

ANARCHY ONLINE

MMORPG, sci-fi style

By: Brittany Steiner

Uma Thurman's got nothing on me. I'm shimmying across the sands of an other-worldly tropical beach á la the *Pulp Fiction* without a John Travolta in sight. Where Uma probably had to train with an expert and work twelve hour shifts to shoot the movie, all I have to do is slurp a few ramen noodles and click the "Actions: Dance: Pulp Fiction" button and my character starts boogieing down to the imaginary Chuck Berry singing in the background. Twelve hour shifts are totally optional.

Welcome to *Anarchy Online* (AO), a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) for the rest of us who aren't hard-core, Dungeons & Dragons fanatics. AO has a quirky sense of humor, to start with. AO gets players out of the traditional dungeons and fantasy land and into a science fiction, space wars, and aliens themed...fantasy land. Ok, so it's still a MMORPG in an imaginary world after all, but it has a different flavor that appealed to the non-RPG player that I am: sci-fi. Maybe, just maybe, this game would hold my hand and hold my interest as I learn to play well with others.

Funcom may have developed AO for the male 18-34 year old market, but price tag for the game had me, a 21 year old female gamer, at "FREE." The regular game is free to download and play, with additional expansions available for purchase plus monthly server fees. Grab the hefty download from the official site [www.anarchy-online.com].

just to survive, and everyone has to deal with mysterious alien invasions.

New Arrival Orientation

You arrive on Rubi-Ka as a fresh faced new colonist of whichever race, gender, and job type you select. Customize away, my friend, but beware the dark cavern of many, many, many choices. I suppose a player needs many choices in a massive multiplayer online game, but it's a bit overwhelming for a new player to the genre. The hand holding is minimal: jumping right in and running around in out of the question. Character control with the mouse is not industry standard or intuitive controls, and good luck finding things in the help menus beyond the basics.

Once you get up and running around in the space, there won't be many surprises if you are familiar with other games in the genre. You start in the newbie island, and then you can go to some new cities, fight more bad things, work for some people, and so on. No thrills, just a bit of nanotech instead of wizardry. Experiential class based leveling system. Menus galore to control stuff you never thought you wanted to control (hence how I go to groovin' *Pulp Fiction* style on a deserted beach head.) And oodles of people to socialize with. AO is packed with plenty of players. Seriously, why have a massive multiplayer anything if there's not a focus on the masses of players to interact with? The expressive nature of the characters and the extensive list of actions allow for unique personalities for characters, assuming you can manage the ton of buttons for controls.



My character, Rasage, dancing *Pulp Fiction*-style. I soon moved on to chicken dancing and waving "italian" to test the wide range of expressive actions available for characters.

QUICK STATS:

Name: Anarchy Online
Platform: PC
Publisher: Funcom
Developer: Funcom
Release Date: June 2001
Overall Rating: ★★☆☆☆



DRAWS:

- Totally free
- Sci-fi theme
- Expressive characters

FLAWS:

- Serious time dedication required
- Unintuitive control scheme

Politicking of Rubi-Ka

The game world of the distant, techno-logically advanced future in AO is on the planet Rubi-Ka and its extra-dimensional counter-part, the Shadowlands. Politics and tempers run hot as the rebels fight the mega-corporation Omni-Tek, the neutrals try to



Check out the billboard advertising: first it's America's army (left)...and now it's Under Armour (right).

The Price of Free: Advertising!

There's something special about this virtual landscape: dynamic real world advertising. I'm trekking through a teleportation complex and suddenly I'm face to face with a giant America's army and Under Armour billboard. Ick. Like the giant aliens spontaneously generating on the beach aren't making it hard enough to suspend my disbelief.

So the basic game is free now with the advertisements but it hasn't always been that way. Funcom teamed up with Massive Advertising Inc. in early 2005 to make the basic game free to players and ad supported. In-game ads are everywhere now, but this partnership was a brand spankin' new idea back then. While I might be taking a Sharpie marker to sanitize any form of advertisement in my universe (digitally, in this case, by blocking the advertisement server address and thereby ejecting this crap from my game), you might not find this so offensive. Heck, at least it makes the game free. And, were I to continue playing this game for a second beyond writing this article, I could always just go ahead and buy the expansions for an ad-free *AO* experience.

Usability Issues

When *AO* first lunched, there were so many bugs that the game almost died on the spot. With such a spectacularly nasty start, the game continued to be known for its initial problems well after Funcom ironed out the flaws.



Sitting. Lots of sitting. When I manage to get up to move around, I'm lost in the land of the multi button mouse controlling movement and camera at the same time.

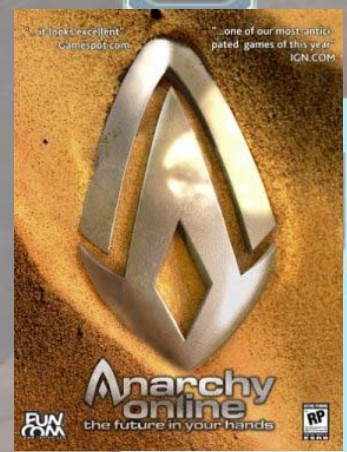
At this point in the *AO* universe, I didn't encounter any bugs while playing. I did run into plenty of problems that weren't ultimately user error.

So how long did I get stuck sitting down and trying to move around? I don't even want to tell you. But the help system independently generated a popup based on my attempts to move while seated and suggested a detailed solution in clear and helpful language. As great as the pop up help can be early in the game, it would be nice for the game to start players off in a gauntlet area to introduce and practice controls and actions. Or, as crazy as this might be, Funcom could have based the control scheme on industry standard controls *and* made a better attempt to induct new players into the system.

You can petition for in game support, with help handed down from the mighty above, but for efficiency, you can't beat looking stuff up yourself. The *AO* official site links to the largest support and community sites of *AO*, such as the *AO* Main-frame [<http://aomainframe.info>] and the *AO* Vault at ign [<http://aovault.ign.com>]. The in-game help is only marginally helpful and arranged in limited categories, so you're generally better off looking it up yourself or asking other players.

To Play or Not to Play

So once I stop typing this article, am I going to play *Anarchy Online* any more? Probably not. For a player who isn't already dedicated to the MMORPG altar, *AO* doesn't offer enough transition help or interest grabbing novelty. The sci-fi theme was more palatable, I'll admit, but a neat storyline can't make up for failing miserably to engage. Top it off with a seriously frustrating control system and the whole enterprise goes can be circular filed. *AO* remains in the land of the few, the proud, the dedicated MMORPGers.



LAST CALL: It's not bad, but not thrilling either. If you're in the market for a sci-fi MMORPG or curious about playing one, grab this free game and give it a spin. But don't expect a life altering experience.