

Glossy PARTIES

Hocus pocus, party magic

Gamer's extravagant birthday celebration revealed more tricks up Richard Garriott's creative sleeves

By Lilly Rockwell

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

There are parties. And then there are *parties*.

Austin game developer Richard Garriott knows how to throw the latter. On a cold night in November, Garriott hosted his annual themed birthday bash at his house in West Austin, a 4,000-square-foot home that sits atop the highest point in the city.

The much-publicized house has secret passageways galore and an observatory at the top. His parties always feature outlandish themes, including a "Wizard of Oz" fête, complete with a fake storm and tornado, and a Titanic gala (more on that later).

For this year's "Magic at the Manor," Garriott flew in 16 of the best magicians in the world. He works on these parties all year round, and hired several party planners to do the heavy lifting. One was Austin magician Brad Henderson, who helped coordinate the magicians. Sources guessed the party cost at least \$150,000 to put together.

Garriott thrives on mystery and suspense, and this party was a celebration of both, starting with elaborate invitations that required recipients to go to a Web site, work a mathematical equation, burn the invitation and then go to another Web site to learn the party details.

Two of those details: Magic would be the theme, and guests could wear only black and white.

To enter, partygoers had to walk the red carpet, complete with bulbs flashing, and photographers shouting at them to "strike a pose."

Guests were led inside a massive white tent near Garriott's pool, with dozens of white tables, centerpieces of popcorn-filled vases and rows of white chairs facing a stage. About every half-hour, Pappadeux Catering brought out more food, from candies made to look like playing cards, to chocolate-covered strawberries, raspberry chocolate mousse, and turkey, ham and roast beef sandwiches. The treats could all be knocked back with anything from the open bar.

All the 100 guests were given a black lanyard with a playing card attached that determined which group they would be in for the evening. For example, the Queen of Hearts included City Council Member Brewster McCracken, newly elected state Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin, and Garriott. The magicians entertained the groups with sleight-of-hand tricks, each one more astounding than the next.

One was dressed as a clown that could pull coins out of thin air and make pages appear and disappear in a children's coloring book. Another magician pulled a small rabbit out of his long, curly black hair and made a dollar bill turn into a butterfly.

"The whole night was amazing," said Maria Parks, a doctoral student in anthropology at Texas A&M University. "From the very beginning when you roll up and there is a red carpet and the fake paparazzi — it was just so well-conceived and so well-thought out."

Even the magicians, who have

performed at parties around the world, were impressed with this shindig.

"This is a spectacular party," said Eric Mead, who traveled from Aspen, Colo., where he regularly performs at the Tower Comedy/Magic Bar. "The whole thing, the back story, flying us all in here, is amazing."

Garriott is well-known for throwing outlandish parties that leave his guests talking about them for weeks, months and even years to come. He made his fortune on the Ultima series of role-playing games. He now runs South Korean-based NCsoft Corp. in Austin.

Perhaps his most memorable soiree was the "Titanic" party in 1998. (That same year, Garriott paid \$65,000 for an excursion to visit the ship's wreckage.) Partygoers were told to dress in period costumes and dined aboard a replica of the Titanic.

True to its theme, an "iceberg" (actually another barge) surprised guests by slamming into the fake Titanic ship, which started slowly sinking.

Garriott's guests, many of whom were in tuxes and dresses, were forced to swim to the shores of Lake Austin. Only a handful were able to get on board the lifeboats, much like with the Titanic tragedy.

Garriott said he notified the Lake Austin authorities in advance, and had lifeguards surrounding the ship at all times. No one was injured, and partygoers left with quite a story to tell.

For Garriott, these annual parties are the highlight of his year. He prefers them even to his beloved computer games.

At least with a party, Garriott said, he gets to see everyone enjoying his creations.

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In boa and bunny ears, NCsoft art director John Muelle holds a bird that magically appeared during the party.





1. Jesus Chavez and Heidi Adams
2. NCsoft facilities manager Jeff Hillhouse and wife Missy Hillhouse
3. Tom and Nicola Shelley, Leona Snell and father Dallas Snell
4. Magician David Williamson as 'Lynch the Genie'
5. NCsoft Austin chief Richard Garriott and Brad Henderson
6. NCsoft game designer Wynne McLaughlin and wife Cathy McLaughlin, magical apparatus creator Nick Ruggiero, NCsoft game designer Susan Kath and NCsoft customer support representative Keith Quinn
7. Janna Bureson and Jesus Chavez enjoy a playing card illusion.
8. A magician does a coin trick at the party.

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