



# Star Trek Online Lives

By [David Blue](#)

## The ancient IP's MMO is still Online, albeit with some disappointing discontinuations.

I entertained fantasies about a *Star Trek* MMO since first experiencing the genre through *Eve Online* and *World of Warcraft* in early adolescence. The idea of commanding my own starship in a universe of other “captains” alongside a hand-picked bridge crew was a beguiling one to myself and many others. This year, the game celebrated its [ten-year anniversary](#) (aligning well with the [continued involuntary beat](#) of this blog.) I’m currently in the midst of my annual check-in with STO and thought an exploration of this most-consequential video game of my life’s history would be an appropriate undertaking.

The execution of today’s final, Arc Games-owned and maintained product is a particularly long and interesting one. As [Justin Olivetti chronicled for Engadget](#), the license for *Star Trek Online* was originally [bought](#) and developed on by Perpetual Entertainment, which was assaulted by [a lawsuit](#) and extensive layoffs in December, 2006. The company was sued by Kohnke Communications for allegedly selling

"valuable assets like the Star Trek Online license" to an affiliated entity called P2 entertainment. Clever. A quote from the complaint as [reported by Ten Ton Hammer](#):

*"On information and belief, the assets transferred to P2 include Perpetual Entertainment trademarks and copyrights, the perpetual.com domain name, and assets related to Star Trek Online, including code and the license... Perpetual received less than market value for the assets it transferred to P2, and the transfer made Perpetual insolvent (or worsened Perpetual's existing insolvency)."*

[Perpetual's STO](#) was significantly different from today's MMO. Instead of captaining one's own starship, "players would have taken on the role of an officer who would be part of a crew of a starship," echoing old legacy titles like [Star Trek: Bridge Commander](#).

*The proposed solution was that players could own smaller ships like fighters and minor spaceships, but the big ones -- like the Galaxy class -- would instead be adventure hubs with explorable, detailed interiors.*



I was 14 in 2008 when I joined the original post-Perpetual Entertainment STO IRC channel when the game's license was [first transferred](#) to Cryptic Studios. In fact, this channel was the only reason I left IRC clients open on my computers for years. It was exciting to find a community of people who were looking forward to participating in a *Star Trek* MMO as much as I was. I originally went by the (very cringey) username "crazyhooligan," under which my current STO account is [still registered](#). In the IRC channel, I met Sata - host of the now-defunct [MMO Junkies podcast](#) and ex-Perpetual developer. He and the STORadio crew accepted me into their Teamspeak conversations despite how strange and unsocialized I was. I learned how [extensive](#) and [beautiful](#) their development had been. One wonders what Cryptic did with the original game and art assets and who technically owns them now.



After [acquiring the rights](#) to make the game in early-2008, Cryptic was legally compelled to come up with a completed product in two years' time as then-Executive Producer [Stephen D'Angelo](#) explained on the [100<sup>th</sup> episode of the STOked podcast](#):

*We were under a very massive deadline to deliver the game. We had acquired the license from Perpetual and Perpetual's license had an expiration date on it, and we had to ship the game before the expiration date or we would lose the license.*

*STOked* also provided an excellent historical account of the acquisition entitled "[How Cryptic Saved Star Trek Online](#)." By late-Fall, 2009, *Star Trek Online* [entered Closed Beta](#), which I somehow acquired a key for in the name of [STOHolic.com](#) (a blogger site which represents one of my first web projects ever.) I was dual-booting Windows 7 Beta on my 2008 MacBook, which only supported 2 of its 4GB of RAM. The

resulting performance was not optimal, but I was tremendously excited just to participate. Somewhere, there are at least three 480p handicam videos of Closed and Open Beta gameplay taken from over my shoulder, but I could not find them at the time of this writing. Comparatively, beta looked drastically different from the property that's online today. In [this video of the original entry tutorial](#), we are introduced to the game's basic controls by the voice of Zachary Quinto of J.J. Abrams fame as the new Emergency Medical Hologram in godawful dropshadowed text. The lighting is dated, the blue-based user interface even more so.



The hair was bad and the textures of the armor, worse. So was mine, though. I uploaded two videos under my STOholic name: an [unboxing of the Collector's Edition](#) and what appears to be [the definitive YouTube tutorial](#) to run *Star Trek Online* on Mac OSX using the (now defunct) wineskin wrapper. Though I was sixteen years old, I appear to be about eight. Endless waves of ground enemies, pressing the "1" key hundreds of thousands of times to whittle them away with my phaser rifle. There were bugs on top of bugs. My favorite was a swap between one's ground and space avatars: a gigantic captain would appear in space and a little ship would appear on the ground.

Four years ago, Lead Developer Al Rivera wrote “[History of Star Trek Online – a Retrospective](#)” – a blog post detailing the chronology of the game from its February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010 release date – about a week after my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, for which my mom bought me my first and only gaming PC. I have never been very good at video games, and *Star Trek Online* has been no exception. After 10 years, my main Captain – Ambassador Kuvak – is still not doing adequate DPS to hold my own in [Task Force Operations](#), from what I understand. My 15-16-year-old self chose a Science Captain but wanted to fly the great (engineering/tank-focused) cruisers of *The Original Series*, *The Next Generation*, and the latter's movies. This is possible, but not necessarily advised. Generally, one specs an Engineering Captain to tank, a Tactical Captain for DPS, and a Science Captain for “[exotic DPS](#)” and light healing. I managed to level a single science character – the original – through to the max ranks using little intelligence and a lot of persistence. Later in life, I've learned the patience for a more deliberate approach, but still struggle to make the numbers.

## The Exploration System

For many *Star Trek* fans, *Star Trek Online*'s combat feels excessive. Or at least, that's what you'd think. The current reality is that search engine results for “[too much combat in STO](#)” are virtually nill. There are some comments on [Massively Overpowered](#) posts, a [year-old blog post in Contains Moderate Peril](#) by Roger Edwards, an old [Ryan Somna take](#), and... that's about it. There was a definite (and entirely reasonable) argument against the amount of combat across the community early in the game's development, but it looks like the arguers have simmered down and/or given up. This is also reasonable, considering its now



ten-year lifespan. The only trouble is that non-combat options in *Star Trek Online* have actually diminished over the years.

The original [Exploration System](#) was an ingenious and significant idea that “[used automated tools to facilitate large quantities of widely varied content](#).” Unfortunately, the result was “nothing close to what [Cryptic] originally planned.” Instead of inspiring variety, Exploration Clusters ended up becoming the most repetitive activity in the game – nothing more than a good source of crafting materials. The missions were generic and the environments simply randomly combined segments of the same interior textures. Procedurally generated environments would hit the mainstream conversation years later with [No Man’s Sky](#), which was written about in two fascinating articles by Raffi Khatchadourian in [The New Yorker](#) and Chris Baker in [Rolling Stone](#):

*Using procedural generation isn’t simply about offloading the creative process onto an algorithm – the real challenge is that it requires developers to teach an algorithm the difference between good and bad game design.*

Perhaps if *Star Trek Online*’s initial development window had not been so limited, Cryptic would’ve had time and resources to pioneer something truly *Trek* and extraordinary in the exploration system, but it ended up having to kill the idea altogether – no amount of [Change.org petitions](#) could prevent this.



## The Foundry

Perhaps the most innovative feature *Star Trek Online* contributed to gaming as a whole came to the live server in Spring, 2011. It was called [The Foundry](#), and it allowed players access to a diluted form of the

same mission creation tools Cryptic themselves used to create content, enabling the community to publish its own playable stories. The result was a wonder virtually inexpressible in words. In player-made Foundry Missions, I found joy, wonder, sorrow, and insight – truly everything and more than one could ever want from fiction. Throughout 2013-2014 my girlfriend at the time and I ran regular [Foundry missions](#) together along with couple friends in our fleet. Unfortunately, I cannot remember a single specific mission (aside from [Unholy Alliances](#), I think,) but I remember the storytelling. I remember laughing at, dwelling on, and even crying for the characters we were introduced to. There were farming-oriented missions and some fairly rough drafts, sure, but the vast majority of the content was deliberately and delicately considered, especially the [Foundry Spotlight](#) series, which highlighted player-created stories of a particular quality and intrigue.



Last April, however, [Arc retired the Foundry forever](#) – perhaps the worst possible news – stating “the legacy knowledge required to maintain the Foundry at our quality standards is no longer available,” meaning – as [Rodger Edwards notes](#) – that all developers with their hands, hearts, and heads in the project had long since departed the company. The community reaction was heartbreak. On Reddit, a group of mission authors and devotees [committed to capturing](#) as many Foundry Missions as possible on video in the month between the announcement and date of death. User [waimser](#) lamented the loss of the Foundry as a critical hit to *Star Trek Online*'s endgame:

Once you've played through the story missions and built your ship, the foundry is what's left, and it has some damn good stuff.

The group even created a Google Docs spreadsheet to coordinate the effort. Another created [a thread in the Star Trek Online forums](#) dedicated to "aggregating the various channels with Foundry content and providing those links to you and updating them as necessary." In [an interview for Gamesindustry.biz](#), Al Rivera suggested that the secret to the title's longevity in which his team had been "strategically successful" was knowing when and when not to make drastic changes. "Don't change the fundamentals of what players love about your game," he suggested.



## Community

Though *STOked* and *STORadio* have long since been off the air, the Roddenberry Podcast Network's *PriorityOne* is still going strong, having just recorded [its 460<sup>th</sup> episode](#). As I discovered last year, the game's Twitch community is also thriving. [Layiena](#)'s streams are incredible because - while he understands theory as well as the other broadcasters in the STO Twitch community - it's his incredible skills at live Captain commentary (calling out abilities and other command inputs as if he really is in the captain's chair.) It may sound cringey (and perhaps it would be to many,) but his thoroughness and accuracy actually 1) make it seem pretty darn cool to me and 2) are hugely valuable in helping the viewer understand what he's doing.

After some three years, I know my one rotation fairly well, but only three or four of its steps by name – not even remotely well enough to do what he does. Unfortunately, it appears as though he's been inactive since last year.

[Sphynx](#)'s streams also have an especially professional feel – he is excellent at calling out his actions as well, if perhaps without so much intensity. His Norwegian sensibility is wonderful: when I introduced myself as being around in the community since 2008, he remarked "that's strange considering the game has only been out since 2010." Nigh-universally common threads among them: imperturbable kindness to their audience and an impressively wholesome commitment to *actually having fun*. Though I'm far from deeply saturated with Twitch culture as a whole, I've watched my fair share of *Eve Online*, *World of Warships*, and *Gran Turismo Sport* streams, and – while all of these have incredible communities – there's none quite like the sincerity of the *Star Trek* fraternity.

A few weeks ago, I departed my own derelict STO fleet for the aptly-named [United Federation of Planets](#) which has over three thousand (presumably at least semi-active) members in its [fleet armada](#). The fleet website has [user profiles](#), a [very active forum](#), and a [Discord server](#) – everything I could possibly ask for. So far, I have been welcomed with [overwhelming positivity](#), and I'm grateful. In a prompt posted on both [their forums](#) and [Reddit](#), I asked players what their favorite part of the community is. Oddly enough, some of the responses I got from the latter were quite jaded: "I really enjoy the love and respect the PVP community gets. No, wait..." [Alex Rowe for \*The Startup\*](#):

*The game's subreddit is full of folks who are tired of the game because they've blasted through all the content, but as someone who has only seen about 1/6th of the quests currently in the game, I'm eager to check out more.*

User [JediMasterx4](#) seemed [particularly disgruntled](#):

*You can do all the lockbox promo vids you want, but you are going to have to live in reality, no matter where your ego flies off to.*

However, there *were* some positives. User [ModestArk](#):

*What I really like about this community is that it seems to be more grown up than other gaming communities. Maybe this comes from Star Trek itself, since it is more based/focused on science than Star Wars etc.*

[Jahoan](#) recommends [StarSword's series on the U.S.S. Bajor](#) and [Jordanomega1](#) vouched for [Captain Geronimo's videos](#).



## State of The Game

This past January, *Star Trek Online: Legacy* was [launched](#), bringing *The Original Series*-referencing episodes *The Measure of Morality* parts [I](#) and [II](#) along with a new [10 year anniversary event](#) and the [Tier 6 Khitomer Alliance Battlecruiser](#) – “the first Klingon/Federation Starship.” I did not participate in the event, save for experiencing the new missions, which I talked about in [my review of \*Star Trek: Discovery\*](#). JustGaming4Us produced an excellent, [in-depth video review](#) of the two missions as well as a [tour of the event as a whole](#). I, for one, have never been partial to Shiny New Ship gluttony largely because of how long it took me to “master” my own Intrepid-Class Retrofit – christened the U.S.S. *Bataan* after the aircraft carrier my grandfather served on in WWII – as much as I have. It took me years to arrange my bridge officer abilities and their keybinds in such a way that I could maintain a fairly-steady dps rotation and I have no desire to go through the process of learning a new ship again. For most veteran players, however, trying out different ships/skill specs is all there is left to do.

Choosing whether or not – or to whom – to recommend the game is an issue best left to actual gaming journalists. In March, *Massively Overpowered* – the followup project to what was once *Massively.com* – published [Mia DeSanzo’s account](#) of her first experience in the game:

*Everything you’ve heard is true. Ground combat is, as multiple sources have told me, “a hot mess.” I don’t think clunky is an adequate descriptor. You’d have to try it.*

For the same site, [Tyler F.M. Edwards argued](#) in January that *Star Trek Online* is best left to those who already love *Star Trek*:

*STO has some things going for it as a video game, and it's certainly unique in the MMO space, but it has too many basis quality issues for it to be a game I'd recommend to someone who's never watched an episode of Star Trek.*

Compared to what I experienced all those years ago in Closed and Open Beta, *Star Trek Online* is now *vastly* more polished, but perhaps compared to other MMOs in 2020, it is, indeed, “rough.” In my casual return this past month, I have yet to experience any significant bugs. Considering his character data dates back to launch, I’d like to think that the server is set into some brief, confused panic every time I log in to Kuvak, but perhaps that’s just a fantasy. I have still been enjoying the space combat in the classic Advanced-level [Borg Disconnected](#) and [Counterpoint](#) TFOs and my first entry into high-level gear upgrade crafting from the vast cache of materials I’ve built up over the years. Apparently, my old lockbox collection might actually be worth some significant Energy Credits on the Exchange – as of the time of this writing, however, not a one had yet to sell.



If you’re a ship junkie who’s entirely unfamiliar with the property, know that *Star Trek*’s ships are *fucking cute*. The [Nebula Class](#), especially, inspires real affection. In my opinion, it alone is worth giving this free-to-play game a shot. My two point eight pound [Surface Laptop 2](#) is enough to run it fairly well at medium-

high settings, which is an absurdly low barrier-to-entry. You shouldn't be worried about investing your time, either – *Star Trek* doesn't appear to be dying anytime soon.