

Nine Ways of Looking



It's been almost three decades since he released *Akalabeth*, the role-playing computer game that made him legendary as "Lord British," the immortal ruler of the fantasy world of Britannia. Now, with the launch of Richard Garriott's *Tabula Rasa*, his avatar is "General British," and the remarkably imaginative Mr. Garriott proves to the millions of online gamers out there — there are no earthly bounds to limit his desire to create new worlds.

at Richard Garriott

By Gregory Curtis

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Games are more than fun

During the summer of 1979, young Richard Garriott was working in a ComputerLand store in Clear Lake, Texas, the company town that had sprung up around NASA, south of Houston. Using the game of Dungeons & Dragons and the works of J.R.R. Tolkien as inspiration, he was on a spree of inventing his own computer games. In fact, he had invented 28 of them, all using just text. Then, employing the newest computer language, he started adding graphics that would work on an Apple II.

Richard had been calling his latest game D&D28b, but now renamed it *Akalabeth*. He made some crude labels, put a coversheet and the software in Ziploc bags, and sold the game for \$20 from the peg-board wall of the computer store. It was not long before California Pacific Computer Company, one of the few publishers of computer games in those days, discovered *Akalabeth* and bought the rights. Properly named *Akalabeth: World of Doom*, some cheesy packaging showing a flying dragon battling a human was created and they issued the game in a bigger Ziploc bag with a new price of \$34.95. Richard's royalty was \$5 a copy. *Akalabeth* sold 30,000 copies, and Richard earned \$150,000. He was still a teenager.

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Beyond reality

Although Richard was born in Cambridge, England, he grew up near Clear Lake, then moved to Austin, Texas when he attended the University of Texas. His father, Owen Garriott, is an engineer and astronaut who has published a book and about 50 scientific papers as well. He spent a cumulative 70 days in space, performing space walks while aboard Skylab 3. He comes from Enid, Oklahoma, where a street has

been named for him. Richard's mother, Helen, also is from Enid, where she now lives. She is an artist and silversmith. Richard has two brothers, Robert, who is four and a half years older and now a business partner, an even older brother, Randy, a M.D., and a younger sister, Linda, who is a registered dietician.

Richard was still in grade school when he found a magic kit at a garage sale. It's true but misleading to say that at that moment magic became an absorbing life-long interest. That's because even as a child Richard was creating the worlds he wanted to live in. Magic was — and continues to be — an important part of those worlds, but still only a part.

The notion that he could create worlds of his own first occurred to Richard when as a tyke he discovered a woman in the neighborhood who transformed her home into a haunted house for Halloween. She made it really scary. At one point in the walk-through she had rigged a Tesla coil that gave a completely unexpected jolt of electricity. That experience literally shocked Richard into awareness. "I knew then," he told me, "that I wanted to live *beyond* reality." Magic was certainly a means of getting beyond reality, but so is science, fantasy, theater, and games, and all of those interests seemed to flow naturally from magic for Richard.

Precocious in a way that was almost frightening and demonically energetic, Richard began to create other worlds for his friends and neighbors to visit. Blessed with indulgent parents who themselves had a fascination with gadgets and doodads, Richard set about to transform the Garriott house into a fantasy world of his own creation. He did this at Halloween, of course, but other times, too. People who visited the Garriott home moved from one room of wonders to the next.

The immense mind inside a child's body teemed with possibilities until finally Richard's mom and dad got tired of living so much of their life inside Richard's imagination. They wanted to live in ordinary day-to-day reality inside their own house. Richard was asked to move his creations outside to the backyard, bewildering the family dog that lived there.

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Amassing the gamers

This fall I stopped in to see Richard's office at NCSOFT. The Korean computer game company's North American headquarters is in a relatively new building tucked beside a hill off Loop 360 west of Austin. Waiting for Richard in the lobby, I had to stare down an eight-foot painted statue of a menacing canine-like creature in a spiked helmet. He was beside a slightly smaller, roundish, greenish boar-humanoid with a short sword and a small shield. They were evidently characters from games Richard's company has produced. I wouldn't know, since my connection with video games vanished 15 years ago when my son outgrew Super Mario Brothers.

Those days were the Paleolithic era for video games. Today, revenue from the sale of video games is greater than the box office receipts of Hollywood movies, and the production values and special effects in the games are on the same level as those in blockbusters like *Jurassic Park* or *Spiderman*.

Since *Akalabeth*, Garriott has designed, directed, or produced dozens more games, including the spectacular *Ultima* series that made him both a legend in the industry and very wealthy. He is the contemporary equivalent of those who made fortunes as pioneering studio heads in Hollywood a century ago.

Although there are still games where a single player is pitted against a fantasy world unreeling on his computer, the big movement in the industry is toward "massively multiplayer" games, where thousands upon thousands of players all inhabit the imagined universe of the game. A player can assume various identities, form alliances with other players, and those alliances can then join or oppose other groups that have formed. A player doesn't win or lose so much as progress or fall back. Typically, each player assumes an identity, thus becoming a character in the game. That character gains powers, abilities, and possessions that are needed as the game progresses. A cottage industry, similar to the sweatshops that manufactured clothes, has grown up in China where women, who have more time than money, play computer games all day long and then sell those identities with all their powers and possessions to players in the west, who have more money than time and don't want to bother with the game's preliminary stages. The players are 99.9999% young males.

When Richard came to get me and take me upstairs to his office, he was wearing the high tech uniform — jeans, T-shirt, sneakers, and a cell phone in a holster on his belt. A thick silver snake hung from a chain around his neck. He made the pendant with his mother's direction while in high school, and he has taken it off intentionally only one time since then — to give to his father to take with him into space.

The whole place was quiet as people were hard at work in offices along a warren of hallways. Hanging on one wall were framed posters of the games Richard has created, including one pre-*Akalabeth* game, which was programmed on paper tape. The most impressive posters are the ones from the *Ultima* series. Richard himself is present in these games as "Lord British," a nickname given him as a teenager. In several versions of the game, Richard does the voice-over for the Lord British character. Lord British is supposed to be invulnerable, but ardent gamers have figured ways to do him in. *Ultima Online* became the first really successful massively multiplayer game. When the decision was made at Garriott's original company, Origin Systems, to not continue in that direction, Richard left and established a new company with his brother Robert. That firm, named Destination, has now merged with the Korean games giant NCSOFT.

Richard's office is comfortable but utilitarian. There are a couple of large computer screens on a desk in a corner and shelves along the

walls filled with the artifacts of Richard's obsessions. As we sat down, he picked up a wooden box about eight inches on a side. "This is magic to me," he says. The sides were a series of slats. He moved one out about a quarter inch, turned the box, slid out another slat, then the top could be moved back about a quarter inch. Another 100 moves or so and the box would open.

"It's a puzzle box," he says, as he reverses the series of moves and returns the box to its original shape. "I just got it and never opened it until now. I collect them. I was exposed to puzzles about the same time I was exposed to the Egg Vase, which is about the first magic trick any kid learns. But they're similar when you think about it."

Richard confesses that he's more a magic collector than a performer. "I like tricks that use scientific principles to create their effects. And when I'm fooled by a trick I must get it to find out how reality has been beaten." He is a Life Member of the S.A.M. and most active in Austin's Assembly 206. "I love being involved in a magic club. In a club, you can see magic performed, and if you are capable of doing a trick they will tell you how to do it. So being a member satisfies both needs — the need to watch and be entertained and the need to advance your skills as a magician.

"My hero in magic is Robert-Houdin. In fact, I think you can categorize most magicians by whether they are inspired by Houdin or Houdini. For instance, Houdin invented the Light and Heavy Chest. Of course, it uses electromagnets, but they were a relatively new scientific discovery at the time. That's what I would like to do — create moments of magic that are accomplished by scientific discoveries."

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Treasures in print

While Garriott owns a first edition of Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, he also collects certain non-magic books — different editions of *The Lord of the Rings*, Harry Potter titles, and the Wizard of Oz series. His bookshelves are also lined with multiple copies of *Hubert's Hair-Raising Adventure* by the British children's author Bill Peet. Richard has memorized all of the book's 30 pages of verse. It was a treasured story from his childhood.

When children visit his home, or whenever there is a day-care facility at conventions he must attend, he entertains the kids by reciting *Hubert's Hair-Raising Adventure*. Afterward, he presents each child with a copy of the book. Yet, when an interviewer recently asked Richard specifically what books he liked to read, he replied, "I do not read for pleasure."

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Other worldly friends

I first met Richard 15 years ago when we were working out at the same boxing gym in Austin, Texas. Richard loves boxing, although his tall, slender frame isn't ideal for the sport. The owner of the gym, Richard Lord, wears his hair cropped short except for a single, long, thin, braided ponytail in the back. That's how Richard Garriott wears his hair, too. And just as Richard has made friends in the worlds of gaming and magic, he has done so in the boxing world as well. As it happens, a boxer from our little gym, Jesus Chavez, became a world champion. Richard and Jesus are such close friends that Richard worked as a second in Jesus's corner during one of his championship fights.

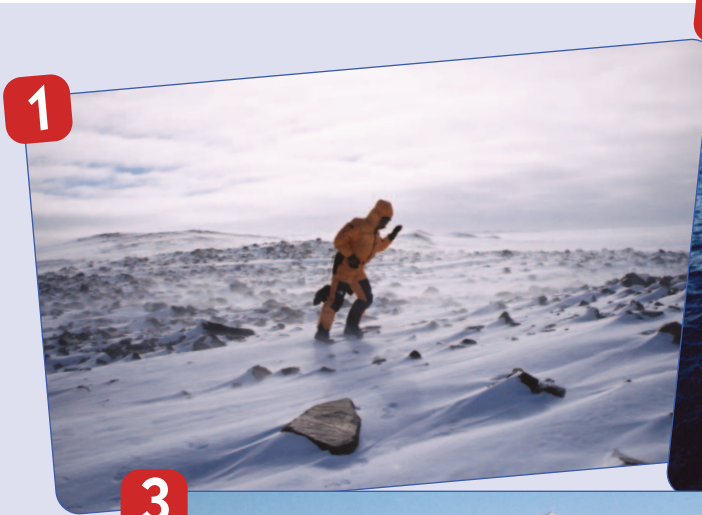
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Exploring extreme environs

In September 1998 Richard squeezed into a submersible that was dropped over the side of a ship into the choppy, frigid waters of the North Atlantic. The vessel sank and continued to sink for the next two and a half hours. In the darkness Richard saw rare sea creatures with blinking lights

on their tails. Finally, 12,000 feet beneath the surface, the submersible hit the ocean floor. There just outside the window was the bow of the Titanic. He paid about \$40,000 to visit the sunken ship.

Garriott likes to visit remote places like the wreckage of the Titanic, where the world seems as far beyond reality as it can get. He has tracked gorillas in Rwanda and canoed on the Amazon. He has hunted for meteorites — and found some — in Antarctica and stood at the South Pole. With his father he dove to the Antarctic Ocean floor to collect anaerobic microbes



Images of Garriott's Earth-based scientific explorations: 1) Hunting for and finding meteorites deep in the Antarctic; 2) Diving to hydrothermal vents to collect anaerobic microbes; 3) At the South Pole, holding the Lineage flag of one of his NCSoft online games; 4) Viewing the bow railing of the Titanic during dive to the wreckage site; 5) Richard at the instrument panel of the Mir submersible.



near hydrothermal vents at the bottom of the sea. But in October, Richard will embark on an adventure that he can perhaps never surpass. He's going to the ultimate frontier.

Garriott has collected memorabilia from the conquest of space since his childhood. In 1994 he bought the Soviet lunar land rover that remains on the moon for \$60,000, and a cosmonaut suit for \$21,000. He has various meteorites and a shell of a Sputnik that never flew.

Richard has contracted with a company called Space Adventures to fly on the Russian Soyuz rocket to the International Space Station. He is already in training and plans to perform scientific experiments in zero gravity, studying protein crystallization for his father's biotechnology company. He'll be in space for about ten days. The trip will cost Richard \$30 million. For another \$15 million he can go on a space walk.

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Play as big business

On Halloween 2007, NCSOft launched *Richard Garriott's Tabula Rasa*. The most popular massively multiplayer game until now is *World of Warcraft*, which claims to have nine million paying customers and reportedly earned \$400 million in 2005. That's the market *Tabula*

Rasa is seeking.

Massively multiplayer games are potentially so lucrative because the gamers first must purchase the game itself, which is basically dumb software and a code to connect the player to a central computer hub that manages the game. Then the player must buy time on the central hub. No pay, no play.

Tabula Rasa was in development for six years — eons in the video game world. The lengthy years created tension in the company between the American and the Korean wings of NCSOft, and even some between Richard and brother Robert. But, those tensions are in the past now that the game's on the market.

The story line of *Tabula Rasa* — which translates to “blank slate,” allowing Garriott to create an outer-space game-scape of his wildest dreams — is that the Bane, an evil alien race, has conquered Earth and killed most of the human race. The player is a survivor who joins the Allied Free Sentients to try to defeat the Bane. But the players don't battle just the Bane. They can fight each other as well. They can fight as individuals or as warring armies of allied players. Richard's in-game persona for *Tabula Rasa* is “General British,” an upgrade from the former Lord British of *Ultima* fame.

The two Garriott brothers often play against each other. Robert, who's the CEO of NCSOft North America, thinks Richard cheats. Richard told *Fast Company* magazine, “Robert is a wimpy player.” Robert told a reporter at *Wired* magazine, “I'm not in the business because I like gaming. I got into the business because I like the business.”



Britannia Manor, Garriott's phantasmagorical castle of wonders just outside Austin, Texas: 1) A focal point of the Media Room is a cabinet filled with highly collectible magic apparatus; 2) A few of the classic performing automata among his collection of hundreds; 3) Richard shows off a unique animated miniature of Christian Fechner's award-winning levitation.

PHOTO: MILLIE SEATON

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The castle keep

Richard's home, Britannia Manor, is probably the most unusual single residence in Austin. For years, Richard hosted a free Halloween adventure where guests toured his castle-like home while encountering various perils. Actors playing ghoulish roles lurked in the dark shadows and frightened guests. Most of the tickets were free — first come, first serve. People camped out for a week in front of the house to get the tickets.

In 2006, instead of creating a Halloween experience, Richard produced an interactive, scripted magical experience called "Magic at the Manor" [see *M-U-M*, March 2007]. This time, people invited to the event had to access a secret Web site to receive tickets. When guests arrived at the Garriott estate, they participated in solving a mystery that hinged on the exposé of the secret of sawing through a person. As they moved from room to room they received clues, but they also had the opportunity to watch magic shows performed by top magicians Jon Armstrong, Derek DelGaudio, Gazzo, Andrew Goldenhersh, Richard Hatch, Kevin James, Just Alan, John Lovick, Bill Malone, Max Maven, Eric Mead, Alain Nu, Peter Samuelson, Steve Daly, Vanessa Lauren, David Williamson, Michael Weber, and Brad Henderson, who helped Garriott stage the event.

Theatrical magic was again employed at Britannia Manor, but with a smaller cast of magicians, this September when Richard produced his industry launch party for Tabula Rasa [see *M-U-M*, December 2007].

At the center of the roof of the Manor is a fully functioning observatory. It is built on a separate steel framework independent of the rest of the house, in order to eliminate vibrations when using the computerized telescope. Each room is connected by a series of secret passages, so that Richard, or anyone else who knows the secrets, can move from any room to any other room unobserved. There is a wine cellar filled with the vintages Richard has accumulated, as well as a dungeon that contains things like shrunken heads from Ecuador, a skeleton, an elephant skull, and a Victorian-age vampire-hunting kit with a crucifix-pistol that fires solid silver bullets. A laboratory room displays scientific equipment that includes a personal cloud chamber for tracking subatomic particles and a large collection of orreries — functioning, mechanical models of the solar system.

But his largest collection of all is that of automatons, hundreds of them. Often these mechanical marvels have magical themes. One shows a magician levitating a woman, and ten or twelve others simulate a wizard making different objects disappear and reappear from under a cup. Another features a magician performing Christian Fechner's F.I.S.M. award-winning barstool levitation and has a miniature version of the mechanics used in the actual illusion.

Prized pieces among Richard's collectible magic apparatus are five mystery clocks designed by Robert-Houdin. As you examine the clocks it becomes increasingly difficult to see how they work. The clock face is mounted in a clear glass case resting atop a glass rod, which apparently contains no mechanics or clockworks.

Richard possesses a remarkable collection of magic apparatus created by British craftsman Alan Warner, as well as much of the limited-edition precision apparatus fabricated by Richard Gerlitz. One of the more elaborate pieces that Richard commissioned is a magical liquor cabinet with two glass doors and a spigot in the middle. A guest can name any drink he wants... vodka, say. The magician holds a glass under the spout and vodka pours out. If someone wants whisky, no problem... the glass fills with scotch or bourbon as requested.

Richard has started constructing tricks of his own invention that use scientific principles to produce a magical effect. He can show a



PHOTO: STEVE BOXALL/ZERO-G

Richard trains for his October trip to the International Space Station in the Zero Gravity Chamber, which just could become the rehearsal hall for the magic trick he plans to perform in outer space.

dark, oily fluid in a metal bowl. The liquid swirls around normally, but then, like a flower blooming, it forms spiky crystals. With a wave of the hand over the bowl the crystals retreat back into liquid. He has also refined the Light and Heavy Chest, so that the age-old effect can be performed on what appears to be a normal coffee table that's too thin to conceal any magnetic gimmicks.

As we leave the Manor's media room, where Richard keeps most of his eclectic collection of magic on display, he says, "I am now in search of a great trick to perform in space! Levitation would be too easy. Maybe it's an effect that uses the vacuum of space outside the window, or the weightless environment. Something like a card through window, or mentally moving objects around the cabin? What might it be?"

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Magic in everything

Richard created Britannia Manor himself and now he has designed a second house that he's building on a hilltop not far away. "It'll have all this and more," he says. "When it's completed, I'll sell Britannia Manor." I'd be very interested in meeting the person who buys it.

We walked outside and lingered by the front door. The house is guarded by gargoyles roosting on the gutters and surrounded on the ground level by shrubbery and flowering plants. Richard's girlfriend, Kelly, is a lepidopterist. "We've chosen the plants," he says, "to provide maximum attraction for butterflies." And sure enough, even on this day in late fall several species were flitting from bloom to bloom.

"Look over here," he says, pointing toward small, dark cones hanging from a ridge in the wall and around the top of the doorjamb. "Each one of these is a chrysalis." And there, even in the smallest detail of the house and of Richard's life, was something beyond the apparent reality — hidden beauty, metamorphosis, magic. ❖