existing guild member must recommend new recruits before they can join the guild. Most guilds have some kind of charter that potential members must accept before they are allowed to join.

Guilds can declare war on one another. If both guilds give their consent, the war is initiated. This means that guild members may attack and kill members of the opposing guild without being flagged as murderers. It is possible to be in a state of war with several guilds at the same time.

The members of each guild are often organized into different sub-groups. The groups can be both formal (e.g., based on profession or skill status) and informal (e.g. a particular group of members that meet regularly to socialize). Often, the guild has a leadership hierarchy with a guild master at the top (this is enforced by the Ultima Online game) and a number of formal group leaders. Some guilds choose their leaders through public elections whereas most guilds seem to use promotion/recognition systems.

Many guilds are members of different umbrella organizations. The goal of these organizations is often to stimulate peaceful interaction between different guilds and thus often keep their own official set of regulations that often deal with rules of engagement for combat and styles of role-play. Member guilds are encouraged to follow these rules as closely as possible.

I have looked closer at one example guild organization, the European Role Playing Association (ERPA), which is an umbrella organization for guilds on the Europa shard. The main goal of ERPA is to compensate for the lack of a clear Ultima Online storyline by encouraging role-playing and the authoring of player-initiated quests. A player-initiated quest can be as simple as the search for a buried treasure that the quest author has placed somewhere, to complex storylines by multiple authors that evolve over several days and involve "actors", i.e. characters created for the benefit of the quest that are played by the quest author or authors.

ERPA has about 50 member guilds and has 7 official guidelines:

1. "Respect the other players."
2. "Follow the rules of engagement." (See below.)

3. "Always stay in-character, only go out-of-character if needed, and do that using an emote or brackets."
4. "Talk normal English without smileys or other IRC-style abbreviations."
5. "Don't whine or complain in-game."
6. "Role-play with other guilds/people that isn't ERPA members."
7. "Be active."

In addition, ERPA has a number of rules of engagement that regulate how and when characters may attack other characters, how and when looting is acceptable and how to deal with non-ERPA-member characters in combat. These rules of engagement are necessary because each ERPA guild is encouraged to maintain a constant war status with the other ERPA guilds. The reason for this is that it is easier to recognize other ERPA members (the name tag that appears over characters in the game turn orange) and that certain role-playing elements become easier. For example, a player character could "become obsessed" by a demon as part of a quest scenario and start attacking other characters. The attacker can do this without having to fear being tagged as a murderer, because killing a character that belong to an opposing guild is not considered to be a murder in Ultima Online. In general, though, ERPA encourages cooperation between its member guilds.

The guild umbrella organizations are typically managed through websites. ERPA keeps a website [3] with news, a FAQ, as set of documents containing the official rules and guidelines, and information about its members.

THE TRADEPORT OF COVE

I have studied a guild named the Tradeport of Cove between October and December 2001. The guild is an active member of ERPA. The Tradeport itself is a new settlement close to the geographical location of the Cove town, and is regarded as an extension of the town by the guild members. At the time of writing, the guild has 21 members, of which 13 are considered to be veterans (i.e., have had an active Ultima Online membership for more than 12 months).

The town of Cove is placed in a geographically remote area, which means that it is relatively quiet and laid-back. The Tradeport of Cove, as the name suggests, deals mainly with trade. 12 of the guild member characters (57%) have merchant professions, 3 are members of the tradeport militia (14%) and the rest constitute the community leadership. The guild did not initiate war with any other guild during the time I studied it, nor did it receive any war declarations (note that this is a violation of the ERPA rules).

The official charter of the guild is "Welcome to Cove, traveler!" The official rules for the guild are equivalent to ERPA, with one addition: players must join a special IRC channel whenever their member characters are in the game. The reason for this is to make out-of-character discussions easier and less disruptive to the game, and to provide a backup communication channel if the game should crash.

The guild incorporates six different profession groups:

- The Rulership of Cove.
- Traders of the tradeport (i.e. characters that focus on general trade).
- Artisans of the tradeport (i.e. characters that focus on one specific crafting skill).
- The Cove Militia.
- Officials of the tradeport.
- Servants of the tradeport.

The guild is ruled by an imaginary family and is in essence a dictatorship. At the time of writing, there exists only one official, the town magistrate, which can act as a judge in conflict situations. The militia hierarchy has the town ruler at the top, followed by the sheriff and sergeants that each lead units of five guardsmen or trainees. The guild title of a character is made visible to other Ultima Online players by appearing next to the character's name.

The general spirit of the guild is very inviting and cheerful. The members have a history of organizing recurring social events (such as tavern nights and market days) that are announced on the official Ultima Online web page. The guild members are also very helpful to new players and beginners in particular. Several of the veteran members of the guild have played Ultima Online from the start and have a considerable wealth of knowledge about the game that they willingly share with new guild members. New member characters are given entry positions in the guild hierarchy. Promotions are typically awarded for active participation in guild events and/or when the character has shown substantial skill advancement.

The guild members have a weekly out-of-character meeting using IRC. In-game meetings and guild events are rather frequent. These range from parties to resource gathering days, where all available guild members travel to a special location to help gather raw material for the merchants and artisans.

DISCUSSION

The Ultima Online guild is probably the game feature that is most important for producing veteran players and keeping newcomers interested. I also believe that many of the guilds could be classified as true virtual communities. Such guilds would be comparable to other virtual communities and could be understood through the use of previously established research methods for examining virtual communities. In this section, I shall argue that the Tradeport of Cove is indeed a virtual community and discuss some implications of that result.

Cove as a community

In [9], Pargman lists six criteria that characterize communities:

- Membership.
- Time horizon.
- On-going relationships.
- Shared values, goals and institutions.

- Commitment and responsibility.
- Political action or collective accomplishments.

The Cove guild fulfils all of these criteria. Some are even made explicit in written form (such as the guild guidelines or the recount of its history that is available at the guild web site). The helpful and inclusive spirit of the guild leads to mutual commitment and on-going relationships between its members, and there is a general feeling of committal to the well being of the guild. As a result, many of the members have been active participants for several years.

It is interesting to note that the geographical aspects of the membership criteria are fulfilled in a somewhat different (and more strong) way than the MUD/MOO system Pargman analyzes in his thesis. The Cove community is geographically isolated in the game geography and most of its member characters "live" there (i.e., they own buildings where their characters are based and enter and leave the game). A MUD/MOO system typically has much fewer members and is geographically smaller than Ultima Online. Thus, they do not feature geographically based character groupings.

Even though the Cove community did not take any political actions during the time I studied it, the guild belongs to one of Britannia's factions and political discussions aren't uncommon.

In [9] a number of qualities usually associated with Tönnies' *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* [11] are listed. The Cove guild has most of the characteristics associated with *gemeinschaft* with two main exceptions.

First, the guild follows the ERPA role-playing guidelines quite strictly, and new guild recruits are officially required to accept the guidelines before they can join. In this sense, the community could be regarded as having a set of rights, contracts and laws, something that is usually associated with *gesellschaft*. Second, the Cove community has a number of professional associations (such as the Militia and the Officials).

In [8], Ostrom, presents seven design principles for constructing communities. These are

- Clearly defined boundaries.
- Congruence between appropriation and provision rules and local conditions.
- Collective-choice arrangements.
- Monitoring.
- Graduated sanctions.
- Conflict-resolution mechanisms.
- Minimal recognition of rights to organize.

All Ultima Online guilds implement the first design principle, in the sense that they are membership-based organizations. In addition, the Cove community is geographically isolated as well.

There is indeed a clear congruence between appropriation and provision rules in Cove. Because the veteran members

of the community are wealthy and/or extremely skillful at producing quality goods, there is no lack of resources. New guild members are given access to appropriate collections of resources (e.g., militia members can fetch new weapons from a crate when their own are lost or broken). When a certain resource runs low, a collective effort is made to replenish it.

All members of the Cove community are invited to the weekly IRC meetings and can therefore also participate in any discussions on changes of the operational rules of the community.

The community monitors the actions of its members partially through the use of the out-of-character IRC channel. All other monitoring is made through personal communication. I have never witnessed any sanctions against members of the community. Through discussions with some of the members, I have learned that the community has had very little dealings with troublemakers. The few thieves and brigands that have threatened the community have been chased away. Internally, there seems to be very little disagreement, although I have observed one rather heated in-character discussion about capital punishment. Also, the community has appointed a magistrate to act as mediator in any conflicts that may arise in the future. It is possible that the community have had internal conflicts that the veteran members do not want to expose to newcomers.

Finally, the community doesn't officially disapprove of members constructing sub-groups or institutions. In fact, such activities are sometimes encouraged (e.g., when an initiative was taken to install a new worker organization for the town pub).

Thus, the Tradeport of Cove fulfils most of the qualities typically associated with communities. We are therefore in a position where we can analyze other aspects of the Cove guild from a virtual community perspective. I have chosen to examine one aspect closer, that of identity and role-play.

Identity

In addition to the formal ERPA rules, the Cove community has a number of informal rules that relate to role-play. Since the veteran community members are very adept role-players and has a substantial interest in keeping the gaming experience as rich as possible, they tend to disapprove of disruptive behavior. What is interesting is that they will typically express this disapproval through *in-character* mechanisms. Examples of this include:

- A person rides his horse into the pub instead of leaving it outside. This results in a number of emotes such as **frowns**, **raises an eyebrow at the horse** and spoken comments along the line of "Do ye smell a horse in here?" and "Indeed – what a barbarian to bring his horse into the pub."
- A character joining a group of community members claims to be a reporter from an online webzine and give them the URL. The community members respond by using emotes such as **looks confused**, **doesn't understand what he is talking*

*about**. Whenever a non-game term is mentioned, the community members respond along the lines of "What was that?" or "I'm terribly sorry but I don't understand a word of what you're saying – what language are you speaking?"

- A character enters a room where a man and a woman, both community members, are having a conversation. The newcomer is carrying a sword and shield. The woman **gasps** and the man responds, "Don't worry – I'll protect you."

The veteran community members are extremely good at role-playing and they experiment with different characters, both of the same sex as the player and of the opposite sex. In other words, "cross-dressing" exists, although without further analysis it is impossible to tell how frequent it is. The community as a whole does not disapprove of this play with gender, even though such behavior has been much criticized in other kinds of virtual communities [16]. Apparently, portraying a member of the opposite sex is a substantial attraction of role-playing situations like these. Even though the graphical environment only allows two basic kinds of avatars (one female and one male) and thus reduces everyone to a similar appearance [10], it probably also helps in increasing the belief in characters played by people of the "wrong" sex. In text-based environments, the written word is the only communication channel available. A visual representation could perhaps be the necessary distraction that makes players disregard statements that could otherwise reveal a "cross-dresser".

Performance

Danet has described experienced IRC users as virtuosos that improvise on the computer keyboard in a way similar to how jazz players improvise on a piano. In certain communities, this kind of play is held in very high regard [2].

I believe that being adept at role-playing is the most important ability among the Cove community players. Virtuoso players make the game interesting, but since IRC abbreviations and play with the computer key characters are considered a violation of the community rules, their skills are manifested in terms of improvisational theatre.

For example, I observed the following events at an in-game wedding I attended (figure 5). Among the guests was an orc character belonging to one of the ERPA guilds. Orcs are regarded as barbarians and are typically rude and quite evil. In this case, the guest was tolerated and was allowed to sit next to a lady, but his presence led to a funny sequence of events. The priest is addressing the wedding couple, and at one point, the bride takes the groom's hand in her own:

Priest: As the many stars that glitter in the firmament make the heavens as a whole –

Bride: **squeezes [groom's] hand**

Priest: So too does the life that flows through our veins render us as one.

Orc: **puts paw on [lady's] lap**

Lady: **slaps it**

Orc: **quickly removes**

Male guest: **stifles a chuckle**

Priest: Now, let the light of the countless stars caress all here in its sacred embrace that we might feel the oneness of creation.

Orc: **fartz**

Here, the player of the orc character very quickly saw the opportunity for creating a funny situation by mirroring the bride's action in a way consistent with his/her character. The male guest acknowledges the role-playing abilities of the orc player by his **stifles a chuckle** emote.

This is similar to the case analyzed by Danet in [2], although the frames are somewhat different (e.g., there is no "party" frame). As Danet, I have also observed instances of playful blending between frames, although this is also done in character. For example, the wedding described above was initially scheduled to take place in a different location. However, the server lag there was large enough to cause people to frequently get stuck for many seconds, which was referred to as "wading through mud". When the lag situation temporarily got better, one female character emoted **scrapes her a patch of mud off her sandals**, which was rewarded with a number of **laughs** from the other characters present.

MUDs/MOOs are often characterized as either adventure games or social games. The goal of players in an adventure MUD is normally to solve quests in order to achieve the level of magician where one is allowed to change the fabric of the game world. Social MUDs are more playful and encourages social interaction rather than quest solving and monster-hunting. The Cove community and the ERPA lie somewhere in between these two types of game. They encourage the creation of quests for the benefit of the members (and monster hunting is an important way to improve the skills of a character). However, social interaction and communication skills are extremely important, and I believe that becoming a good role-player is the main goal of most Cove community members.

Several authors [4][5][6] have expressed certain puzzlement with regards to the mechanisms that cause tens of thousands of veteran players to keep playing Ultima Online in spite of generally bad reviews, technical problems and the abundance of player killers. I believe that the guild system and the role-play it encourages is the feature that causes these players to keep subscribing to the game service. Since Ultima Online has existed for such a long time, the guild communities and role-playing mechanisms have had plenty of opportunity to develop and evolve. Taking part in a conversation with experienced Cove community members can be an experience similar to watching a high-quality theatre play. The level of immersion and enjoyment this brings, together with the opportunity to develop character careers is, for me and probably for thousands of other players, the long-term appeal of the Ultima Online game.

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Figure 5: An Ultima Online wedding.