



The CRPG Book Project

Sharing the History of Computer Role-Playing Games

200-page preview
June 2015

Welcome back!

This second public release of the CPRG Book Project comes six months after our previous release, but packing twice the content! Here you'll find information about more than 100 RPGs, from 1978 to 2014, written by fans, developers, journalists and modders across the globe.

There are a few additions worth a special mention, such as a new layout for double-page widescreen reviews, a prototype of a 'five year summary page' to split the reviews and offer some context (page 96), and an article about Sir-Tech's story and legacy (page 178). Spanish readers will probably enjoy to see an old friend, Ferhergón, writing about his favorite RPG: *Shadowlands* (page 60).

As I explained last time, the purpose of these releases is to serve as "beta test" of the book, so we can use the feedback to continuously improve the project. The last release had over 32k downloads and some fantastic feedback, so we're excited to see how this one will be received. This is still an "alpha build" of the book, so there are still issues such as missing sections and temporary screenshots. Also, there isn't a reference section yet, to show from where all the developer quotes and data comes from, but don't worry, it will be there!

This release is particularly exciting for it marks a halfway point for the project, since we expect the final book to have around 400 pages. There are more finished reviews in stock, as well as currently being written and edited, but being able to put about half of the book out there for everyone to read feels like a great achievement – a good payoff for 16 months of hard work.

However, there are many more games that still need to be reviewed, so, if you're interested in helping us, please visit us at <https://crpgbook.wordpress.com/> or e-mail us: crpgbook@gmail.com

Thank you for reading

Felipe Pepe,
Project Editor
10/06/2015

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Contributors

The full list of kind souls who volunteered to help the project is over four pages long, and many still are writing their text or haven't told how they want to be credited. Hopefully we'll soon be able to give full credit for everyone but, for the time, we'll list here only those whose reviews are featured in this early preview:

Andre Stenhouse (AS) didn't own a single console game until high school, but played *Quest for Glory* with her father and read stacks of books.

Arkadiusz Makiela (AM) got his first computer, an Atari 65XE, at the age of 10. This was the beginning of his quest for an ultimate RPG. Today, he still doesn't realise there's no such thing.

Árni Víkingur (ÁV) has been sheltering from the Icelandic frost by a warm computer since 1986 and therefore knows far too much about video games.

Blobert (BL) Started with RPGs with *Phantasie III* on the C64. Fell in love *Ultima V*, and continues to play CRPGs when his 4 kids give him the chance.

Branislav Mikulka (BM) resides in the land of the leprechauns. Got stuck in the MS-DOS gaming era, secretly admires trashy movies from the 50's and thinks Philip K. Dick was the best writer ever.

Brian 'Psychochild' Green (BG) is an MMO developer who first played text MUDs and a lot more friendly than his pseudonym might indicate.

Brian Stratton (BS) started playing CRPGs in third grade and still lives for fighting minotaurs, dragons, orcs and the undead.

B. White "MrNovanova" (BW) is a writer who remembers when *Knights of Legend* would make his floppy drive melt. Inquiries can be sent to forbwhite@gmail.com

Casiel Raegis (CR) is a North Carolina-based film director whose backlog is larger than this book.

Chris Avellone (MCA) is reported to be friendly, non-toxic, and his mother still doesn't understand what he does on a daily basis, but he loves her anyway.

Christopher Ables (CH) has a passion for gaming history. He and his wife grew up gaming and love playing both new and old-school games together.

Crooked Bee (CB) got to be the RPG Codex's editor-in-chief after defeating the previous editor in a game of *Wizardry IV*. That should tell you all you need to know about her.

Daniel D'Agostino (DD) became a software developer to learn how to create games. Ironically, he now seldom finds time for games thanks to software development itself.

Darth Roxor (DR) likes *Betrayal at Krondor*, naked volleyball and putting as many adverbs into his articles as possible.

Deuce Traveler (DT) has many hobbies besides CRPGs. He also likes beer, exercise, pulp novels, chess, and the occasional screw.

Durante (DU) role-plays a scientist by day and an RPG gamer at night. He has a thing for intricate systems and simulations, even if they are needlessly complex.

Felipe Pepe (FE) the idiot who thought he would complete this book in just six months.

Ferhégón (FHG) used to host "Maniacos del Calabozo" and thinks old gold times for RPG are gone. In any case, he spent a long time in an examination of *Skyrim*. After that, he degenerated into economist theorist and only plays with thoughts.

Frank "HiddenX" Wecke (HX) The Elder Spy, Game Curator & Editor at RPGWatch, RPGLot veteran and special emissary at the RPGCodex.

Gabor "J_C" Domjan (JC) I was fortunate enough to grow up in the 1990s, so I was part of the golden age of gaming. I enjoy most genres, but CRPGs

Garfunkel (GA) got C-64 for Christmas, detoured briefly to Amiga 500 before settling in with a PC in the 90's and has never strayed elsewhere.

Geo Ashton (GE) is an avid writer who enjoys playing video games and reading about gaming culture.

George Weidman (GW) makes videos a few people enjoy. He has lost years of his life to the *Fallout* series, and regrets nothing.

Grant Torre (GT) Living in the state of Michigan, he spends his time with drumming, literature, video games, and everything else geek culture has to offer.

Guilherme De Sousa (GD) has enjoyed CRPGs since playing *Ultima IV* on the C64 back in the mid 1980s. Also interested in creating his own CRPGs inspired by the classics he grew up with.

Hannah and Joe Williams (H&JW) are a married couple LARPing as computer game creators and part-time hermits.

Ian Frazier (IF) is a game designer whose hobbies include painting minis and banishing unfathomable evils to the outer darkness.

Ivan Mitrović (IM) Proud member of the PC master race, in 2001 I tried my first RPG, *Planescape: Torment* which up to this day remains my favorite game.

Jack “Highwang” Ragasa (JR) is a youtube game reviewer that attributes many years of videogames to his overly verbose nature.

Jakub Wichnowski (JW) Story is what I value the most in games and I hope that one day I'll be able to make a game at least half as good as *Planescape: Torment*.

James McDermott (JM) is a musician that plays too many games. He is still waiting patiently for *Arcanum 2*.

Jedi Master Radek (JMR) from the very deep of his basement is scheming to take over the world. Hoping to turn all readers into his mindless puppets.

Jörn Grote (JG) had to decide whether to learn for final school examinations or play *Fallout*. It worked out for the best.

Kenneth Kully (KK) inadvertently created the biggest hub of *Ultima* news and fan activity online, and still finds time for it when he isn't on call as a father or Scout leader!

M. Simard (MS) prefers to stay in the basement during summer, although his German Shepherd does take him out for a walk every once in a while

Maciej Miszczyk (MM) Gamer since early childhood, loves games of all kinds but prefers either RPGs from mid-to-late 90s or anything that's obscure, complex, difficult or unique.

Mathias Haaf (MH) Amateur writer from Germany and an avid collector and player of IBM MS-DOS RPGs. Has a [YouTube channel](#) where he posts videos on his beloved hobby.

Nicolas Hennemann (NH) freelance writer and translator, took the chance to tell you about his favorite game and ran with it.

Nicole “Jaz” Schuhmacher (NS) grew up with *Pong* and is still a multi-platform gamer. She gets all teary-eyed when thinking of the games of the '90s.

Nostaljaded (NJ) can be found lurking in the Bearpit. No other known facts other than a quirky one who prefers the veil over limelight.

Octavius (OC)

Reggie Carolipio (RC) has been trying not to walk and turn in 90° angles or (A) tack stray monsters without armor since the 80s. Tries writing about games past and present whenever he can emerge from beneath Mt. Backlog.

Richard Mitchell (RM) got his CRPG start with *Ultima 1* on the Commodore 64 in 1988. He would like to say it's been all downhill ever since but *Star Wars* and comic books would disagree.

Ryan Ridlen (RR) Hooked on RPGs since *Betrayal at Krondor*. Loves story-driven games and turn-based tactical combat.

Robert Bailey (RB) is a member of RPG Watch who still collects and plays C64 RPGs and quite readily goes misty eyed upon reflecting on the games which got him started on this grand adventure.

Rob Taylor (RT) has been hanging out in Waterdeep tavern, enjoying the vibe, since 1991. He was a professional games journalist in another life.

Scorpia (SC) is still crazy (gaming) after all these years. Sometimes, she wishes we were still in the 8-bit era. See Cartography (page 8) for other times.

Scrooge (SR) got into computer gaming relatively late, being a part of the console crowd before. Since then she loves soaking up everything that's turn- and party based.

Shanga@Bearpit (SH) Cuddly fierce bear who doesn't like to share his food, but would gladly starve and let you eat it all if you're a nice person.

SniperHF (SD) started playing RPGs on complete opposite ends of the spectrum with *Fallout* and *Diablo*. He has been addicted to the genre ever since.

Silver Girl (SG)

Suzie Ng (SN) CRPG enthusiast since *Baldur's Gate II*, enjoys party-based games with good NPC interactions, and dreaming of getting involved in mod development.

Thomas Ribault (TR) can't stop talking with his hands. He loves CRPG so much that he is writing a PHD about them.

Tim Cain (TC) has been making video games since before it was cool. You know, like in the 80's.

Vadim Keilin (VK) is a scholar whose academic job gives him the perfect excuse to play games - because, you know, research.

VioletShadow (VS) would like to be a figure skater in the next life. In this one, she frequents questionable forums and plays *Bloodlines*.

Werner Spahl (WS) is an analytical chemist who never would have thought that fixing a game is sometimes more fun than playing it.

Wojtek “Mico Selva” Misiurka (WM) is a failed fan-fiction writer turned world class time waster, with an ever-growing backlog of stuff to do.

Special thanks to:

The RPG Codex, RPG Watch, Hardcore Gaming 101, The Ultima Codex, The Internet Archive, Matt Chat, MobyGames, Cyber1, CGW Museum, DJ OldGames, DOSBox, The Digital Antiquarian, Museum of Computer Adventure Game History, The LP Archive, The CRPG Addict and every unsung hero who worked on or contributed to these websites, who developed emulators, ports for modern systems, mods, fan-patches, archived rare games or uploaded footage of them to Youtube. Even this rough preview would have been impossible without all of you.

And, of course, a most special thanks to those who created all these games in the first place, as well as those who put their best into games that unfortunately never saw the light of day. This book is a tribute to your work.



B

C

D

Might and Magic®



Castle Basenji

Desert of the Sphinx

Barbaric Mountains

Warzone

Ogre Hills

Winterkill

Cave of Illusion

Troll Forest

Land of the Giants

Darkstone Tower

Tower of High Magic

Newcastle

Rivercity

Fairy Forest

Lifeforce Lagoon

Nightshadow

Jousting's Savannah

Asp

Gargoyle Range

Dragon-Tower

Lava

Red Dwarf Range

Castle Burlock

Darzog's Tower

Land of Xeen



Articles & Guides

Here will be featured various articles and guides about retro-gaming, gaming history, CRPGs and how to better enjoy them. In this preview, we included three articles:

The first article is from Jay Barson, developer at Rampant Games and prolific writer, full of insights into the RPG genre.

The second comes from Michael Abbott. He writes at the Brainy Gamer blog/podcast, a great place for debating games & the gaming industry.

And finally, Scorpia, the anonymous legend of gaming journalism. She was the CRPG expert for Computer Gaming World magazine during the 80's and most of the 90's. Until 2009 she posted at Scorpia's Gaming Lair, but has unfortunately retired. Still, she was kind enough to contribute with an article and a couple of reviews for this book.

For the full book, we intend to include articles on the home computers from the past, on the early PLATO CRPGs from the 70's and a brief history of Role-Playing Games as a whole.

The map for
Might & Magic
IV: Clouds of
Xeen, by artist
Michael
Winterbauer.

What is an Old-School RPG?

by Jay Barnson

I'm going to make a confession. This is a big one, coming from a designer of an "old-school style" CRPG, and from a guy who's constantly harping on the joys of old-school gaming.

I don't know what the hell "old-school" means.

Sure, I was there playing these old classics when they were new, and I still play some of them today (Hey, I just re-played *Ultima III* a few months ago!) I remember clearly when *The Bard's Tale* was the hot new thing. I was reading "behind the scenes" articles in magazines and books when the big players of the era seemed like they'd be pumping out RPGs until the end of time ... and are now long shuttered. I've chatted with some of these guys at length at GDC (back when it was called CGDC, even). But that doesn't mean I know what I'm talking about.

And sure, I've got my own little pet ideas, but they apparently conflict with other people's ideas, so apparently I don't really understand what it means. That, or old-school is in the eye of the beholder.

For example... turn-based vs. real-time (or "action"). Action-based, "real-time" RPGs have been with us for a very, very long time. I like to refer back to *Gateway to Apshai*, published in 1983 (yeah, over a decade before *Diablo*), which was pure action-arcade-RPG. You had the trappings of an RPG, gathering loot and gaining levels as you used the joystick to do action-based battle against pixellated bad-guys. We can also go back to *Ultima III* or *Telengard*, two of the earliest CRPGs I ever played. These were "real-time turn-based" if that makes any sense. You had time limits to choose your actions. Worse, the only "pause" command was getting into some input loop where the games were asking for additional details or confirmation of your action.

So really, as far as I'm concerned, and as much as I like to refer to "turn-based" games as "old school", the truth of the matter is that both have been with us about as long as we've had commercial CRPGs. There's absolutely nothing inherently new or improved or better about action-based gaming. And there were absolutely no technical limitations preventing RPGs from being real-time / action based back in the day, Mr. Findley*. (Hopefully he's repented of that attitude now that they're working on *Wasteland 2*). There were lots of action-RPGs back then.

I don't know what the hell "old-school" means.

The variety runs the gamut. Perspective? We had top-down, first-person, iso, side-scrolling, hybrids, and variations like crazy. Even many games that changed perspective when combat started. Complexity?

You've got dirt-simple titles from back in the day that makes the most "dumbed-down" modern offerings seem like piloting the space shuttle by comparison. And then you have some pretty awesomely over-the-top tactical stuff, likeSSI's *Wizard's Crown*. And humongously detailed systems with tons of dynamic-generated content and gazillions of factions, like *Daggerfall*. And everything in-between. Old-school games had you exploring a single, open-ended dungeon. Or an open-ended world. Or led you along a very constrained path, level-by-level.

We can't even agree about a time-period for "old-school." Maybe it's my age, but I still have a tough time thinking of any game published in a year that begins with a "2" as "old-school." It's like... for me, you take the history of commercial computer games, which for me begins around 1979, and mark it at the halfway point between then and now – which would be about 1996 – and set that as the "old-school" demarcation.



Gateway to Asphai: action-based battles back in 1983.



Ultima III imposed time limits on your decisions.



The awesomely over-the-top Wizard's Crown.



Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse, RPG or not? No one cared.

Yeah, I'll give it a little bit of extra slosh, but I have a tough time thinking of a game like *Oblivion* as old-school. Friggin' kids. Plus, as I'm a retro-gamer who is still playing older games for the first time (I just recently finished *Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords*), I have a tough time thinking of some of these games as being all that old.

When I talk old-school, I tend to talk about the classic games that I personally played, which included some classics as well as some stinkers. Back then, I didn't worry about whether *Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse* was a "real" RPG or not. Hardly anybody worried about that until the "boom" of RPGs hit its peak in the early 90s and then started contracting. Sure, you occasionally had an article explaining the difference between the two popular genres, RPGs vs. Adventure Games. How quaint that seems now. Really – it was all good. Except when it was bad. When did we start worrying so hard about what box we fit these games into, anyway? And how did that happen?

So you wanna know what "old-school" means? Maybe it means all the amazing variety of game styles that used to be sold but are no longer "in vogue"

amongst mainstream publishers. Instead, they've narrowed their scope down to just a tiny handful of crowd-pleasing styles that they keep trying to perfect. But as the whole "mainstream publishing" thing is also losing relevance (at least for PC development), I don't even understand how important that really is anymore.

I'm still going to refer to some of the things I do as "old-school," but like the word "indie," it's really just a poor shorthand to potential players to reset expectations. But old is the new new. Or something like that.

But really, I still don't know what the hell I'm talking about.

March 18, 2013¹

Jay Barnson been playing video games since *Pac-Man* and *Wizardry* were hot stuff, and has been creating both indie games and top-shelf "AAA" retail games for over a decade.

1 Originally posted at: <http://rampantgames.com/blog/?p=1180>

Unplayable

by Michael Abbott

One of my most satisfying moments as a teacher came two years ago when 15 students overcame their resistance and disorientation and embraced the original *Fallout*. I wrote about that experience¹, and since then I've continued to challenge my students with games that fall well outside their comfort zones: arcade classics (e.g. *Defender*); interactive fiction (e.g. *Planetfall*); and early dungeon-crawlers (e.g. *Rogue*).

But I've noticed a general downward trajectory forming over the last six years or so. Gradually my students have grown less and less capable of handling one particular assignment: *Ultima IV*. To be sure, they struggle with a game like *Planetfall*, but when they finally learn the game's syntax (and heed my advice to map their progress), it's mostly a question of puzzle-solving. *Defender* knocks them down initially, but they soon apply the quick reflexes they've developed playing modern games, and they're fine.

Ultima IV is another story. Here's a sampling of posts from the forum I set up to facilitate out-of-class discussion of the game:

"I've been very confused throughout the entire experience. I've honestly sat here for hours trying to figure out what to do and it just isn't making much sense to me right now."

"When I start a game I like to do it all on my own, but it's been impossible to do so with Ultima. I've asked friends for help, looked up FAQs/walkthroughs, and even searched for Let's Play Ultima 4 on youtube and I am still uncertain as to how to get further in this game."

"Yeah, I still have no idea what the main goal is. I suppose it's to basically find out what the purpose of the Ankh is. But I see no way of furthering that goal!"

"I tried for awhile without any walkthroughs to get the full gamer experience sort thing and within the hour I gave up because of a combination of bad controls and a hard to get into story for me at least. It reminded me of a bad RuneScape."

"I don't quite understand the concept of the game. I believe my main confusion is the controls and how it displays what you have done and how you moved. I'm not used to RPG's and I don't like them too much. I hope to find out how to move forward, but so far no luck."

"How the hell do I get out of here after I die?"

They had five days to play *U4*, and I asked them to make as much progress as they could in that time. When we gathered to debrief in class, a few students explained how they'd overcome some of their difficulties, but the vast majority was utterly flummoxed by the game. As one of them put it, "I'd say for gamers of our generation, an RPG like *Ultima IV* is boring and pretty much unplayable." After removing the arrow from my chest, I asked them to explain why.

It mostly came down to issues of user-interface, navigation, combat, and a general lack of clarity about what to do and how to do it. I had supplied them with the Book of Mystic Wisdom and the History of Britannia, both in PDF form, but not a single student bothered to read them. "I thought that was just stuff they put in the box with the game," said one student.

CHAPTER I

POLITICAL HISTORY



The Dark Ages of Britannia is the name given to that long span of time when the infamous Triad Of Evil stalked the lands and challenged all for the supremacy of the soul.

The First Era of the Dark Ages came to an end with the downfall of the evil Wizard Mondain and his many minions, as chronicled in *Ultima I*. The Lords of the lands were weak and scattered, rendered ineffective by factional wars. It was only through the valiant efforts of an itinerant adventurer that the foul Mondain was tracked to his hidden lair and slain.

But a few years of restless peace followed Mondain's downfall. So long had the world shuddered beneath Mondain's yoke that many found it hard to believe he had been really vanquished. In truth, his teachings did not disappear. Mondain's apprentice Minax rose to power soon thereafter to challenge the fledgling city-states that were beginning to evolve. The Terrors had begun anew.

Minax's powers upon maturity greatly exceeded those of her evil mentor. With these powers she was able to rain wholesale destruction upon the planet, twisting and corrupting everything. Her foul web spread through time itself, ensnaring all who sought to oppose her. Finally, there arose a hero out of legend who dared face Minax in her own fiery castle and destroy her. Thus ended the Second Era of Darkness, as told in *Ultima II*.

Twenty years of well-earned tranquility ensued and prosperity favored the land. Then disturbing omens appeared, followed by the mysterious appearance of a fiery island. The tale of the Third Era of the Dark Ages is told by Iolo the Bard in *Ultima III* — wherein Lord British, sovereign of an incipient empire in the land of Sosaria, called forth through time and space for Heroes of the People to assemble. Four diverse adventurers answered this clarion call. To them fell the geas of the Doom of Exodus. Long they labored on the trail of the mysterious Exodus, through many a deep dungeon which seared their souls. To this day, each member of that team bears the marks of their journey. With the aid of the mystical Time Lord they were successful in bypassing the Great Earth Serpent and gaining access to Exodus' island fortress. The very bricks of the fortress rose up against them, and great is the Bard's tale of their struggle to reach their mortal foe. Of the final confrontation not one of them will speak, save to say that the evil is gone from this plane. So passed the third member of the Triad of Evil and with this death, so passed the Dark Ages of Britannia.

From the rubble of Sosaria, Lord British was able to unite all the mainland and a few of the islands under his one rule. This new Empire of Britannia brought much sought-after peace and prosperity to its subjects. Many of the ancient pockets of evil were destroyed, so that the only remaining hazard to wayfarers was the occasional stray band of marauding orcs or hill giants. Most of the lands were mapped, although a few unexplored regions still remain. With the Triad of Evil destroyed, Lord British became known for his dedication to raising the quality of life of his subjects. To assist in this endeavor, three mighty structures were raised in distant parts of the realm. One was the Lycaenum, wherein lay the great observatory. Another was the Empath Abbey with its oak groves where wise men and women meditated upon the teachings of the ancients. The third structure was the great castle of the Knight's Order of the Silver Serpent. Only the flower of Lord British's chivalry was invited to join this order, which embodied the highest ideals and exemplary bravery. The rest of the land was divided among eight major towns, each with its own political faction. Numerous satellite villages also dotted the countryside between the towns. In this manner were Lord British's lands organized.

Two pages from
Ultima IV's
'History of Bri-
tannia' booklet,
that came with
every copy of the
game.

"Yes," I replied, "They put it in there because they expected you to read it." "Wow," he responded.

Some of their difficulties must be chalked up to poor teaching. I should have done a better job of preparing them for the assignment. I resisted holding their hands because in the past I've found it useful to plop them down in Britannia and let them struggle. Figure out the systems, grok the mechanics, and go forth. *Ultima IV* may be a high mountain to climb for a 19-year-old *Call of Duty* player, but it's well worth the effort.

At least that's what I used to think. Now it seems to me we're facing basic literacy issues. These eager players are willing to try something new, but in the case of a game like *Ultima IV*, the required skill-set and the basic assumptions the game makes are so foreign to them that the game has indeed become virtually unplayable.

And as much as I hate to say it - even after they learn to craft potions, speak to every villager, and take notes on what they say - it isn't much fun for them. They want a radar in the corner of the screen. They want mission logs. They want fun combat. They want an in-game tutorial. They want a game that doesn't feel like so much work.

I'm pretty sure I'll continue to teach *Ultima IV*. The series is simply too foundational to overlook, and I can develop new teaching strategies. But I believe we've finally reached the point where the gap separating today's generation of gamers from those of us who once drew maps on grid paper is nearly unbridgeable. These wonderful old games are still valuable, of course, and I don't mean to suggest we should toss them in the dustbin.

But if we're interested in preserving our history and teaching students about why these games matter, a "play this game and sink-or-swim" approach won't work anymore. The question for me at this point is how to balance the process of learning and discovery I want them to have inside the game with their need for basic remedial help.

I love great old games like *Ultima IV*, but I can no longer assume the game will make its case for greatness all by itself.

September 22, 2010¹

1 See http://www.brainygamer.com/the_brainy_gamer/2008/10/fallout-3.html

2 Originally posted at: http://www.brainygamer.com/the_brainy_gamer/2010/09/unplayable.html

Cartography

by Scorpia

Many gamers today take automapping for granted. Very likely, they couldn't imagine a product without it. We of the (cough) "elder generation", however, know otherwise. Those who go back to the "golden era of gaming" remember well, perhaps all too well, the joys of manual cartography.

I learned my lesson fairly early. It wasn't long, as I wandered in the mazes of *Colossal Cave* and *Zork*, before I realized that random scraps of paper or sheets stolen from the printer just weren't going to do the job. It was time to get professional about this. I bought a stack of graph paper, a package of pencils, and that most important item, a blister pack of erasers.

Actually, mapping out the adventures games usually wasn't too bad. Aside from an occasional nasty trick or mean maze, they were pretty straightforward, and most important, nothing was out there waiting for lunch. RPGs, however, were quite another matter.

Despite being on mere 8-bit machines, the RPGs were big, and seemed all the larger because mapping was a very slow process. There you were (or I was), carefully pencilling in one step at a time, and there all the critters were, ready to pounce and rip out your heart, lungs, and assorted other organs for appetizers.

In no time at all, you were turned around, and only twenty minutes later (if you were lucky), did you realize your careful cartograph was somewhat inaccurate. It's amazing how many erasers you could go through mapping out just one game.

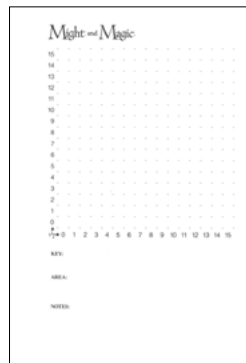
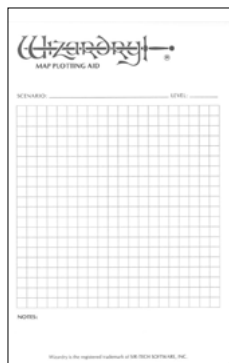
The prime example for huge was the first *Might & Magic*. I still have my 50+ maps from that one. Yep, that many. It seems incredible now, to look at those old sheets, and ponder the time and effort needed to draw the maps, one step at a time.

There was one saving grace, though: the dungeons were all standardized, being the same size and shape. Naturally, size was different in different games, but if you were doing *M&M*, you could count on each outdoor area, each town, each dungeon level, being the same 16×16 square.

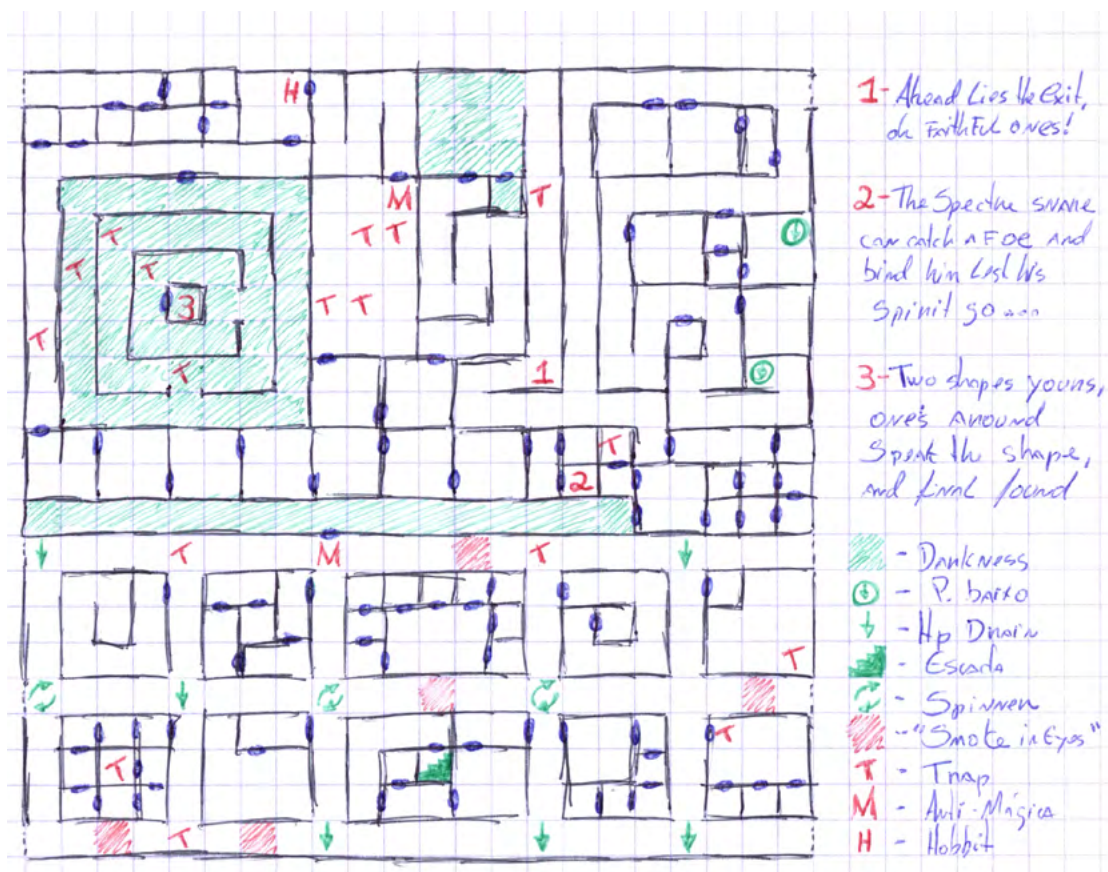
Of course, that meant 256 happy little steps per section, each one carefully mapped. With notes, naturally, on where things were found, where traps were, where messages appeared (and what they said), and so on. And fighting off monsters galore almost every step of the way (it's odd how Monsters Galore showed up in every RPG; busy little critter!).

While *Might & Magic* was the most excessive in terms of mapping, other games weren't far behind. *The Bard's Tale*, for instance, required a fair amount of cartographical effort, though it featured a mere one town and no outdoors. Seventeen maps for that one, each a generous 22×22 in size, and our friend Monsters waiting for us everywhere.

I don't know if it's possible to adequately convey what it meant to map-as-you-go. This was work, real work. Okay, you knew the size of the dungeon, drew it on the graph paper, numbered the sides, and usually knew your starting point. Say it was X3, Y5; here were the stairs out. Everything else was unknown.



Some companies, such as Sir-Tech and New World Computing, would even gift graph paper sheets together with their games.



A map from *Bard's Tale*, filled with spinners and dark areas. Be glad it isn't a teleporter maze.

So you started off, taking a step, drawing lines on your map, and hoping against hope that you hadn't just stepped on a spinner that turned your merry band in another direction, or worse, an undetectable teleporter that just sent you halfway across the dungeon without your realizing it.

Beyond that, there were nasty little places where everyone took damage as they walked through, where magic was suppressed, where it was totally dark, where you could walk into pits or chutes, or any combination of the foregoing. And remember, our pal Monsters was there, too, practically every other step.

Yet we persevered. We mapped. We fought. We erased. We screamed and cursed and muttered (maybe louder than muttered) imprecations against the evil designers. Then we mapped and fought and erased and screamed some more.

We could take it. We were tough. We were dedicated. We were hardcore gamers. We were masochists. Nothing else could explain why, the moment a game was finished, we put aside the old maps, reached for a fresh sheet of paper, and started on the next RPG.

It's a pity there was no Game Scouts of America to hand out merit badges for Cartography. Not a few of us earned one, and we still have the calluses to prove it.

Ah yes, the golden age of gaming. In many ways, it was a good time. But y'know, there are some things about it I don't miss at all...

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Scorpia is one of the most fondly remembered game journalists of all time. From the '80s through April '99, she was a lead reviewer of, and hint giver for, adventure and role-playing games at *Computer Gaming World* magazine. Scorpia also ran game-related areas on CompuServe (the original GameSIG), Delphi (GameSIG), AOL (Scorpia's Lair), and GEnie (Games RoundTable).





The Reviews

This is the meat of the book. Around 300 games will be reviewed by fans, modders, developers and journalists, listed in chronological order and full of screenshots, quotes from its developers and even mod suggestions. The idea is to serve both as a timeline of the genre and a guide to help players enjoy the most out of their games.

We decided upon dividing this section into smaller sections, each featuring a span of 5 years. These will showcase the events that happened during those years, plus add a brief overview of the changes in the gaming world during that period. These are still being written, so only some are present.

As with the rest of this preview, nothing is still set in stone, so if you have any comment, suggestions or corrections, please contact us.

Lord British and the Gargoyles read the Codex of Ultimate Wisdom, in *Ultima VI: The False Prophet*.

Beneath Apple Manor

BENEATH APPLE MANOR BY DON WORTH

Don Worth, 1978
Apple II (PC Booter, Atari 8-bit)*

*BAM was re-released in a Special Edition in 1982, with fancier graphics, multiple ports and the ability to save the game to play in multiple sessions.

There are old games, and there are ancient games. *Beneath Apple Manor* is ancient. Arriving in 1978, it was the first, or one of the very first, RPG-like games for home computers. Yes, personal computing goes back that far.

It could run in as little as 16K RAM (tape version) or in 32K+ (disk version, which I had). Levels were created on the fly as you went deeper in the dungeon. Monsters were limited to five: green slime, ghost, troll, purple worm, and red dragon. However, they increased in power the farther down you went.

Each had its own type of nastiness. Slimes could dissolve armor. Ghosts reduced your Strength permanently. Trolls regenerated. Worms could kill you in one hit, as could Dragons, who also had very tough hides.

BAM could be customized, too. You chose the number of rooms per level (4-7, depending on RAM), the difficulty factor, and whether you wanted black & white or color graphics. With color, every-

thing was a different colored block. I much preferred the ASCII black & white, where the monsters (player, too) were represented by letters and treasure by \$.

You had four stats: Strength, Dexterity, Intelligence, and Body. Fighting depleted Strength, so a breather after combat was necessary to restore it. Likewise, movement reduced Dexterity and spell-casting lowered Intelligence. Resting brought those back up, but only a Heal spell could restore hit points. This was not a game of fast movement and rapid-fire combat.

Experience was earned by killing monsters and bringing treasure back to the main staircase, the starting point of each level (it wasn't marked on the map, either, so better remember its location).

Here you traded points at 10 xp for 1 stat point, increasing it permanently. Gold could buy upgrades to weapons and armor. Most important of all, you could purchase a "brain scan". It was your character save.



My character (Y) found a treasure chest (\$) while trying to run from a slime (S). It was cursed.



Commands were all over the keyboard, and each action depleted one of your attributes.

"It was released two years before *Rogue* came out. I was not influenced by *Rogue* (didn't see it until something like 1983) and so far as I know the *Rogue* guys up at UC Berkeley hadn't seen *BAM* either. We probably both came up with the same idea independently. But at least I can say *Rogue* is "*Beneath Apple Manor*-like"

- Don Worth,
Beneath Apple Manor's creator



Playing a huge floor with colors enabled. We listen behind a door, where apparently a troll lurks inside.

Should you die – sooner or later, bound to happen – the scan restored you to life at the staircase. Of course, any money you had at the time was dropped. However, you were alive again as of the last scan. And you'd want a new scan as soon as you could afford it. Each use reduced the save by 10%. Ouch! Too many restores of the same scan would leave you a wimp.

So you proceeded carefully along the level, Listening at doors, Inspecting walls for secret doors, Bashing stuck doors open, Running when over-matched, and hoping you wouldn't run into too many wandering monsters.

All this had a goal: to find the fabled Golden Apple, rumored to be in a dragon horde far below the surface. Naturally, it exists, and there it is! Or is it?

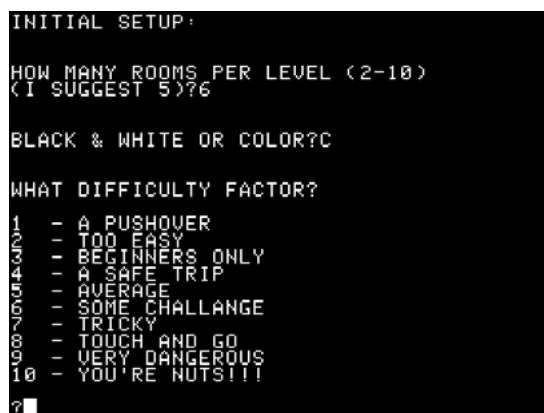
You know the saying: there can be only one (though not a ring this time). But each horde had a supposed Apple; grab a fake, and you were restoring

at the staircase. How could you tell real from fake? Only – haha – by taking it. You don't always need heavy combat to induce sweaty palms.

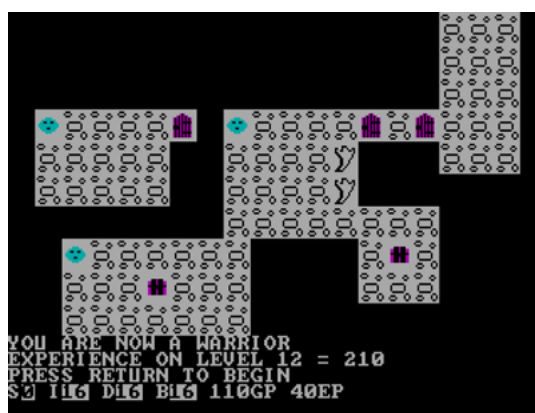
BAM had to be played entirely in one session. The brain scans were good only for the current game. Quit, and you'd have to start a new game next time. Still, it was meant as a "quick" play. At 5 rooms/level, you could usually get through it in about four hours or so.

Thus *BAM* was a prototype for *Rogue* and its many variants. Sadly, it seems to have been overlooked in the history of this subgenre, even though it arrived two years before *Rogue* itself showed up in 1980.

In its time, *Beneath Apple Manor* was a fun – if occasionally frustrating – diversion. While simple, the game required thought and strategy. And it shows what could be done with limited RAM and tight, well-designed code. **SC**



BAM allowed you to customize the size of the levels, choose between display modes and 10 difficulty settings.



Beneath Apple Manor: Special Edition added so called "hi-res graphics", but you could still play in ASCII mode.

Ultima



Garriott wanted to call his game "Ultimatum", but the name was trademarked by a board game, so it was changed to *Ultima*.

Ultima was the first real professionally released RPG from Richard Garriott, and it shows. He threw in everything his young computer geek self thought fun, so anything went! Combining a huge, colorful and innovative overworld map, the randomly generated wireframe dungeons from *Akalabeth* and an incredibly frustrating space battles – similar to the Atari 8-bit game, *Star Raiders* – *Ultima* gave players many fun and interesting things to do, and it's easy too see why it was so successful.

As the game begins, the four continents of Sosaria have already been conquered by the evil wizard Mondain, who used the Gem of Immortality to become invincible. Your only chance them is to collect four magic gems to power a time machine to go back in time and slain the wizard before he gains his powers. You can basically explore the world as you want because of how loosely intertwined the game's solution and mechanics are. Which is good, as at its core *Ultima* takes about 2-5 hours to complete, if you know what you are doing.

Most of that time is spent gaining enough gold to buy food and supplies to survive, along with getting enough experience points from killing monsters in order to qualify to acquire the time machine and complete the game. This is all XP is good for, character levels are otherwise irrelevant in this game.

Hit Points are gained through killing monsters inside of dungeons and then escaping, or by giving money to one of the eight kings that inhabit the world (one of which is the famous Lord British, Garriott's alter-ego). Attribute scores are improved by locating and interacting with sign posts spread throughout the world, with bonus points rewarded for going to these sign posts as a quest for four of the kings. Doing quests for the other kings involves killing monsters in the dungeons you would go into anyway, and you can also try to rescue captive princess from castles.

Combat itself is very similar to *Akalabeth*, but you have a time limit to act, or you'll lose your turn. And now there are random enemies encounters on the overworld map as well, not only inside dungeons.



The innovative overworld map. I was about to reach one of the sign posts, when two dragons attacked.



Here we are on the lowest floor of a dungeon, being approached by a wireframe Balrog... I mean BalRON!



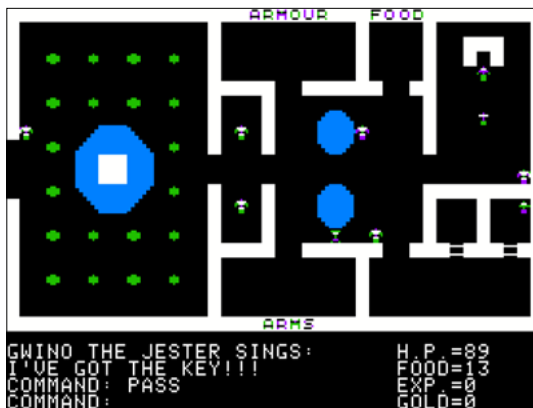
When in space, you must dock into star bases, acquire a spaceship and shoot down TIE-Fighter clones.

Towns and castles are one-screen areas where most of the game's solution are uncovered via jesters talking out loud, or by spending money in bars. Items and food can be bought or stolen, with the chances of very tough and angry guards homing in on a caught offender's position. As the player progresses, the technology of the world advances, and various new weapons and armors begin showing up in the stores, going from swords and bows to pistols, energy swords and even a "phazor". That also includes vehicles, such as a hovercraft with lasers and a space shuttle (again, anything went!).

Ultima allows you to play a Human, Elf, Dwarf or "Bobbit", as either a Fighter, Cleric, Rogue or Wizard. Those mostly just change your initial attributes, as anyone can use any equipment, but only the Wizard can cast some of the spells. The magic system is quite simple, with only a few different spells available in towns as one-cast scrolls. And really, only two are useful: Ladders Up & Down. Those aid in making the dungeons somewhat light and semi-optional, as they allow one to avoid having to seriously map or look for secret doors in any of the many dungeons.

For a new RPG player this makes *Ultima* a great first taste of the grand-fathers of the genre, especially for one who isn't heavily invested in complicated games. You can read the gorgeous manual illustrated by Denis Loubet to make you feel as if you're a part of this world, and then the Command Summary Card to learn the few keystrokes required to play.

Ultima was my first real RPG experience. While I had some understanding of this sort of thing thanks to the *Endless Quest* and *Choose your Own Adventure* books, this game was like nothing my 13 year-old mind had experienced back in 1988 on my new Commodore 64. It taught me keyboard layouts and how these "RPG things" worked. To look for clues.



At Lord British's castle, with the Jester shouting he has the key I need. In a RPG, that's a death wish.

To explore a world with much of its flavor in the manual's wonderful text and artwork. To BE in an adventure, as opposed to just watching the animated *Hobbit* film. This game took me a good month to complete – with only a single call to Origin's hint line towards the end game – in those days before game solutions were easily available.

And it made me fall in love with the genre as a whole. Would a much more difficult and unforgiving game like *Wizardry* have done the same, with its deadly traps and multiple characters – who could all be permanently wiped out in an instant? Would *Apshai*, with its far finickier control scheme, world detail hidden within multiple paragraphs to read in a booklet and far slower form of character advancement had done the same? Probably not. **RM**

The remake

In 1986 *Ultima* was re-released as *Ultima 1: The First Age of Darkness*, with new versions for the Apple II, Commodore 64, IBM PC and various japanese computers, such as the MSX2 and FM-Towns.



Outside Lord British's castle, on the IBM PC version. It isn't a massive graphical leap, but it's nice.

Fan Joseph Propati created a boardgame adaptation of *Ultima*, made for solo play. It's free, and you can find it at <http://boardgamegeek.com>

Moria



*The original *Moria* was made for VAX-11/780 computers, but its creator shared the source code freely, which allowed various versions and ports – under the requirement that it was kept non-commercial.

First released in 1983, *Moria* started out as a *Rogue* clone for University of Oklahoma's VAX-11/780 minicomputer. As the development went on, the game started to differ significantly from its predecessor: the setting became Tolkien's Middle-Earth and the objective was to kill the Balrog.

More importantly, *Moria* introduced several gameplay innovations that would later become essential to a certain subgenre of roguelikes: a town with shops at the top of the dungeon, scrolling multiple-screen maps, spells, artifact items with special properties, character classes and races and the need to carry a source of light.

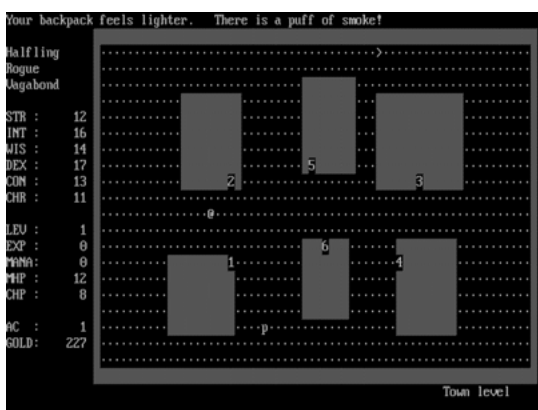
At the beginning of each game, a new character must be created. Race, class and sex are chosen by the player while all the stats as well as the character's background are randomized (the game allows re-rolling so one shouldn't worry too much). From then on, *Moria* is pure dungeon crawling with occasional trips back to the town in order to sell useless equipment and buy better one, replenish food and torches and identify unknown items.

The game (as well as other inspired by it) is focused mostly on combat and exploration and doesn't feature *NetHack*'s item-based puzzles or *ADOM*'s quests – like *Rogue* before it, it's all about getting to the bottom of the dungeon while fighting against hordes of monsters. Levels (with the exception of a town) in *Moria* don't persist – when you return to the dungeon floor you've visited, it will be generated anew.

Moria's interface differs a bit from the one of *Rogue*: this time, playing area occupies the right side of the screen, with the character information placed on the left. There are also a few graphical differences like the walls being denoted by a hash sign and the inequality signs being used for staircases. The game is played through a text terminal (with the usual possibility of playing the game remotely through telnet or ssh) and controlled with the keyboard. The control scheme might be a problem for laptop owners as most versions of *Moria* are controlled with the numpad, without the possibility of using arrow keys or the vi-style controls.

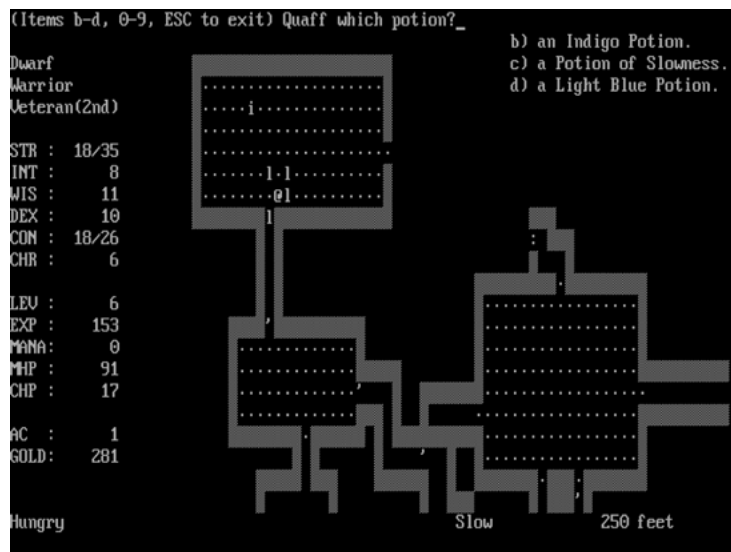
Unfortunately, *Moria* is an early roguelike and it suffers from many of the same problems a player might encounter with *Rogue* or *Hack*: it's difficult while not being complex enough to provide you a way of preparing yourself for the worst encounters. That would be enough to make your survival in any game dependent on the mercy of random number generator but *Moria* takes it a few steps further: while the game was being developed, each new version was supposed to be a challenge for the veteran players who've managed to beat the previous ones. As a result, *Moria*'s difficulty makes the game unwelcoming even to those who've played roguelikes before and don't have a problem with procedurally generated levels, permanent death and high level of difficulty.

The town shops allow you to prepare yourself for the dungeon. But beware, as beggars and thieves also roam the streets and may steal your gold – or life.



"I listened a lot to my players and kept making enhancements to the game to fix problems, to challenge them, and to keep them going. If anyone managed to win, I immediately found out how, and 'enhanced' the game to make it harder. I once vowed it was 'unbeatable', and a week later a friend of mine beat it! His character, 'Iggy', was placed into the game as 'The Evil Iggy', and immortalized... And of course, I went in and plugged up the trick he used to win..."

- Robert Alan Koenek, *Moria's creator*



Surrounded by giant white louse, our desperate dwarf resorts to one of the unidentified potions in his inventory. Sadly, it was a potion of slowness.

After being abandoned in 1987 by its original creator Robert Alan Koenek, the game lived on as *Unix Moria* – or *uMoria* – a port that thanks to being written in C provided new players with the possibility of playing *Moria* on different hardware (contrary to what the name suggests, *uMoria* can be played on systems other than Unix, e.g. MS-DOS). This is by far the most popular version of *Moria* and the one that inspired the creation of games such as *Castle of the Winds*, *Angband* and even *Diablo*.

Nowadays, the popularity of *Moria* and *uMoria* has been far surpassed by the derivative titles, especially *Angband* (in fact, the subgenre of roguelikes that has been codified by this game is often described *Angband*-like). While it's sad that such an important game in the history of CRPGs is being overlooked, it's easy to see why: *Angband* is extremely faithful to the gameplay and setting (although this time players are tasked with defeating Morgoth) of original *Moria*

while greatly improving it and expanding upon it. It's simply a better game that, while still challenging, won't scare off less experienced players.

While everyone with an interest in roguelike games should play a few sessions of *Moria* to experience an important part of the genre's history, chances are that more fun will be had with games that descended from it. **MM**

Angband

Angband was first released in 1990 but is still in active development. Its gameplay and visual style are similar to that of *Moria* but it has more enemies (including boss monsters), spells and items as well as a longer dungeon while at the same time being more balanced and streamlined. In contrast to *Moria's* monochrome look, *Angband* gives colors to different enemies, items and HUD elements. It is also notable for the ease of modding as all its data is stored in text files – this has resulted in the creation of numerous variants, such as *ZAngband* and *MAngband*, and helped to popularize the *Moria/Angband* subgenre of roguelikes.

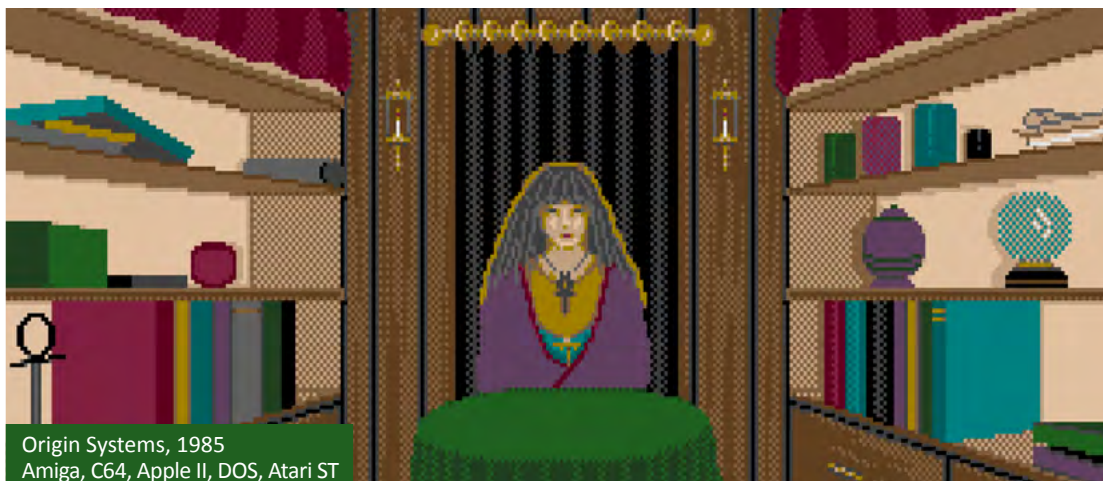


The Amiga version had mouse support and very simple graphics, but both were more confusing than helpful.



Angband allows for tilesets, as well as ASCII graphics.

Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar



Origin Systems, 1985
Amiga, C64, Apple II, DOS, Atari ST

It's a very old game now, designed originally for 8-bit systems with 64K RAM and CPUs running about 1 MHz. Regardless, the achievements of *Ultima IV* are astonishing.

It begins with a novel method of character creation: the Gypsy woman and her quasi-Tarot cards. She presents several situations, each with a choice of two responses. There are no right or wrong answers. The reading is designed to gauge your mental outlook, your morals and ethics, and give you the profession closest to them. Each profession represents one of the eight virtues: Valor (Fighter), Honor (Paladin), Spirituality (Ranger), Humility (Shepherd), Honesty (Mage), Self-Sacrifice (Tinker), Compassion (Bard) and Justice (Druid).

With many games, that's as far as it would go. You'd have your mage or fighter or bard or whatever, and play on from there. In *Ultima IV*, this is only the start of a long journey of the soul, a journey that depends on building character. On perfecting yourself in all eight virtues and becoming the Avatar.

No game, before or since, has had such an objec-

tive. All others have been concerned with making you a better warrior or spellslinger, concentrating entirely on developing physical or magical prowess. Combat is the means to this, and it is easy to see why other CRPGs have so much. It's the main way to get ahead; in some cases, the only way.

You certainly have fighting in *Ultima IV*. It's how you prove your Valor - but Valor is only one virtue. Developing those other seven depends upon how you react to and treat other people.

No backsliding, either. Each "eighth" (enlightenment in a virtue) is hard to earn and not permanent. The game watches every move you make. Start acting the wrong way, and you'll be losing those eighths. Only a true Avatar can finish this game.

Aside from character development there is *Ultima IV*'s open design. You can go almost anywhere you want, any time you want; the game is very much not linear. There are many things to do, and quite a few objects to gather, but for the most part, these can be done in any order. Eventually, of course, everything narrows down to the end game. Until that time, the player has a lot of discretion as to where to go and what to do.

While combat isn't the main focus of the game, there is plenty of it, turn-based. Opponents are carefully controlled, so you won't, especially at the start, be overwhelmed. You can explore without worrying that a horde of orcs will show up and wipe you out. Also, enemies will sometimes run away if they take too many casualties.

You aren't alone, either. Over time, you gather in seven members to your party. They represent the other seven virtues, and you will need every one of those people. Further, leveling is not a big item; eight is the maximum you can reach.

An upgrade for the DOS version was made by fans. The *Ultima IV Upgrade Patch* fixes bugs, improves the graphics, the UI and the music. Grab it here: www.moongates.com/u4/upgrade/Upgrade.htm

Moongates allow fast travel; ships can get you to inaccessible places.



"The point is not whether you have strong enough muscles or big enough guns to win, the issue should be: What have you learned? What wisdom have you gained from the beginning through to the end that really means you're now the appropriate person to solve the problem?"

- Richard Garriott,
Ultima IV's Project Leader



Creating your character with the Gypsy's Tarot cards. Your choice is always the right one.... for you.

Conversation has always been a staple of the *Ultimas*. An important aspect here is that people give you information because they like you, trust you, or respect you. This is trust or respect you earn by your actions during play. The closer you are to the ideal of Avatarhood, the more likely people are to tell you things.

There is none of the "quid pro quo" that infects so many games. You know: "So, you want the location of the +30 Sword of Instant Death? First, you must travel to the lair of the Dread Funny Bunnies, and bring back to me the Drum of Ages (batteries included)." Nowhere in *Ultima IV* are you ever someone's "gofer". People don't send you off to retrieve lost/stolen items as though you're some sort of pet dog. Nor do they ask you to do any "favors". Everything you learn, every item you obtain, is for your own use.

Beyond all the above, perhaps the most icono-

clastic part of *Ultima IV* is the ending. As a friend of mine put it, "It's the only game where the goal is to read a book." Not trashing Foozle, not saving the world (again), but penetrating to the depths of a dungeon to read the Codex of Ultimate Wisdom. There have been other games with nonviolent endings, but none so original as this.

For all that, some of today's gamers may find the game unplayable. The graphics are primitive. There is no log, no journal, no automap, no big loot drops, no hand-holding. Patience and extensive note-taking are crucial, because there is so much to learn. You'd better learn it all too; you're tested throughout the final dungeon to ensure you know what it means to be the Avatar.

However, if you're looking for a unique experience, a game that doesn't rely on hack'n'slash or endless "side jobs", then *Ultima IV* is the one for you. Happily, it has been made available to run on modern PC systems from Good Old Games (www.gog.com) free when you sign up (also free). *Ultima IV*, still one-of-a-kind after all these years. **SC**



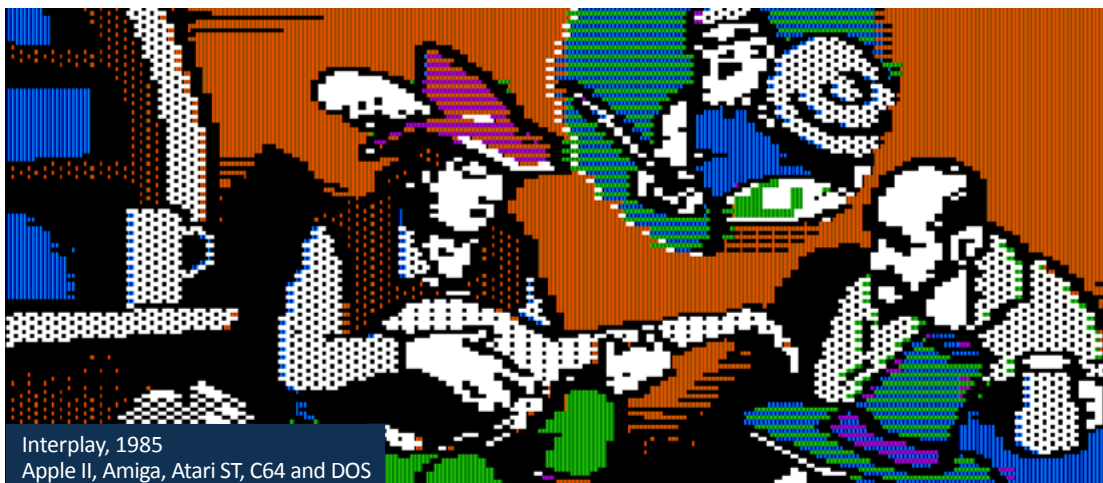
Enlightenment in virtues brings visions critical to the end game.

The Parody

Created by fan Chris Hopkins, *Ultima IV Part 2: Dude, where's my Avatar?* is a parody of the *Ultima* series. It takes place in the gap of time between *Ultima IV* and *Ultima V*, and tries to answer some of the unresolved questions from the series, such as what happened to Mondain, Minax, and Exodus and where did the Guardian *really* come from.

Grab it here: www.80sgaming.org/ultima-parody

The Bard's Tale



Interplay, 1985
Apple II, Amiga, Atari ST, C64 and DOS

Eight novels were written around the *Bard's Tale* lore, by famous authors such as Mercedes Lackey, Josepha Sherman and Michael A. Stackpole (who also helped to design *The Bard's Tale III*).

Designed in the halcyon days of computer role-playing games where using graph paper to map out every explorable space was practically the norm, the irrepressible *Bard's Tale* trilogy is a deeply treasured series of games developed by Interplay through the mid to late 80s.

Highly inspired by its older brother, the *Wizardry* series, *Bard's Tale* helped push the party-based dungeon crawler forward with its emphasis on tactical turn based combat, deviously creative and eminently memorable dungeon design, sheer atmospheric writing, monster sprite animations and its deeply unique magic system, requiring the player use four letter code words. (ARFI, MAMA, NUKE anyone?)

Michael Cranford's ambition came in the form of a windowed first person perspective which moves with a pseudo-3D effect as the textures change, creating an immersing sense of truly moving through a virtual world. The player's characters 1-6 were listed below, with a slot available for summoned creatures or NPCs who may occasionally join your intrepid group.

Arguably one of the greatest pleasures of *Bard's Tale* lies in party creation: Making a diverse range of

characters to explore Skara Brae and meet its challenges. The rich party design gives these games a fantastic longevity and I can vividly recall experimenting with many combinations of paladins, warriors, hunters, bards, rogues and the spell-casting classes, seeking that "perfect" party balance.

A distinctive aspect to the *Bard's Tale* character system is the array of magic classes at the disposal of the player. In addition to the classic bard class, who can weave a limited number of magical songs in and out of combat to influence proceedings before requiring a stiff drink, the player can also take advantage of the tiered magical class system. Whilst Magicians and Conjurers are the only two spell casting classes initially available in character creation, after some levelling players can choose to change the classes of their spell casters to Sorcerer (illusions) and Wizard (Summoning), adding depth to combat.

During the early phases of the game, *Bard's Tale* is an intensely demanding experience as players have to familiarise themselves with Skara Brae's important locations relatively quickly, else suffer the wrath of one of the many random encounters which could easily send low level characters to their collective doom. The incredible sense of danger one has when simply making one's way to Garth's shoppe, exploring a new dungeon for the first time, or the sense of dread when making one's way back to the stairs with low magic points to the sanctuary of the Adventurer's Guild and the safety of a well saved game, are memorable highlights of this wonderful trilogy.

Thus, a slow careful approach in nurturing and managing one's characters in the beginning pays off as the group progressively becomes stronger and moves with greater assurance through the wintry streets and dungeons: to finally face Mangar himself!



The original Apple II release had very simple graphics, but was revolutionary next to *Wizardry*'s crude wireframe corridors.

The Bard's Tale						
You're in an alleyway. It's now early morning.						
Skara Brae						
Character Name	AC	Hits	Cond	SpPt	CI	
PEPE	10	8	100	0	Ha	
KRUNK	10	5	100	0	Ha	
SAREUOK	10	5	100	0	Hu	
CAPITU	10	14	1	100	0	Ba
BILBO	10	19	1	100	0	Ro
VICTORIA	10	13	13	16	Co	

"I had a vision for abandoning Wizardry's wireframe corridors and introducing framed animation of textured walls that moved toward you (a pseudo-3D effect). I wanted a world that looked more real than Wizardry's. That was my primary design departure. I also wanted more magic involved in the game; hack and slash wasn't as interesting to me."

- Michael Cranford,
The Bard's Tale creator



Conjurer

MERTIN
Race: Half-Elf
Class: Conjurer
St: 13 IQ: 15
Dx: 16 Cn: 14
Lk: 12 HP: 9
Lvl: 1 SpPt: 11
Exper: 0
Gold: 169
(POOL GOLD)
(TRADE GOLD)
(CONTINUE)

Character Name	AC	Hits	Cnd	SpPt	Cl
CONAN	10	16	16	0	Wa
SHADOW	9	18	18	0	Mo
DANCER	10	16	16	0	Ba
SNAKE	7	11	11	0	Ro
MERTIN	9	9	9	11	Co
BLACK	9	7	7	11	Ma

Later ports of the game, such as the Amiga version, released just one year after the Apple II version, vastly improved the graphics.

Released a year later, *Bard's Tale II: The Destiny Knight*, saw a much larger game-world with six cities, greater save game opportunities and more outdoor areas to explore. The player could also transfer parties from *Bards Tale I* or *Ultima III*, use the services of banks, gamble in casinos and take advantage of ranged combat.

Perhaps as a reaction to the difficulties for new parties in the first game, a starter dungeon assists the player in getting up to speed with their chosen characters. As portrayed in title screen animation, the main quest in the game was to reunite the seven pieces of the destiny wand and foil the plans of the evil Archmage, Lagoth Zanta.

Ardent fans of the series will also recall the "Snares of Death" within the many challenging dungeons. These were real-time puzzles and often had a slightly esoteric element which befuddled and flummoxed gamers world-wide. The game also saw the

introduction of the Archmage class; a powerhouse caster with its own higher individual spells. This was a culmination of progression from the base magic classes. I would argue that *Bards Tale II* is the most arduously challenging game of the trilogy.

Michale Cranford left the company afterwards, but in 1988 *The Bard's Tale III: Thief of Fate* brought an even wider scope to the series. The player must now traverse the dimensions and solve their individual quests to collect magical items before aspiring to topple the mad god Tarjan in his fortress in Malefia.

The addition of an auto-map feature and the ability to save one's game anywhere added a layer to accessibility and convenience to the series, whilst maintaining its core features and challenges. Due to the variety of locations, descriptive prose within dungeons and overall story, the third game remains my favourite and closest to my heart, though admittedly it does polarise some fans.

Personally, I found much delight in the writing as it is richly atmospheric and yields many poetic moments. They can range from the articulate (Sceadu 's realm in Tenebrosia.) to even the poignantly romantic and tragic. (Lucencia/Werra in Tarmitia). I can even recall using some of the riddles from the game in AD&D sessions with friends!

May ye all live to see why the thief was so fateful! Let us all raise a tankard to the great *Bard's Tale*! Huzzah! RB

(Robert Bailey dedicates this article to his long lost friend of dungeon delving, Shane McConnell.)

In 1992 German magazine Power Play featured a preview of *Bard's Tale IV*, but the game was never released. A second attempt at a sequel was made in the late 90's, this time as a 3D hack'n'slash with multiplayer features, but it was also canceled. Leaked footage of it is still available [on Youtube](#).



Ape Soldiers

"Gimme a break! Where do they come from? You see 7 Ape Soldiers (10'), 11 Ape Grunts (10') and 5 Familiars (40') and 3 Sorceress (60'). Will your gallant band choose to: Fight bravely Run away

CHARACTER	AC	HIT	PTS	SPL	PTS	CL
1 Hawkslayer	-22	501	501	0	0	Mn
2 Sir Tor	-14	756	720	0	0	Pa
3 Ambrosius	-51	394	394	0	0	Mo
4 Essyltt	-11	573	523	0	0	Ba
5 Vaux	-12	351	351	0	0	Ro
6 Mabon the Mad	-3	633	633	572	568	Co
7 Escorducarla	-5	616	616	580	580	Ch

The series is often criticized for the massive amount of random encounters, and it's quite self-aware of that.

Alternate Reality: The City



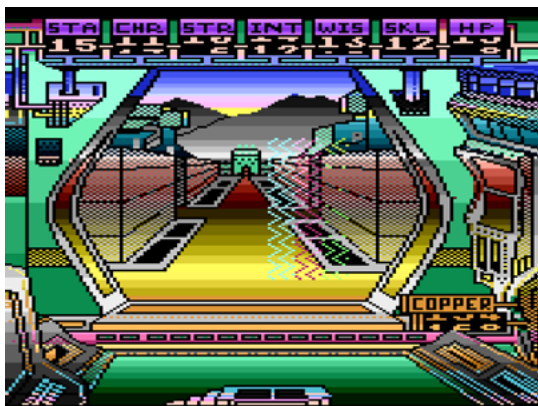
Paradise Programming, 1985
Atari 8-bit, Atari ST, Amiga, Apple II, DOS, C64 and Macintosh

In 1999 Philip Price and Gary Gilbertson teamed up again to create an MMO called *Alternate Reality Online*, but the project was canceled due to lack of funds.

Created by Philip Price, *Alternate Reality* was originally planned as an ambitious series of seven scenarios – *City*, *Dungeon*, *Arena*, *Palace*, *Wilderness*, *Revelation* and *Destiny*. *The City* would be patched by subsequent scenarios, creating a huge, seamless adventure. Sadly only the first two – *The City* and *The Dungeon* – were ever released.

Kidnapped by an alien spaceship, you find yourself dropped into the hostile city of Xebec's Demise, fighting against the elements and a wide variety of inhabitants from thieves, robbers and noblemen to fantastical creatures of the night as well as trying to understand why you were abducted.

As you step through the doorway of the spaceship the spinning numbers above your head will roll your initial statistics within the world of *Alternate Reality*. As well as the traditional Strength, Stamina, Skill, Charisma, Wisdom and Intelligence, the game featured a number of additional statistics about the character, such as hunger, drunkenness and exhaustion, which remain hidden from the players. Even 30 years later there's still discussion about the impact stats have on events and certain types of encounters.



The character creation screen, where your stats and wealth are rolled. The graphics were quite impressive for the time.

You explore a large city (64x64 squares) through a small first person window in the center of the screen, using either keyboard or joystick. Unlike *Wizardry* and *Bard's Tale*, which used relatively simple 3D views which "jumped" as you moved to each map square, *Alternate Reality* provided full colour textured walls which scrolled smoothly by as your character moved from one map square to another.

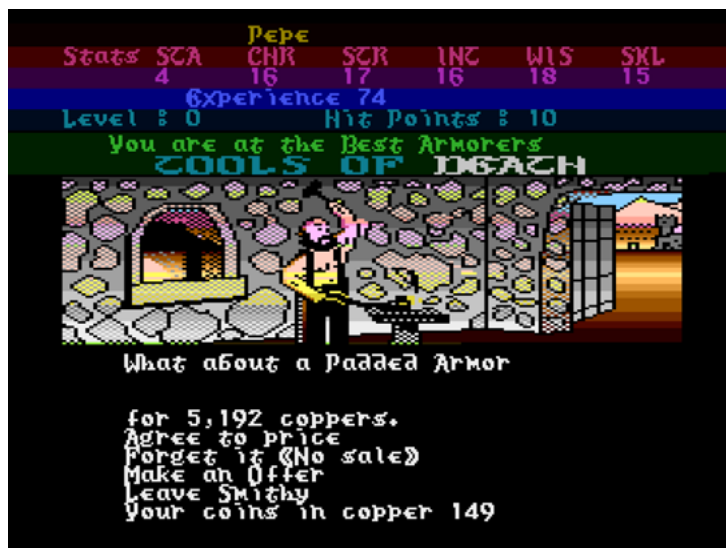
Combine that with other graphical effects such as numerous sprite animations, day & night cycle, rain and flashes of lightning and you have a game which was graphically and aurally way ahead of its peers. It made use of the Atari 8-bit unique strengths to achieve some special effects, such as maximizing the number of colours on-screen, that programmers found challenging to port to other computers later on. It's elaborate opening sequence (almost 5 minutes long and with a theme song), movie-style credits and careful sync of sound and image were novel features which only became common many years later.

The music by Gary Gilbertson is memorable and well employed. There's a variety of songs for special locations and events – including a Game Over song – with lyrics appearing on-screen. During encounters, the type of music can be used to determine the nature of the encounter and how hostile it is likely to be.

With the absence of any defined quests within *The City*, your goals are simply to develop a character with powerful stats, obtain high quality equipment and amass sufficient wealth so that you may have a chance to survive in future scenarios. This is done through encountering the city's inhabitants and defeating them in combat, though wealth can also be increased through the use of variable rate bank accounts although a higher interest rate also means there is a higher risk of you losing your money!

"Life is very short and one must try to do what one can that best serves man. It's too short to just sit back content and watch the world go by. One is obligated to find ways to help one another. I received much less money creating games than when I worked on the B-2 Stealth bomber, but the joy I brought to so many people with the games is priceless, completely without measure. Never underestimate the power of joy."

- Philip Price,
Alternate Reality's Creator



Alternate Reality features intense use of music. Some locations have unique songs, with lyrics that appear in sing-along style on the screen.

After the release of *The City*, Phillip Price left due to issues with the game's publisher. And so the sequel, *Alternate Reality: The Dungeon*, would arrive only in 1987, developed by Ken Jordan and Dan Pinal with some notes from Price and with Gary Gilbertson again providing a rich variety of music.

The Dungeon is a solid dungeon-crawler, that can be played without *The City* and feels like a full game. It offers several quests found either through exploring or by visiting the Oracle, who will assign quests if a suitable offering is made. Through completing these quests the player learns a lot more about the nature of *Alternate Reality's* environment and his kidnappers.

New features included a greatly expanded range of items such as scrolls, tarot cards, magical eyes, wands as well as more unique locations across four dungeon levels, spell casting and an interesting guild system where membership in one guild made you an instant enemy with a rival guild.

Sadly, the series was never completed. A design document for *The Arena* was completed but coding never began. By that time 16-bit computers such as the Amiga, Atari ST and the IBM PC were the rule, and the market had moved away from all the 8-bit machines. *The City* would be ported to these new computers, now featuring vastly improved graphics, but the developers did not include the patch system Price had created, so the ports were unable to link with other scenarios.

In the end, that didn't matter, as *The Dungeon* never got a 16-bit port. Versions for the Amiga and IBM PC were about 70% complete when the game's publisher, Datasoft, went out of business.

Today players still brave the streets of Xebec's Demise and the corridors of *The Dungeon*, trying to discover yet more secrets of the mysterious *Alternate Reality* and hoping that one day they will be able to finally bring their characters back to Earth. **GD**

Alternate Reality X is a modern, fan remake of the first two games, that allows you to freely move between *The City* and *The Dungeon*. It's currently under development, but you can try it at: www.crpdev.com



Besides fighting, players can also try to Charm or Trick foes if their Charisma and Intelligence are high enough.



The Dungeon added a four-level maze to explore, with various new interactions, events, enemies and quests.

Phantasie



SSI, 1985
Atari ST, Amiga, C64, Apple II and DOS

In a 2013 interview, Winston Wood revealed he was working on *Phantasie V* during his spare time. However, in 2014 the project was put on hold due lack of funding.

Ask CRPG fans who Lord British is and chances are they'll know – he's Richard Garriott's alter ego in the *Ultima* series. Ask them who Lord Wood is, and the answer is less certain.

In the mid '80s, SSI released a three-game series, *Phantasie* (1985), *Phantasie II* (1986) and *Phantasie III: The Wrath of Nikademus* (1987) created by Winston Douglas Wood. In the games, he's known as Lord Wood, the noble leader of the forces of good and the adversary of the evil Nikademus.

Phantasie's original box touts the game as a "role-playing odyssey," and this is a truly fitting description. For just as Odysseus wandered throughout ancient Greece on his journeys, the *Phantasie* series draws much of its inspiration from Greek mythology. The sorcerer Nikademus is bent on conquering the world with the help of his patron, the dark god Pluto. Zeus cannot allow this challenge to go unanswered, and like the myths of old, he finds mortals – a party of adventurers – to help his cause. The god also enlists the aid of Lord Wood and a wizard, Filmon the Sage, to guide and assist players throughout all three games.

Throughout the games, your journeys are many and varied. Not only do players venture across medieval-fantasy lands, but they also visit different planes of existence. In fact, interdimensional travel is a crucial and exhilarating aspect of the series. Players travel to the Astral Plane, the Planes of Light and Darkness and multiple layers of the Netherworld. These aren't just dungeons to explore, but rather small overworlds, complete with towns and locations. Not only do players hear about the gods, but they also meet them, Zeus at Mt. Olympus and Pluto in his "smallest castle," which is so vast it defies mortal comprehension.

One of the most unique aspects of the series is the wide range of playable races available for players' parties (15 in total). Not only can characters be humans, elves, dwarves or gnomes, but they also can be any number of *D&D*-inspired races, such as gnolls, orcs, goblins, minotaurs, lizardmen and sprites. Each race has its own graphical representation on the combat screen, which was quite advanced for the time. It's also possible to transfer characters from game to game in the series.

The flow of the games follows a pattern that has become quite familiar in console games and JRPGs. Players' parties advance from town to town in the overworld, explore dungeons encountered along the way and gain more experience and better equipment in the process. The dungeons are displayed in a basic, mini-map-style view, but are embellished with text descriptions to bring them to life.

The story is mainly told through scrolls found scattered across towns and dungeons. These scrolls do an excellent job of introducing players to the people, places and events that shape the world of *Phantasie*. Players also encounter many puzzles and personalities in the dungeons, such as Filmon and Lord Wood.



The overworld map is quite simple, containing only cities, dungeons and inns. But it's full of enemies, that can even take the party by surprise at night.



The dungeons are a highlight. You'll encounter various skill checks, interactions and secrets while exploring.



Upon defeat, your characters' souls are judged. They can be resurrected, destroyed or turned into undead.



In combat, enemies organize themselves in rows, while your party remains on the bottom of the screen.



Phantasia III offers improved graphics and locational damage – you can injure, break or even cut off limbs.

However, few encounters are so benign, and combat is an ever-present reality in the *Phantasia* series. The battle system is phase-based with enemies organized in rows and closely resembles the early *Final Fantasy* games, which arrived several years later. This system is the same in the first two games, but it's improved with the addition of ranged weapons and the ability to hit different body locations in the third game.

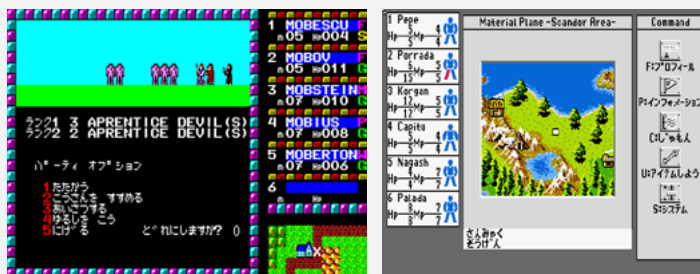
Not all battles are random though, and there are many unique encounters to experience in the games,

such as a creature called J.R. Trolkin in the first game, an obvious homage to J.R.R. Tolkien. More memorable though are Pluto's Minions from *Phantasia II* (1986), a collection of nine unique and challenging monsters whom Pluto keeps as pets.

This all leads to a final confrontation with Nikademus in *Phantasia III* (1987). Though the series is mostly linear, players are presented with a choice before the final battle. Should they defeat Nikademus and be hailed as heroes by Zeus, or should they betray Lord Wood and side with Pluto? You decide. **BS**

Japanese Games:

The *Phantasia* series was localized in Japan by Star Craft Inc. Several changes were made, such as altering the art style and using a side-view combat screen. The games were a success, and in 1991 Winston Wood traveled to Japan and worked with Star Craft to develop *Phantasia IV: Birth of Heroes*, that sadly remains unreleased in the West.



The side-view battle interface of the Japanese *Phantasia* MSX port (left), and the Japan-only *Phantasia IV* (right).

Defender of the Crown



Cinemaware Corporation, 1986
Amiga, Atari ST, Apple IIgs, C64, etc*

Defender of the Crown in its original incarnation on the Commodore Amiga was a “System Seller”, a game built around showcasing the hardware it was on, more like a technical demo than an actual game.

However due to the game’s success and inherently appealing and fun core concepts it ended up being ported to every platform under the Sun, always amongst the best looking games on these machines.

*Defender of the Crown has more than a dozen ports and remakes, including recent ones for iOS, Android and even web browsers.

From the stairs to the shadows, the sword fights are a nice tribute to Errol Flynn, and were an amazing graphical feat in 1986.



The original Amiga version was rushed out, and later ports included features that were cut due lack of time, such as more elaborate army battles.

Overall, the game is an excellent pickup and play “Koei Kingdom Simulator” styled Strategy/RPG that can appeal to many different audiences. Based on the Norman invasion of England during the Crusades, the player is tasked with picking one of a handful of Saxon lords to defend the land. Each of them have different abilities in Swordfighting, Jousting, and Leadership. The former two affect the difficulty of some of the game’s action sequences while the latter affects the meat of the game, which is effectively a beefed up version of *Risk*.

Set with amazing music and graphics, you spend the month long game turns defending territories from the five other lords, attacking in turn, raiding enemy castles for money or to rescue a maiden in the swordfighting minigame, and engaging in a jousting minigame for fame (increase your Leadership), or territory. There is also a simple action sequence for using a catapult when you siege enemy castles but it isn’t connected to the three abilities.

It all plays relatively fast and is a good primer for action players who might want to dip into the Strategy or RPG pools. In general an entire game can be completed in about an hour or less, with the different Saxon lords and randomized starting positions giving some replay and difficulty settings.

The entire game is done in the concept of an “Interactive Movie” with various text and graphics screens coming up to give context and feel to your adventure, something most Cinemaware titles would do to great effect.

While only just barely an RPG, it provides a good and quick pickup game when you want to conquer a nation with fantastic audiovisuals.

And you get help from Robin Hood! Who wouldn’t want that? **RM**

Rings of Zilfin



Strategic Simulations Inc., 1986
Atari ST, DOS, Apple II and C64

Rings of Zilfin is one of those early CRPGs that really makes you wonder how differently the genre could have evolved. The game is a unique mix of light RPG mechanics with *King's Quest*-style adventure and fast-paced arcade-like battles.

The plot is the usual save the world fare, but it's played with some twists. The world of Batiniq is threatened by the evil Lord Dragos, who has one of the two legendary Rings of Zilfin. Your rather challenging quest is to somehow get both rings for yourself and use them to destroy Dragos once and for all.

The world is divided into a series of locations, such as villages, forests, mountains, deserts and dungeons. You must journey the land, collecting items, purchasing equipment, talking to NPCs in search of hints and battling the occasional enemy.

Most of these foes are fought in the ground, in real; you can slash them with your sword, cast spells or use the bow at point-blank range. However, some foes are flying creatures that must be shot down with the bow or with projectile spells – *Space Invaders* style.

Your endurance will go down with each hit you take, but you'll also have to manage your fatigue, which is necessary to perform actions such as attacking, casting spells or just traveling. Luckily, there are plenty of magical mushrooms and healers in Batiniq.

However, while *Zilfin* has an interesting world, it bears a critical flaw. Instead of directly traveling from one area to another, you must always go through a long and repetitive side-scrolling travel, battling monsters, collecting food and resting. These all look and play exactly the same, which gets boring really fast, especially when you must cross a large number of areas. You'll eventually gain access to a teleport spell that speeds things up, but few players will still be playing by that point.

It's a shame really, for the rest of the game is surprisingly smooth and well-crafted, even though it's an easy game, clearly meant for beginners. It wouldn't be far-fetched to consider *Rings of Zilfin* a lost precursor to the famous *Quest for Glory* series.

The creator of *Zilfin*, Ali Atabek, would move on to develop *The Magic Candle* series in 1989, where a few of these concepts would get a second, and much more enjoyable, chance to shine. **FE**



Night Birds might appear during your travels. You must quickly shoot them down, in *Space Invaders* fashion, or they will call more monsters.



Towns and villages provide places such as shops, healers and taverns. Talking to the NPCs will provide important clues to succeed in your quest.

Deathlord



Al Escudero and David Wong, 1987
Commodore 64 and Apple II

Some say *Wizardry IV* is the RPG that hates you the most. Others – the more elitist types who snicker at something as mainstream as *Wizardry* – might name *Deathlord* instead.

Combining *Ultima*'s top down view with a *Wizardry*-like combat system, *Deathlord* takes place in an Oriental fantasy world with Japanese names for everything, but it was not originally conceived this way. In a move that will not surprise anyone familiar with the company's history, Electronic Arts demanded, just five weeks prior to the game's release, for the setting to be changed to Japanese – from Norse.*

As a result, *Deathlord* lets you play a Toshi and an Obake, a Mahotsukai and a Ronin. There are 8 races and 16 classes, including 4 mage classes, each with its own compelling set of spells. The character system is solid, and every level-up brings you a significant increase in power, allowing you to brave areas you previously would not dare to.

And with *Deathlord*'s 17 continents and archipelagos, there are a lot of areas to brave. The game's

huge world may feel too empty at times, but the locations, from towns to dungeons, are consistently good. They have traps, clues, and secrets to find. They are often cleverly designed. Many show more than they explicitly tell, by way of their surroundings and the NPCs that inhabit them, such as the masterful portrayal of the eternal yet unstable opposition between Fort Demonguard and Malkanth, the volcanic city of demons.

Another high point is how exploration is presented. There are no quest objectives, or quests at all. There is only the starting clue that *Deathlord*, the game's villain, gives you. Further clues are obscure and difficult to find. There are some places, such as prisons or private residences, that you cannot simply enter; you can only break into them, with the consequence of taking on the entire town guard that come rushing at you. However, you might learn something valuable if you do take the risk – all the greater given the game's "permadeath" save system with only one, automatically overwritten slot.

At its heart, *Deathlord* is a hardcore *Wizardry*-style dungeon romp translated to a top-down view with an added overworld. The ingenuity of *Deathlord*'s design is to make this transition flow really well despite the difficulties involved in bringing traditional dungeon hazards, from chutes to secret doors to teleporters, over to a top-down perspective. Most dungeons have a unique and memorable theme, and are as unforgiving as they are inventive. You will not make it far without accurately mapping them out, and some secrets are only noticeable if you study the map.

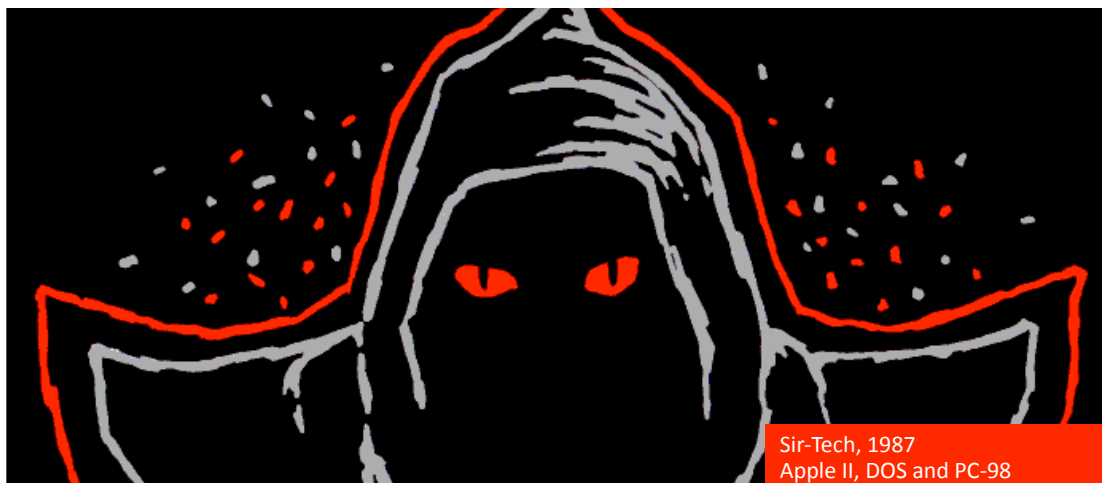
To an enthusiastic dungeon crawler, *Deathlord* is one of the ultimate games. CB

*Al Escudero recalls: "I was given 5 weeks to change all the art, story, spell names, equipment names, location names, etc. I was quite upset about it."



The city of demons is located inside a volcano, so prepare to get some lava burns.

Wizardry IV: The Return of Werdna



Sir-Tech, 1987
Apple II, DOS and PC-98

Wizardry IV: *The Return of Werdna*, is not just the fourth game in the legendary Wizardry series - it's famously the hardest game in the history of computer RPGs. The majority of those who have played the game were unable to leave the very first room. Incidentally, *Wizardry IV* remains to this day one of the most innovative role-playing titles.

Wizardry IV turns the standard RPG premise on its head. In this game you play Werdna, the villain you defeated back in *Wizardry I*, trying to escape his escape proof underground prison. Stripped of his powers, Werdna starts out extremely weak. Doing away with the customary experience-based character development system, the game has you rely on summoned monsters and only increase your power at pentagrams - specific, sparsely placed points in the dungeon, so that your power is directly tied to your progress. Allied with monsters, you battle parties of adventurers fully intent on banishing you back to your eternal rest. Simply put, *Wizardry IV* has you fight as a monster party against an adventuring party.

Monsters are, however, an unruly bunch. They do not follow Werdna's orders directly. To make things worse, most enemies you encounter - Werdna sarcastically dubs them "do-gooders" - can kill you in one or at most two hits, and you tend to encounter them every other step. An unlucky roll of a die, a wrong step or a foolish decision, and bam! you're dead and have to reload the game.

Beginning at the bottom of the penal dungeon, you struggle to climb up to the surface. Useful loot is minimal, being mostly limited to puzzle-related items, and there's no way of telling a plot-critical item from a fluff one beforehand. And even if by some miracle the enemies don't get you, the dungeon

itself will. To that end, *Wizardry IV* features the most sadistic, and brilliant, dungeon and puzzle design that no other RPG, except maybe *The Dark Heart of Uukrul* or *Chaos Strikes Back*, can compete with, where not only every step you take may mean certain death or a devilish puzzle or both, but the dungeon itself is basically one large puzzle that you must figure out to make progress or at least survive. The dungeon is also insanely hard to map.

If you're in the mood for some fantastic and incredibly punishing dungeons, be sure to check out *Wizardry IV*. **CB**



The enemies you face are actually other player's parties from previous games, that were submitted to Sir-Tech by mail.

Each Pentagram offers a different set of monsters to be summoned.

Dungeon Master



FTL Games, 1987
DOS, Atari ST, Amiga, Apple IIGs and SNES*

Dungeon Master was a massive hit at the time, becoming the best selling Atari ST game of all time and winning dozens of awards, including a "Special Award for Artistic Achievement" from CGW.

Dungeon Master is one of the games that have had the biggest impact on me. I'll never forget when I faced my first zombie. It was behind bars, I had a dagger, and to my joy throwing the dagger at the zombie through the bars actually worked! Immediately I knew this game was something special.

Dungeon Master was a revolutionary CRPG featuring a pseudo-3D world presented in first-person perspective. Players controlled a party of four characters that acted as a single "blob" (hence the term "blobber"), moving in real time from square to square. Controlling four characters in real time may sound like a daunting task, but the game is fairly slow and all actions take a certain time to execute, with the various types of attacks having different speeds, so there is no frenetic clicking involved.

The combat is the weakest aspect of the game, since it's too easy to side step enemies, attack them, and side step again – the infamous Two Step Dance – but that is a general problem with all real-time first person party- and tile-based RPGs – aka "blobbers". Apart from the combat, however, *Dungeon Master* was a step forward to RPGs in most respects.

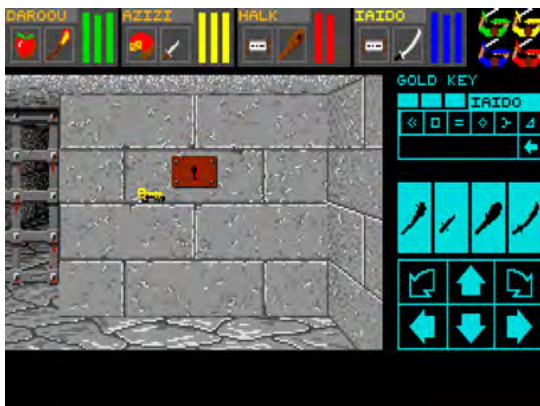
The audiovisuals were unrivaled for a long time. *DM* was one of the first games to use 3D audio, so you could actually use sound to keep track of your enemies. And while there's only one type of dungeon graphics throughout the game, it looked very good.

Dungeon Master was also one of the first CRPGs to discard the traditional XP system, and instead used a system where skills increased by usage, something later adopted by the *Elder Scrolls* games. The game did have the traditional character classes of Fighter, Priest, Wizard and Ninja, and characters could advance in all classes. Using melee weapons increased Fighter levels, missiles weapons and generally throwing things increased Ninja levels, casting spells increased Wizard levels, while making potions increased Priest levels.

You didn't create your own characters, but instead had to choose up to four heroes from The Hall of Champions. And what a colorful and diverse lot those champions were! Who can forget characters like Hisssssa, Wuuf the Bika or Halk the Barbarian?

Dungeon Master featured a wide assortment of enemies, from skeletons and zombies, to shrieking slow moving trees, to giant rats, scorpions and purple worms. And the most annoying creature of them all – the gigglers, who would run up to the party, steal an item, giggle and run away.

There wasn't really much of story in the game, but the manual included a well-written back-story to introduce players into the game. It tells that one day the Grey Lord found a Power Gem, but unleashing its power resulted in his essence splitting into two halves – a good wizard and the evil Lord Chaos. The player takes the role of Theron, Lord Grey's apprentice, who selects and controls the four champions. The task is to enter the dungeon, find the Firestaff and then use it to stop Lord Chaos.



While most other RPGs were still using text parsers, *Dungeon Master's* interface was mouse-driven, graphical and very intuitive.

"We had a 'hunch' that *Dungeon Master* would do OK. I guess because we felt we were trying to do a type of game that had never been done before. That is a game that blends real-time action with a rich environment to play in. I guess the closest analog to what we were trying to do was to create the dungeon equivalent of a 'flight simulator'."

- Wayne Holder,
Dungeon Master's Producer



The various attacks have different speeds and power. Characters can also throw their weapons and pretty much anything in their inventory.

DM was followed by *Chaos Strikes Back* (1989), at first advertised as an expansion, but then released as a stand-alone game. It allowed you to import your characters from *DM* and also came with a Champion Editor tool, which allowed players to customize the Champions names and portraits – pixel by pixel.

Chaos Strikes Back was like *Dungeon Master* on steroids, with even more deadly enemies, fiendish puzzles and possibly the most intricate 3D dungeon ever created, with all 13 levels interconnected via numerous stair and pits. In my opinion it was the ultimate game in the real-time blobber sub-genre of CRPGs. One of my best gaming moments ever was on a level containing both illusory walls and dragons. Unlike me, the dragons could see through the walls, and even breath fire through them. But I could hear each dragon stomping about, which meant I could locate them by sound and then do the "Two Step Dance" though the illusory walls!

Later RPGs would have prettier and more varied graphics, and have more of a story and better NPC interaction, but none could rival the level design and puzzles of *Dungeon Master* and *Chaos Strikes Back*.

Another thing that set *DM* and *CSB* apart from later games is the interaction with the environment, from using doors and traps, to chopping and fireballing doors, to something as basic as throwing things through bars. For example, in *DM* a Fireball actually has a physical presence in the dungeon and can burn wooden doors or be sent through teleporters.

Dungeon Master is a landmark in gaming history, creating a new CRPG sub-genre and inspiring dozens of clones – even after *Ultima Underworld* appeared in 1992 with a natural evolution of the formula. However, all the real-time blobbers that followed were evolutionary dead ends; even though some of them were fun to play, for me they were all anti-climaxes after *Dungeon Master* and *Chaos Strikes Back*. **OC**

**Dungeon Master* still has an active community of fans, that created various ports (Windows, Java, Mac and Linux), tools and over a hundred custom dungeons for *DM*. Visit them at www.dungeon-master.com



If the dangers of the dungen weren't enough, players still have to keep all characters feed and hydrated.



Spells are cast by inputting the correct runes at the right side of the screen – if your character has enough skill.

Zeliard



As happened with many other games at the time, *Zeliard's* US box tries to mask the Japanese aesthetic of the game, featuring a viking on the cover instead of the manga-styled character that actually stars the game.

Zeliard is among my earliest gaming memories and I remember it mainly for three reasons: the game is huge, extremely difficult and I only finished it a few years after my progress stalled in the final dungeon. At the time when I first played it, I could barely understand English so had to parse the in-game text with a dictionary and missed an important hint. Thankfully I kept my save games and a few years later managed to finally finish it.

One of the first free-roaming, exploration-driven platform games (popularly known as the “metroidvania” genre), *Zeliard* was originally released in Japan in 1987 – a year after *Metroid* and *Castlevania*. It’s also one of the earliest games of its kind that has a slight influx of RPG elements. It features a hidden experience system (you never see the numbers) and once in a while you level up when sages in town deem you experienced enough, which increases hit points, damage and magic.

Zeliard also has a simplistic inventory system: one slot for a weapon, one for armor and one for a shield – which will break after a certain number of hits. The various potions you can buy in towns regenerate health, magic, raise damage or repair your shields.



The hints provided by the townsfolk are vital to uncovering secrets and finishing the game.

You can attack with horizontal, upwards and downwards sword slashes, and after defeating each boss monster you will also get new spells – all of them offensive in nature. As in other “metroidvania” games there are also items that grant you access to otherwise unreachable areas, such as boots to climb slopes, or a cloak to resist intense heat.

Story-wise, it’s your usual fantasy fare; you’re Duke Garland, sent to save the Kingdom of Zeliard and its princess from an ancient demon who can only be destroyed by assembling nine mystical orbs hidden deep inside eight dungeons.

All of which doesn’t sound very impressive when compared to other “metroidvania” variants, especially modern ones. However, *Zeliard* stands as the only game of its kind that recaptures the feeling of old-school CRPG dungeon crawls. It cannot be mastered by just being good at the action part, you have to also map the entire game meticulously, explore every inch of each level and also note down every hint the townspeople utter to succeed.

Mapping is made difficult both by the fact that later levels consist of two or three layers intricately interlinked and by a very unusual quirk of the overall topology: the maps are circular. Wherever you may be, if you go far enough right or left, up or down, you will end up where you started. It’s easy to get lost even in the first level, and without a map you won’t get far in the later ones. And while the game came with all maps printed out, those didn’t show invisible walls and other obstacles or where the doors led.

Zeliard's platforming mechanics have long been surpassed and its fusion of 2D action and RPG elements is by no means unique these days, but the overall dungeon design make it stand in a class of its own even today. If you enjoy a challenge, that is. **JG**

Neuromancer



Interplay, 1988
Amiga, Apple II, C64 and DOS

Even with titles like *Circuit's Edge*, cyberpunk is one of those genres I wished had gotten as much play in CRPGs as they did on tabletops. For their part, Interplay went straight to the source with William Gibson's *Neuromancer* including word of a potential film emblazoned on the box (the movie never happened). The result was a sort of cross between a traditional 2D adventure and a CRPG, a year before Sierra's *Quest for Glory* hit retail.

The game doesn't follow the events of the book, but uses the same setting and some of the characters. In the year of 2058, people plug into the 'net in a literal sense thanks to a surgically implanted jack in their head transforming all those 0s and 1s into a digital hallucination. And someone or something in there is making all of your friends disappear one by one.

As a cyberspace 'cowboy' that only has six credits to their name and who spent the last night face down in food that they haven't paid for yet, they'll be pulled into the same mystery talking to NPCs for leads, finding ways into places they're not wanted in Chiba City, and eventually hitting the matrix in search of data and the credits for upgrades and connection time. One could also sell organs replacing them with cheap plastic though don't expect what's left of your meat body to survive more than a minor biofeedback shock in cyberspace.

Skills are learned via chips that can be bought and upgraded the same way software and your cyberdeck can be. Spells are software. Those are used in combat within cyberspace against intrusion countermeasure electronics (ICE) and the occasional AI shackled as corporate watch dogs in data fortresses protecting their secrets.

It's also not much of a stretch in seeing how Warren Spector's *Deus Ex* shares elements of its gameplay

formula with Interplay's creative adaptation within its own detailed slice of fiction, NPCs to shake down for clues, and in using your own wits to map your way through all of that data. It makes sense.

Neuromancer's cyberpunk manifesto continues to influence dystopian futures where flesh is cheap and information can flash fry the wetware between your ears. And Interplay's interpretation is as close to the original chrome as you could probably ask for. RC

"I suppose the ultimate *Neuromancer* game would pit you against a real AI..."

— William Gibson



A big part of the game is spent trying to get money to survive the harsh city of Chiba.



Surfing through cyberspace, you'll use 'warez' to infiltrate databases.

Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny



Origin Systems, 1988
DOS, Amiga, Apple II, Atari ST, C64 and NES

Ultima V carried on the proud tradition from *U4* of including a physical trinket in the box that was key to the plot: in this case, the Codex coin.

The entire *Ultima* series is near and dear to my heart, but none more than *Ultima V* – a game I spent over five years of my life striving to recreate via a *Dungeon Siege* mod called “Lazarus”.

What makes *Ultima V* so special? While the first three *Ultima* games established foundational design tenets for CRPGs in general, and *Ultima IV* pioneered the concept of morality in games, *Ultima V* was the first RPG to introduce true world simulation. By “world simulation,” I mean the collection of systems which grant players the illusion of a living, breathing world that exists independent of their actions, rather than simply a game board upon which the player can stab monsters.

Earlier *Ultimas* had already introduced primitive day/night cycles where visibility and monster spawning varied based on time of day, but *Ultima V* took that a step further and introduced NPC scheduling – merchants get out of bed in the morning and walk to their shops to open for business, while guards close down city gates after nightfall to keep out wandering monsters.

On top of that, environmental objects were actually recognized by the game for the first time – each potted plant or bookshelf wasn’t just a painted bit of the background, but a physical thing you could move around. Harpsichords could actually be played, and a careful look through the game’s manual could teach the player how to play a specific tune with special effects in the game world. While this sometimes allowed for puzzle solving, it mostly just served to make the game world feel more real and to give players more opportunities for interaction.

And that was the beauty of it – *Ultima V* was perhaps the first time a game designer realized he could generate a tremendous amount of fun by simply creating an immersive world with some limited agency and letting players run wild. The groundwork laid with this philosophy would later emerge (with improvements) in everything from *Grand Theft Auto* to *Skryim*.

On top of its accomplishments in world design, *Ultima V* pushed forward on the narrative front, turning *Ultima IV*’s focus on virtue upside-down as Lord Blackthorn – the prime antagonist of the game – codifies the eight virtues of *Ultima IV* into draconian laws. To some characters you meet, Lord Blackthorn is a vile usurper and his laws are unjust, while others are benefiting from his rule and see the player character and his friends as dangerous outlaws.

You play a Robin Hood-esque role, never entirely certain who you can trust and who might turn you in to the authorities. This situation leads to interesting questions like “does virtue still have meaning when compelled?” and introduces shades of gray to the moral equation of *Ultima*, creating situations where “what’s right” isn’t always readily apparent and keeping players on their toes.



From chairs you could sit in to torches you could steal and barrels you could move, *Ultima V* created a living world.

"[...] where *Ultima IV* was fairly black-and-white – I mean good guys are good guys and bad guys are bad guys – *Ultima V* unfolds in a gray area. Lots of characters try convincing you that Blackthorn is doing things just right; some say he's a evil force; and others realize he's wrong but are taking advantage of the situation for personal profit and are willing to fight anyone who opposes Blackthorn."

– Richard Garriott,
Ultima V's creator



With Lord British now missing, Blackthorn took control and imposed a darker, extremist version of the virtues.

Another place *Ultima V* worked wonders was in the Underworld – a massive new region added to the game world for the first time in the series. The Underworld was a sprawling cavernous region every bit as big (and as open) as the surface world, linked to the realm above by a network of dungeons. The impetus for the game's story is the disappearance of the rightful king (Lord British) into this shadowy expanse, and the developers of *Ultima V* used this fact as an opportunity for immersion by providing a written chronicle of the king's expedition into the darkness.

Smart players could read carefully through the chronicle and use its words to guide them in-game as they followed the lost king's footsteps. The ensuing connection between shared experience of the real player and the character they controlled was remarkably powerful.

In conclusion: From its morally ambiguous dilemmas and intriguing story premise to its primitive world simulation and vast play space, *Ultima V* paved the way for all the great RPGs to come. If you haven't already played it, you owe it to yourself to pick up a copy and experience this key piece of RPG history! **IF**

Ultima V: Lazarus

Lazarus is a 60+ hour *Dungeon Siege* mod that recreates *Ultima V* from the ground up, with modern 3D graphics, CD-quality music, real-time combat, richer quests and dialogues, and an optional "evil" path through the game.

You can find it here: www.u5lazarus.com



Ultima V: Lazarus uses the *Dungeon Siege* engine to recreate *Ultima V* with more modern technology.



Ultima V would be the last game of the core series to feature a first-person view when inside dungeons.

Wasteland



Interplay, 1988
DOS, Apple II, C64 and Windows*



*Wasteland was re-released in 2013 by InXile, featuring new soundtrack, reworked art and now including all the text on the game itself, with no need to check paragraphs on the manual anymore.

I almost passed on *Wasteland* on the shelf of EB Games way back when. Like, way way back when. I had tried almost every other CRPG in the store, from the big companies like Interplay, SSI, Origin – checked out their games from *Wizard's Crown*, *Bard's Tale*, *Ultima*, *Eternal Dagger*, *Might and Magic*... until *Wasteland* was the only thing left in the store.

Yet I didn't want to get it. It looked weird. I liked post-apocalypse, sure, but the player mechanics and the layout of the maps in the screenshots seemed to be an odd mix of *Bard's Tale* and *Ultima*. Finally, two things lured me in: the *Bard's Tale* character layout screenshot on the back cover, and the *Interplay* name. I loved *Bard's Tale*, I trusted *Interplay*, and I trusted Brian Fargo. And when I sat down and plugged in this spiritual ancestor to *Fallout* into my Commodore 64, I could not stop exploring this unique, highly-imaginative world devastated by nuclear war.

I fought giant garden pests, communed with a drunken hobo who saw the future in snake squeezin's, upheld the Desert Ranger tradition of bringing justice to the wastes and helping the downtrodden,

cloned my party members (!), repaired toasters, fired howitzers, got wasteland herpes from a three-legged hooker, and fight a menagerie of enemies from killer robots, leather jerks, to rad angels that glowed with a life of their own.

At the end... and I didn't want it to end (you can still keep playing, too!)... I was floored. I didn't realize CRPGs could be this way. I still refer to *Wasteland's* mechanics today in game design, a brilliant blend of area design context and RPG systems used to create some amazing scenarios.

Wasteland has numerous strengths and weaknesses, but the strengths definitely overshadow the weaknesses. The area design, ambiance, the system spread and applications, and the narrative itself were top-notch, while the system balance, attribute use, healing and the rare applications of one of its pillars: the ability to divide your party, diminished the experience somewhat.

The narrative shines through in the game content itself, and also in the well-written (and amusingly so) narrative book included in the game, filled with richly described characters. The wasteland is simply an amazing blend of raider-occupied towns, mutant agricultural centers, robot factories, Las Vegas... and even the inside of an android's brain, where I almost feared the game had jumped the shark, it was so amazing. The quests and encounters there are innovative and interesting, and although the overall quest doesn't kick into full gear until over halfway through the game, there's plenty to keep you going. The people of the world respond to your actions, even as soon as the first area of the campaign, and remind you of the harsh world that you've found yourself in.

Wasteland comes with a slight learning curve not present in other RPGs at the time, reflected first in its



Equipping the Geiger Counter is a necessity for careful desert navigation.



The infamous Scorpitron, one of the deadliest robots you'll face in the game.

character creation. Its skill-based and attribute-based system for character creation and development was a bit more complex than say, *Bard's Tale*, but allowing for that attribute and skill-based advancement made role-playing your characters richer (something it shared with *Wizard's Crown* and its sister, *Eternal Dagger*). If I wanted to do a Russian explosives expert who liked to throw knives, I could, and that was a much richer development tree than "Fighter."

The system design is elegant, difficult, and confusing at the same time. The elegance comes in the simple mechanic of being able to select any attribute, item, or skill, and then select an object in the environment for that to act on. An adventure game mechanic taken to the extreme with brilliant results. If you want to use Intelligence on an object, you can. If you want to use your proton axe on a wall or door in front of you, you can. Being able to re-arrange your skills and items on the character display is key (usually Doctor being the top of the list), a welcome feature since the skill and item list is lengthy, and the skill list can even grow beyond what's presented in the rulebook.

It is touches like this where *Wasteland* shines. The fact the skill tree grows beyond what's in the manual added a powerful element of mystery, drives you to explore more of the world and see what's in the next library, and made the world deeper as a result. You also want to use your skills often, trying them out in the environment, as using them in combat and non-combat situations can reward you with a surprising level-up that makes you stronger, whether climbing, shooting, or swimming.

That said, *Wasteland* has its share of design confusion in the skills presented to the player and the value of attributes as well. It is often difficult to see the differences in combat between Pugilism, Melee Weapons, and Brawling... and some skills break the



Cults, cults, and yet more cults, all willing to embrace you with radioactive, glowing arms.

compact with the player, in being largely useless over the course of the game, while other skills are absolutely critical and the party cannot do without (Doctor, for example). The same is true for stats: Some attributes, such as Charisma, hold little value at all.

Wasteland also had an annoying auto-save function that could sometimes trap you in dead-end situations (some area designs can push you out of an area, say, by falling into a river and irradiating everyone, then saves the game right after, almost guaranteeing a slow death). This often forced me to quickly yank the disk when this occurred or, when I was older, set up individual copies of the game in sub-folders to prevent being trapped in a deadly situation that would wipe out my party members with no hope of salvation.

It's worth mentioning that one of the hallmarks of *Wasteland* was you could split the party, and except for a few forced segments of the game (to solve puzzles, or even to choose who enters the men's and women's restrooms), the interface required to handle this via turn-based was largely a hurdle and seemed to have little return for the investment. While some of this may have been due to the fact that few RPGs included this feature at the time, overall, it was not enough to justify its inclusion.

Wasteland is one of the best role-playing games I've ever played, and it's echoed in the design philosophy and how they accomplish so much by exposing their systems to design. That, matched with the sheer creative brilliance of the levels and the novelty of the setting, has kept it in my heart for over 20 years, Scorpitrons, androids, bloodthirsty rabbits, and all.

I swore that if I ever had the chance, I'd want to work on a sequel, and thanks to Brian Fargo, I got the opportunity, with *Wasteland 2* coming out in 2014. I hope the next generation enjoys the wasteland as much as I did. **MCA**

To avoid players reading the paragraphs without being prompted, there were fake ones hidden among them. Some had false passcodes, while others told an entire storyline about an alien invasion.

A sequel called *Meantime* was worked on. It would be based around time-travel and feature characters such as Albert Einstein and Cyrano de Bergerac, but sadly the game was canceled.

Hillsfar



Westwood Studios, 1989
DOS, Amiga, Atari ST, C64 and NES

Part ofSSI's AD&D series, *Hillsfar* is a very elaborate side-quest and, like all side-quests, there are rewards to be had for those daring enough to seek them.

Instead of importing your characters from *Pool of Radiance* straight into *Curse of the Azure Bonds*, you can import them into *Hillsfar*, then transfer them back out. Characters cannot level up in *Hillsfar*, but the experience they earn will transfer with them.

The game plays much differently than its Gold Box brethren. Your party camps outside the city of Hillsfar, where the mage Maalthiir has taken power, outlawed magic and oppressed the populace. You take individual characters inside the city to quest alone. Based on their class, they find quests by visiting their respective guilds. Quests range from finding lost items to investigating a kidnapping, and may require you to fight for information in the arena or check out the latest gossip in the taverns. Three quests, with increasing rewards, are available for each class.

Most of the action takes place in the form of arcade segments. Traveling to outlying areas requires riding a horse across dirt roads while avoiding obstacles. Investigating locations (or breaking into them) takes place in a top-down perspective as you explore mazes for treasure and clues, avoiding the town guards and magical traps. There is an archery range where you may compete for prizes and an arena where you may fight for the same (sometimes your life). All combat takes place in the arena, and since magic is outlawed, magic users will not be permitted to cast spells during the game. The mini games are the same despite your class, though class will affect certain aspects of them. For instance, chests that you find will often be locked, and you can either force them open, risking dangerous traps, or if you are a thief you may engage in a lock-picking mini game that requires good eyes and fast fingers.

Although as a standalone title the game can be tedious considering the lack of an overarching quest, as a companion-piece to *Pool of Radiance* and *Curse of the Azure Bonds* and a chance to build your characters beyond the usual methods of experience farming, *Hillsfar* is an entertaining diversion and a fun place to explore. **CH**

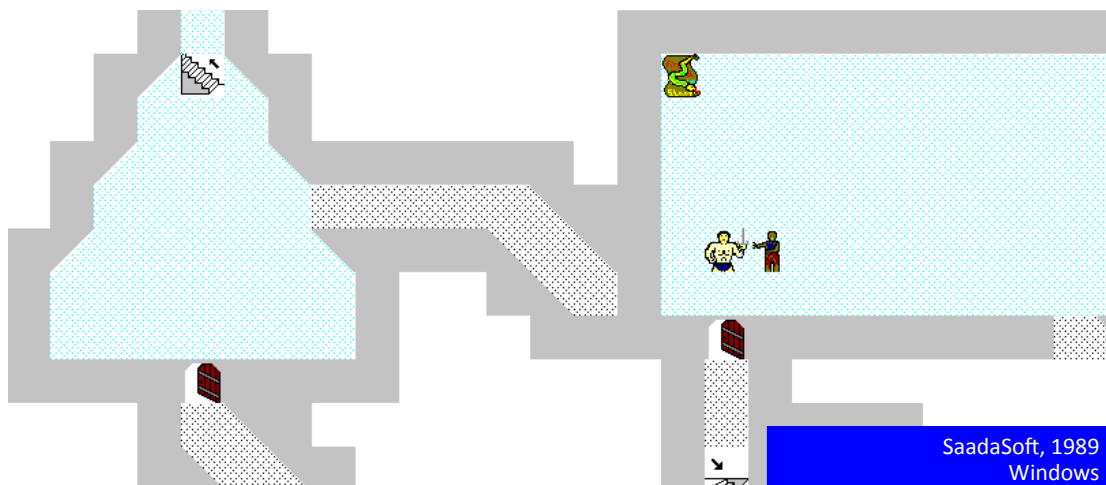
Hillsfar is full of locations to explore and trouble to get into. For the right price, you can also hire skilled individuals to assist you.



Picking locks is the best way to open chests, but if you are clumsy or take too long you may set off a trap!



Castle of the Winds



Castle of the Winds is one of the few CRPGs I remember playing and winning as a child of the 90's, partly because it was available as shareware to set up the commercially released second part of the story, so the first part was shorter. Beyond that, it has an addictive charm derived both from its roguelike tile-based dungeon-delving and its clean window-based interface.

Originally produced in 1989 as an early piece of software using the Windows graphical shell in MS-DOS by Rick Saada, it was released with its sequel in 1993 by Epic Megagames. In the first part, *A Question of Vengeance*, you are an orphan who must avenge the destruction of your hometown and retrieve a stolen amulet given to you by your parents. After two dungeons and a boss, finding and activating the amulet allows the character to be imported into the second part, subtitled *Lifthransir's Bane*, which features a much larger town and many more items, enemies, and encounters. Its deep dungeon has 25 levels with multiple bosses and monster hordes.

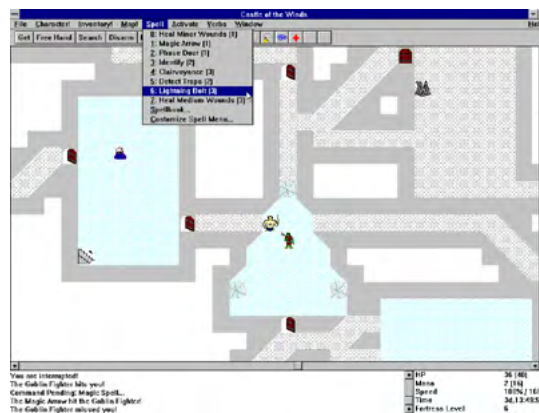
What earns *Castle of the Winds* a notable place in CRPG history is its unique blend of Norse mythology and addicting dungeon crawling in one of the earliest Windows-based graphical interfaces. Today that gives it a utilitarian aesthetic but, unlike most roguelikes, its gameplay is mouse-driven with a drag-and-drop inventory and a customizable spell button bar.

There are no classes or races, so characters can use every item and spell. A new spell is granted each level, and more can be learned from books. The game is entirely turn-based, but time passes in varying increments depending on actions taken. Inventory is measured in both bulk and weight, so packs can run out of room even if the PC can carry more weight. The dungeon levels are persistent once generated, plus a

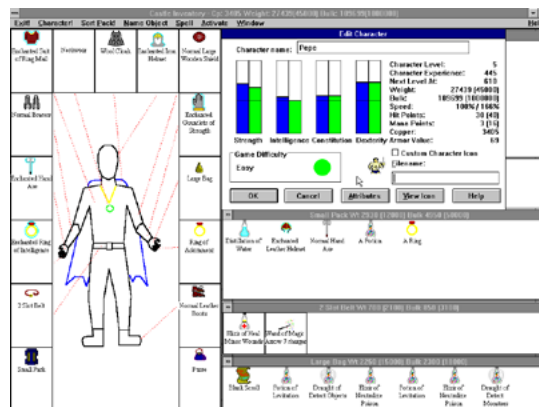
few have set encounters, such as a memorable position-shaped spider room, or a prisoner to free within a limited time. Foes include vicious wildlife, humans, standard fantasy creatures, undead spirits and specifically Norse monsters like jotun – giants.

While some aspects of the game are very simple, *Castle of the Winds* has enough complexity to satisfy that itch to explore dungeons, increase in strength and tackle ever fiercer enemies. **AS**

In 1998, Saada released both parts of *Castle of the Winds* as freeware on his website.



The Windows-based interface sets the game apart from others of the time, with its drop-down menus and mouse-driven gameplay.



The stats and items are simple, and the graphical interface is very intuitive, making the game accessible to those new to roguelikes.

Ultima VI: The False Prophet



Origin Systems, 1990
DOS, Amiga, Atari ST, C64 and SNES*

*Thanks to Nuvie, *Ultima VI* can also be played under Windows, Linux and Mac OS X. The game also had a Japanese FM-Towns version, that added voice acting by Richard Garriott and other Origin employees.

Ultima VI must have come as a shock to *Ultima* fans when it was first released, so wildly did its graphics depart from the design of the first five titles in the series. Gone were the overhead tiles and dual-scale worlds that had been staples of the series; full-color isometric graphics and a continuous, open world awaited the Avatar.

From the first moments of its introduction, *Ultima VI* marks itself as different. The turn-based combat is the first aspect of the game that players experience, and the initial battle plays out in the middle of Lord British's throne room!

It's a grim picture that is painted as the game opens: Britannia is under attack by a new and terrifying foe. The Gargoyles have marched out of the depths of the world, killed many of the realm's soldiers, and have seized the eight Shrines of Virtue. And it's up to you to stop them. *Ultima VI* thus seems to set up a very generic tale about a hero ridding a fantasy realm of an army of monsters. And were this any other game, that might well have been the scope of its story.

But this is an *Ultima*; *Ultima VI* twists its story around in a brilliant act of narrative subversion. The Gargoyles, we soon learn, have a legitimate grievance against Britannia, one which upends the Avatar's seemingly noble actions in *Ultima IV* and *Ultima V*. For, as the player will soon learn, the Codex was not Britannia's to claim; it has, in fact been stolen. And the rescue of Lord British precipitated a horrifying cataclysm that devastated the Gargoyle people and their home. Now, bereft of their holy book and reeling from the destruction of much of their world, they have set out to pay back Britannia in kind for its misdeeds. And it is only by finding a way to reconcile the warring sides, to forge peace, that the Avatar can prevail.

In fact, *Ultima VI* gives players the option to almost completely avoid the use of violence. It isn't even necessary to level up to finish the game, and there are only two or three fights that are genuinely unavoidable. (The opening battle, notably, is not one of these.) Clever players can, for the most part, find ways to carry out each piece of the game's plot using non-violent methods, and some parts of the plot can even be skipped entirely.

Not that one can't find combat if one goes looking for it; there are plenty of random encounters scattered across Britannia. *Ultima VI*'s monsters are usually not difficult to best even at lower experience levels, but some of them can be truly devastating in combat. (Battle-hardened Avatars can even test their mettle against the dragons of Destard...if they dare.)

Of course, you don't need to throw yourself out into Britannia alone. The Avatar's companions from previous games can be found all across the land, some of them eager to join you again. New NPCs can also be found, to further fill out the ranks, and up to seven party members can be recruited.

The Shrines of Virtue allow the Avatar to level up, once they have been liberated. Each confers different stat bonuses, based on its respective Virtues.



"The first thing I do is invent an abundance of activities, then I write a story that takes you from one activity to another to another to another. That is the way to design it, not to come up with a story, and then put in enough puzzles for you to solve the story. To my knowledge, very few people are really approaching it [game design] from that angle."

- Richard Garriott,
Ultima VI's Designer



Ultima 6 is widely regarded as the first *Ultima* which had both a deep narrative and a highly detailed world.

The concept of "open world" gaming is not new; even the first *Ultima* game can be considered "open world" in many respects. But *Ultima VI* expanded upon it by doing away with the dual-scale world design that had been a key characteristic of previous *Ultimas* (and, indeed, of most other CRPGs to that point). Gone were the depictions of cities and towns as single-tile icons on an "overworld" map, which had to be "entered" in order for the player to be taken to another map full of buildings and NPCs. In *Ultima VI*, the overworld is the world; buildings and NPCs are present alongside mountains and forests, and all

of Britannia can be explored in a single go.

And Britannia itself feels alive. NPCs are fully scheduled; they sleep at night, wake in the morning and sit down to eat, and go about their day tending a shop or wandering about town. They close up shop for the evening, eat dinner, and then return to their bed to rest for another day.

Ultima VI can be different games to different players. It can be approached casually, but offers much for the seasoned CRPG veteran to enjoy as well. It can be completed in under two hours, or explored for months on end. **KK**

Numerous utilities exist to allow players to edit the map, graphics, and dialogue of *Ultima VI*. For more details, see: <http://ultima6.ultimacodex.com/>

Nuvie

The New *Ultima VI* Engine began as an attempt to create a simple, open-source implementation of the *U6* engine that could run natively under modern operating systems. But Nuvie has since grown far beyond Eric Fry's original design and now offers various new features, such as a new UI, dialog keywords, new graphics and much more. Download it here: <http://nuvie.sourceforge.net>



Nuvie allows you to hide *U6*'s intrusive UI and use new features from *Ultima VII*, such as dialog keywords.

The Ultima 6 Project

Created in partnership with the team behind *Ultima V: Lazarus*, this mod offers a recreation of *Ultima VI* using the *Dungeon Siege* engine. It adds new subplots and side quests, but it's also more combat-heavy than the original game. Get it here: www.u6project.com



Encounters that could easily be avoided in *Ultima VI* typically have to be fought out to their bitter end in *U6P*.

Eye of the Beholder



Westwood Studios, 1991
DOS, Amiga, Sega CD and SNES



The game's story and villainous characters are taken from a story arc from the official AD&D comic book.

Eye of the Beholder was a point-of-no-return for me when it came to RPGs, it looked like a deep and complex game with stunning visuals and a gripping atmosphere. I had never heard of anything called *Dungeons & Dragons* before this, and in hindsight *EotB* served as a wonderful entry point into that realm. The intro blew me away as it laid down the plot: A party of adventurers is sent to look for an evil presence within the city of Waterdeep and told to start in the sewers. The game mesmerized me so much that I didn't stop to ask "Wait, sewers?" but was instead eager to start my adventure and see where it would take me.

EotB's character creation appeared both simple and complex at the same time, but it wasn't until much later that I realized why that was; the developers decided to merely use the *AD&D* rules as a guideline instead of wrapping the game in them. Turns out that half of the main stats are useless and many smaller rules are either ignored or hidden from the player. Looking back on that I can imagine that hardcore roleplayers would be miffed, but to a newcomer

like myself it was perfect. I did as the manual suggested and created a mixed party of 4 characters that could deal with whatever dangers lay ahead, knowing that I could recruit 2 NPCs in-game if something went wrong.

Once the game starts it won't take long to get immersed in the game's atmosphere. Bare bones lie piled up in the corner and glowing eyes stare at me from a sewer grate. No music is played beyond the title screen, which left me only with environmental sounds to break the silence. After checking my gear and opening a rusty door I stood face to face with my first monster, a little kobold with a vicious glint in his eyes. I was familiar with older games telling me in plain text what monsters I had run into, but here I saw first-hand that I was facing one murderous kobold, and that I had to act fast to deal with him as *EotB* is real-time, after all.

The game's design firmly points to "figure things out for yourself". Except for a crude map of the starting levels, a compass in the UI and a few vague clues gleaned from the mostly useless manual, I was utterly on my own, trapped in a sewer. Even when I accidentally discovered that the game has hidden "Special Quests" I was mostly clueless as to how I triggered them. Not that I cared, I was having too much fun exploring.

At first I thought my party would never meet anyone to talk to, but as soon as I cleared the sewers and reached the levels beyond I was proven wrong. Interactions with NPCs are just walls of exposition text, but sometimes I was given a choice like should I slay an injured dwarf or spare the dwarf leader's life... not that any of that mattered in the long run.

Barring the occasional recruitable NPC, the clan of Dwarves are the only friends you'll meet. Be nice to them.





The various plot-locked doors and undetectable traps make the thief class almost useless.



The eponymous monster of the game even gets to say a few lines.



Eye of the Beholder 2 was an improvement in every regard, adding more of everything... Including monsters.



Not even giant mechanical scorpions could save *EotB3* from being the weakest game in the trilogy.

Death is never far away in *Eye of the Beholder*; while characters can be raised from the dead there are few opportunities to do so, especially early on. The early monsters didn't pose much of a threat, but then I stumbled upon that infestation of 6-foot tall spiders that wiped out my entire party several times due to their poisonous bites. And that was just the start of my adventure...

Around the time I bought *EotB* the sequel *Eye of the Beholder 2: Legend of Darkmoon* had already been released. Having two *EotB* games to play simul-

taneously was a slice of heaven for me, as the sequel bettered the original in almost every conceivable way.

When *Eye of the Beholder III: Assault on Myth Drannor* was released, I snapped it up immediately. While it delivered more of the same it just didn't have the same magic touch as the prequels. Turns out that the developer and publisher had parted ways which forced the publisher to finish the game in-house in a hurry, leading to some strange elements appearing in the game. It was a bad end to a great game series. **AV**

If you're having a hard time, *The All-Seeing Eye* is an automapper for the first two *Eye of the Beholder* games, that also provide some cheats and a character editor.

Ports & Remakes

Eye of the Beholder's success resulted in faithful conversions to the SNES and the Sega CD in 1994, that added a new soundtrack by composer Yuzo Koshiro, famous for his work on the *Streets of Rage*, *Ys* and *Etrian Odyssey* series. Curiously, a remake for the GameBoy Advance was made in 2002. This remake made various changes, such as employing the *D&D 3rd Edition* rules, adding non-combat skills like Bluff and Intimidate, and even using a new isometric tactical combat, similar to that of the Gold Box games. Unfortunately, the slow combat and awkward interface don't fit well, resulting in a mediocre game.



Moonstone: A Hard Day's Knight

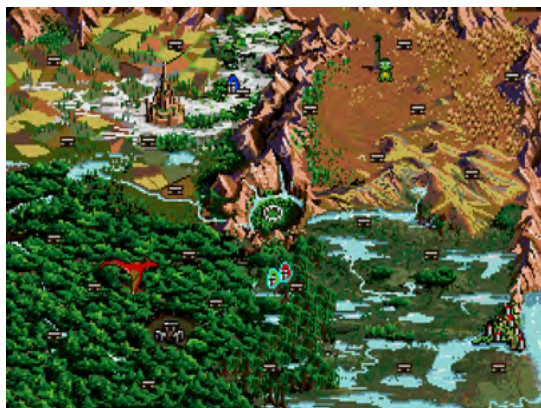


Mindscape, 1991
Amiga and MS-DOS

The finger-drumming, fidget-inducing drudgery of the loading screen has tested many a gamer's patience down the years. Not in *Moonstone*. These precious moments of downtime – illustrated with such portentous quotes as “The gods pause for a moment to contemplate your fate” – were a chance to gather wits, wipe down your sweat-soaked joystick and prepare for the carnage that awaited.

Moonstone is not just my favorite RPG, but my favorite game ever. After a spine-tingling intro in which a red-garbed knight is initiated into the quest for the titular moonstone by a sect of druids on behalf of their deity Danu, the adventure began in earnest.

Not your typical title by any means, *Moonstone* was a curious mixture of genres; a Frankenstein's monster that, astonishingly, has never been revisited by either direct sequel nor indirect imitator. To hijack a football analogy, it's a game of two halves – the first being a fantasy map in which you move the icon of your knight around. Each turn you can move a bit and perform an action, such as attacking other knights, investigating lairs, pestering wizards, gambling away your hard-gotten gold and so on.



The small but perfectly crafted world map is a potpourri of lairs, villages, ancient shrines and wizardly hangouts. Just beware of the red dragon on the lose.

This first half was patently influenced by board games like *Talisman* and *Dark Tower*. From AD&D came elements like purchasing swords and armor, finding magical scrolls and potions or using XP to raise stats like Strength and Constitution. Up to four human players could quest to find the moonstone, leading to memorable multiplayer sessions littered with back-stabbings, betrayals, unstable alliances, a couple of thousand beheadings and some of my most cherished childhood memories.

So far, so predictable? Possibly. But players must raid monsters' lairs in search of the four keys to the Valley of the Gods, where the moonstone (and its guardian) rest. And when your knight enters a lair, *Moonstone's* second half grabs you by the arm, rips it clean off and proceeds to beat you to death with it.

Each lair pits the player against an eclectic array of foes, from lion-like trogg warbeasts who impale unwitting warriors upon their horns to skull-faced mudmen who pounce from their wetland lairs to drag unsuspecting heroes into the earth and a giant – seemingly invincible – red dragon who randomly cruises the world map and snacks on knights.

Moonstone's combat consists of insanely unforgiving battles that fairly drenches the screen in gore. Inspired by the classic hack & slash game *Barbarian*, your knight can execute different combat moves by pressing the attack button together with one of eight directions. A range of satisfyingly meaty thrusts and parries lie at your disposal, varying in power and speed of execution. Collision detection is spot on, and as such players rarely feel cheated when they die.

Timing, strategy and lightning reflexes are key, as limbs are severed, bodies hacked in two and ripened yellow cornfields become innard-soaked charnel pits as *Moonstone's* true legacy becomes brutally clear.

“Rob [Anderson] was in discussions with Mindscape about *Moonstone 2* but, because it was not release in the US, they decided not to go forward with it. What happened there was that Toys R Us took a look at it and decided it was too violent for them to carry. At the time Toys R Us sold 25% of all computer games in the US, so Mindscape decided they would not release in the US. The irony there is that one year later Toys R Us made gonzo money selling the console versions of *Mortal Kombat*.

- Todd Prescott,
Moonstone's Designer



The fierce baloks of the northern wastes hit hard, but fall harder. Beware their bone-crushing stomps and brutal shakedowns.

What, to my mind though, truly sets *Moonstone* apart from not only its contemporaries but – heck – every other video game ever made is that intangible quality simply known as... well, atmosphere.

Whether it's Amiga's maestro Richard Joseph's dread-inducing, funereal dirge that plays over each loading screen (or, indeed, the incongruously jolly ballad that signals a trip to a tavern) the sparse use of sound effects literally ripped from the *Conan* and *Red Sonja* movies (screech! roar! grunt! squirt!) or the wonderfully evocative knight and monster designs – in fact, the entire game is gorgeous – every aspect of *Moonstone* begs to be committed to memory.

The sparse, subtle narrative feels unsubstantial, wrath-like, scary. The fantasy world, a sort of pseudo Dark Age Britain (if, indeed, the olde isle I call home ever hosted hulking Baloks, bestial Troggs and Medusa-like demons) is a far cry from the happy-clappy high fantasy that usually permeates the genre.

Why, then, did so few recognize this? *Moonstone* was a critical curate's egg and a commercial failure, only ever achieving – at best – a certain cult notoriety. In a pre-*Mortal Kombat* world, its extreme violence shocked and dismayed. Gamers stayed away and US retailers refused to sell it. What a terrible shame.

Is *Moonstone's* gore over the top? Undeniably. Is it tasteless? Possibly. Is it tongue in cheek? Crucially! The game's creator, Rob Anderson, cites *Looney Tunes* cartoons as a principal combat inspiration. The game's black knights (and their amusing penchant for losing limbs) are a tip of the hat to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Even the eyebrow-raising subtitle is a quirky nod to the iconic *Beatles* tune.

Moonstone, then, is as misunderstood as it is criminally underrated. Almost a quarter of a century after its release, the game is finally garnering long due acclaim, and there's even talk of a Kickstarter-funded remake on the horizon. Danu be praised! RT

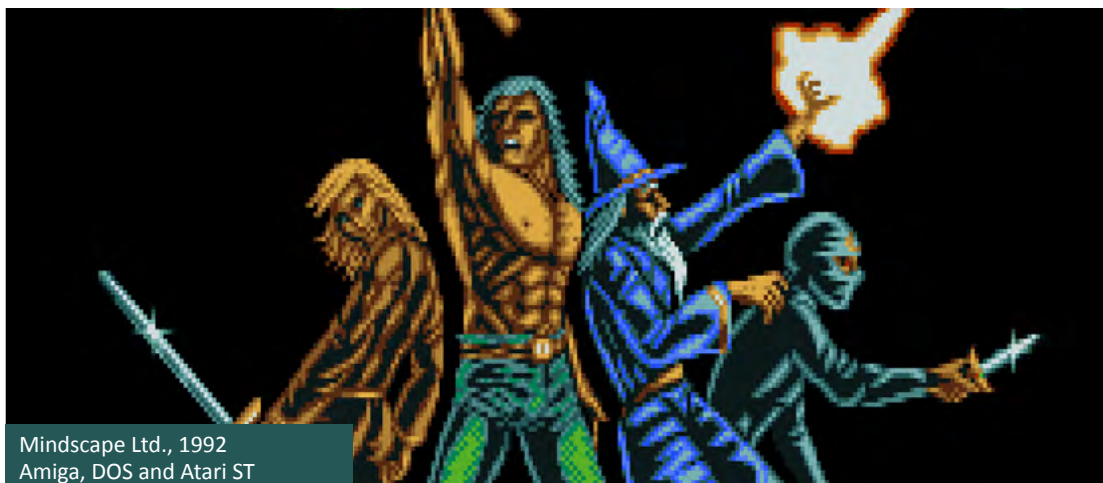


Math the wizard is a generous sort, sharing various gifts, but test his patience and you might be turned into a toad!



Some players believed the red dragon was unbeatable. A few magical talismans can make him a lot easier.

Legend



Mindscape Ltd., 1992
Amiga, DOS and Atari ST

When, as a 12-year-old, I first played *Legend* (titled *The Four Crystals of Trazere* in the US), I was left confused. Until this day RPGs for me were always turn-based, but now my party ran in real-time, sometimes fighting monsters faster than I could react. Nevertheless *Legend* quickly became one of my all-time favorite RPGs, because of the fascinating magic system and isometric view - two features that were new to me as well.

A sequel was released on the same year, called *Worlds of Legend: Son of the Empire*, this time with an eastern setting.

A tricky riddle room at the Dark Tower. You must mix and cast a couple of complex spells to open the four doors to the west.



Mixing a deadly spell. All runes are present and our Runemaster has a good stock of reagents too.



The land of Trazere is a state of emergency as an ancient force of chaos begins to transform ordinary citizens into monsters. Seeking to save the kingdom, four heroic adventurers gather at the city Treihadwyl: The Berserker, a warrior prone to uncontrollable rage; the Troubadour, who plays magical tunes; the Assassin, a master of deception who can turn invisible and backstab enemies; and the powerful Runemaster.

Legend plays in two levels, the map view and the dungeon view. At the map the group can travel to towns, villages, forts and special locations – including enemy armies in the field. They can visit blacksmiths, apothecary, taverns, temples, artificers and level up at the Guild – if they are experienced enough.

When the party enters a dungeon, the game switches into an isometric view. Enemies appear randomly and combat is mostly automatic – click on the rally icon and the group will seek the nearest enemy and start to fight – but you can also individually control each character. Each dungeon level also has a special puzzle room, which must be solved by casting various spells with the Runemaster.

The magic system is the highlight of the game, allowing the Runemaster to create various spells by mixing reagents and runes. For example – to create a offensive spell that first hit an enemy, then all adjacent foes around, inflicting damage and paralyzing – the Runemaster needs the runes Missile (for the flight characteristics), Surround (for the environmental effect), Damage (for harm) and Paralyze (for paralysis). The ingredients are then mixed in the mortar through a nice animation and become a spell, which the Runemaster can now cast once.

The combination of its unique magic system and challenging dungeon riddles makes *Legend* a great title, suitable for all fans of classic RPGs. **MH**

Fate: Gates of Dawn



Fate: Gates of Dawn is an obscure, superlative German game. It's a first person turn-based blobber with quite a few interesting features. You are able to control as many as 4 different parties with up to 7 party members each – one of your parties can crawl through a dungeon level while another is in the city collecting rumours and a third one is out in the wild exploring the gigantic world.

It's also worth mentioning how you gather your party: You're able to recruit almost every (friendly) NPC you meet. Encounters usually work like this: You encounter one or more NPCs and either they are hostile, which still gives you options like bribing them or fleeing, or they are neutral, which is when the interesting part sets in. Every encounter lets you choose from several menus – chatting, charming, joking, bragging, etc. Depending on several (maybe random?) factors the NPCs react differently to you, from being upset and leaving without a word, to getting angered and attacking, or to starting to like you and wanting to join your quest, which is usually what you want if you aren't looking for information.

Combat encounters are done by menus too, and feel incredibly satisfying. The mix of 11 races and 31 classes available to the player makes up for interesting party composition – you really have to think about it and have several parties to be able to prevail in the sometimes hard as hell combat situations. There is a total of over 150 spells to choose from, with characters being able to learn spells from different classes to satisfy all your character-building needs.

Perhaps due German humour, there's also some odd options, such as closing your eyes during combat, groping, mocking and laughing at enemies, or even asking party members to kiss. The game also featured nudity, that was censored in the english release.

The world itself is one of the largest in old-school games, brought to life by wandering NPCs and day & night cycles, with things to discover behind every corner. Be it a magic well that replenishes your magic points, a hole in which you find an NPC that might join your party, or an incredible item – it's all there for you to discover. The continent contains nine towns, and there are a few islands to explore if you manage to get your hands on a ship.

Then there's the dungeons, which are enormous too. There are several carefully crafted lairs, crypts and castles, riddled with maddeningly complex puzzles, deadly traps that will make you curse at the screen and combat encounters that feel like the developer is personally taunting you. As hard as the dungeons are, they feel very rewarding once you find your goal and can finally leave the place for good, though every dungeon usually needs several visits.

I cannot overstate how large the game is; even playing it with a guide would still easily require over 100 hours. If you enjoy large and complex RPGs, you should definitely play Fate. But I advise making good use of the 8 save slots – there are multiple ways to completely screw up your game. **SR**

Fate's English retail release is extremely rare, only a dozen of copies were ever made. However, the game has been released as freeware, and can be legally downloaded.

Olaf Patzenhauer, Fate's creator, died in 2011 while working on Fate 2. Fans have since taken over the project. Oddly, it features a Japanese artstyle.



Puzzles require a lot of thought and sometimes have odd solutions.

Might and Magic: World of Xeen



New World Computing, 1992
MS-DOS, Mac and NEC PC-9801

New World Computing released an enhanced CD version of *World of Xeen* in 1994 that added new voiced content to the game.

Might & Magic: *World of Xeen* is actually an adventure composed of two distinct games: *Might & Magic IV: Clouds of Xeen* (1992) and *Might & Magic V: Darkside of Xeen* (1993). Played separately, these games are typical *Might & Magic* games, but when both are installed in your computer they combine into a continuous experience.

Xeen is a flat, square-shaped world, and on each game you explore one side of the planet – first defeating the infamous Lord Xeen on the Light Side, then battling his master, Sheltem, on the Darkside. Magical pyramids spread through the land allow you to travel between both sides, exploring each at your own pace. Furthermore, *World of Xeen* adds a new batch of quests, requiring you to face challenges across all of Xeen to reach the game's true ending.

World of Xeen is the ultimate 2D game of the series before the move to 3D in *Might & Magic VI* and beyond. It was also the last game that New World Computing published independently before being acquired by The 3DO Company. As a game developer, I find the games like *Xeen* at the cusp of a transition to be particularly interesting.

Xeen's production values show that New World Computing wanted a grand game. The art is lush and detailed, the world is massive by any standard, there were voiced cut scenes not often seen, and the fact that the two entire games combined together to form a complete game set it apart from any other RPG.

Gameplay-wise, *World of Xeen* is a direct descendant of prior *Might & Magic* games and borrows many mechanics, particularly from the third game. You create a party of six characters of various classes and races. You have a standard selection of weapon users, spell slingers, and hybrid classes that can use heavy gear and spells. Your race choice gives you some benefits and penalties in the short term. Advancement comes from gaining new levels, as well as acquiring skills to help you in your adventures, such as Path-finding, Swimming and Linguistics. Items created by combining base types with random attributes also adds to character power.

Power inflation is the hallmark of the *Might & Magic* games, and you see it clearly here. Your party starts out weak, but magical items and temporary buffs to statistics, hit points, or magic points can make any party orders of magnitude more powerful. While this seems silly, it allows for the player's knowledge to give advantages that simply grinding levels could not. This power inflation also makes it so that the adjustments you got from your starting character choices have less of an impact at the end game.

Movement and fighting are the usual grid- and turn-based affairs of first-person RPGs at the time. Characters with ranged weapons and spell casters can fire at enemies approaching from a distance; but be warned, enemies can do the same. Knowing how to move and not expose yourself to attacks can be the difference between victory and defeat.



Side-quests usually are very simple, based on finding an object or killing a specific enemy. But they are creative.

"I have always felt the game systems I created were very robust, probably the biggest strength of the games and still hold up today. Plus the free form nature of the game worlds are very appealing. [...] Although I have a special fondness to *Might and Magic I* since I did the entire game myself, I would still have to say *World of Xeen* was my favorite and the pinnacle of the game systems, universe and conclusion to the original story."

- Jon Van Caneghem,
Might and Magic's Creator



Enemies have large, expressive and sometimes humorous animations. But even the silly ones can inflict nasty status effects and wipe out your party.

The land in each game is large, with 24 map locations each of which are 16x16 squares. On top of all this explorable area, there are ten towns, castles, and dozens of dungeons to explore. Progressing across the map often requires your characters to cast certain spells or to learn special skills mentioned previously.

There are plenty of exotic places to visit. The gorgeous physical maps included with the games show a wide variety of biomes: huge deserts, lava lakes, dense forests and frozen expanses. In addition, there are fantastical places where you can levitate over clouds and walk along roads in the sky. The game feels like a heroic sword-and-sorcery story, with different elements thrown together in a hodge-podge of fun. The important part is the adventure, not necessarily any thematic or logical consistent with the "real world".

The puzzles are particularly interesting, as they tend to rely on knowledge outside the game and can be daunting to non-English speakers.

For example, one dungeon has you solving a crossword puzzle using clues. The sheer number of puzzles makes the game challenging more than just hacking up monsters and taking loot. Of course, those playing the game now can just look up a handy FAQ to get past the tricky parts.

As mentioned before, the game also had cutscenes as part of a larger story. The story continues with standard fantasy tropes that blend with slowly revealed sci-fi elements – another hallmark of the *Might & Magic* series. As the player approaches the end of the game, the true plot becomes revealed: the events of the game are the conclusion of a grand fight that spanned all the prior games in the series.

In all, *World of Xeen* is a game that includes practically everything. If you look hard, you can probably even find a kitchen sink somewhere. But, because of its immense scope and place in history, the game stands as a landmark RPG for good reason. **BG**



The game has a unique visual style, using an iconic color palette, a few digitized photos and a lighthearted tone.



Some areas have special requirements, like learning to swim to cross a river or casting Levitate to walk on clouds.

Ishar:

Legend of the Fortress



Silmarils, 1992
Amiga, Atari ST and DOS

If you find *Ishar* too punishing, fan-made patches exist to remove the need to pay each time you save the game.

At first glance, *Ishar* appears to be one of the many games spawned by the success of the *Eye of the Beholder* series. Fortunately, it's much more than that. Silmarils, a French veteran of the Amiga scene, introduced many original ideas to the formula.

You start all alone in the middle of Kendoria, a vast kingdom, a bit lost too. Contrary to many dungeon crawlers, *Ishar* let you spend most of your time outside: no indications except a big map and a simple objective ; reach the fortress of Ishar to kill the evil sorcerer Khrog. A direct sequel to *Crystals of Arborea*, *Ishar* doesn't require any former knowledge of the series but offers interesting cameos.

Ishar is probably the ultimate capitalist dream since you must pay for everything. Recruiting up to four other characters? Pay. Getting precious food and water to avoid starvation? Pay. Train your characters to grow stronger? Pay. You merely want to save? PAY. While disturbing at first, the system quickly becomes a nice way to make dire choices at every step of the adventure.



This friendly man is the first NPC you'll meet. He's eager to join your party... and run away with your items.

Combat is in real-time, meaning a lot of micro management on your end. Magic is useful and since most classes get specific spells you don't need to focus too much on it. Still it can be extra costly thanks to expensive potions to cure your characters and refill your magic. The very "high fantasy" looking bestiary is well endowed and the general monster design very nice. A cool feature regarding combat in *Ishar* is the possibility to create a tactical formation for your group, protecting your spell-casters behind your more resilient warriors for example. While a bit crude, attacks and spells are entirely animated. Curiously, enemies don't chase you but since the game is really hard, that's a relief.

The sense of scale is probably one of the things that *Ishar* makes best. Kendoria is a vast land and navigating through its wilderness takes some time. Cartography becomes vital as you step through miles and miles of marshes, forests and open plains. Silmarils has worked a long time on Amiga and excels in making beautiful lush nature making long strolls enjoyable. Strangely enough for a CRPG there is only a handful of underground dungeons but each one is memorable. Spending most of the game outside makes dungeons feel claustrophobic and deadly since you can't avoid enemies anymore. Civilization is also present through scattered villages and one gigantic city.

Adventure and dangers dwell within towns with packs of thieves and bandits but those places also offer rest for our weary adventurers. Inns, smiths and various shops are a good way to recruit fresh blood, train your merry band or hear rumors. Additionally to the main plot, various side-quests are available through specific NPC. For example, one of them allows you to even cross the path of the former heroes of *Crystals of Arborea*, the prequel to *Ishar*.



Characters will vote key decisions. Here they just refused my order to dismiss one of the party members.



Some characters are clearly using you and may refuse to even tell their names.



The second game have you traveling through various islands, in search of artifacts for your quest.



Ishar 3 features exotic settings and some really impressive artwork, based on digitalized photos.

In *Ishar*, from the lowest human thief to the greatest lizardman fighter, everyone has a voice and strong feelings toward other races. Every time you want to recruit, murder or dismiss someone, a vote occurs. The outcome is democratic and characters each have their pre-determined opinions. The most powerful teammates usually have the most xenophobic opinions, which can lead to dreadful consequences such as a character leaving the group or, worst case scenario, total party kill. Having 100% human team is weaker than other combinations but is also the safest way to control a group. Silmarils is keen to remind you the “dog-eat-dog” nature of Kendoria as the first recruitable NPC in the game will take your money and flee after traveling a few days with you.

Ishar is a hard and demanding game but the satisfaction and the novelty of the game makes it a worthy addition to every CRPG library.

Bigger, better and less confusing, *Ishar 2: Messengers of Doom* (1993) is probably the best of the series but doesn't have the awesome Basil Poledouris soundtrack. You now play as the new lord of Ishar,

Zubaran, who needs to kill Shandar, an evil sect leader. The second entry offers an expanded playground with an entire archipelago to explore and some major improvements. Saving is now free and a GPS indicate your location on the map. You can also import your party from the previous game. However, NPCs will send you all over the archipelago to get an object or talk to someone, so taking notes is essential.

Sadly, the last game of the series, *Ishar 3: The Seven Gates of Infinity* (1994), is a disappointment. By using the Gates of Infinity, Zubaran & co time travel to different time periods, displaying specific environments, monsters and NPCs. While graphically enhanced, most backgrounds feel like reused assets of *Ishar 2*. The battle for the fate of Ishar consists mostly of traveling back & forth between the Dragon of Sith's lair and the city to heal your wounds.

On a funny note, the now speaking NPCs are mostly digitized actors, like a bearded Mel Gibson or Dustin Hoffman. **TR**

A fourth game, called *Ishar: Genesis* was considered, but never got made.

Star Control 2



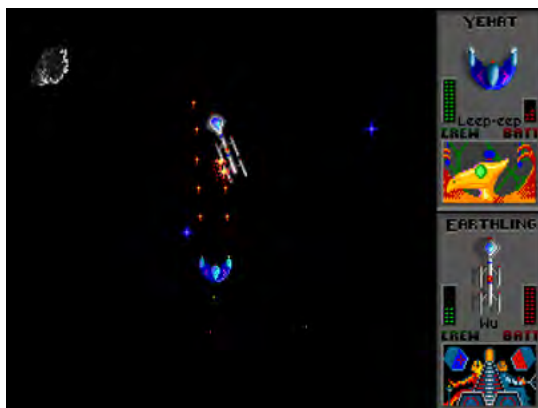
Toys for Bob Inc., 1992
DOS, 3DO (Linux, Mac and Windows)*

*In 2002 the source code of SC2 was released. Fans then started *The Ur-Quan Masters* project, to port the game to modern PCs. Check it at: www.sc2.sourceforge.net

When I am asked what my favorite CRPG is, people are often surprised when I answer *Star Control 2*. “That’s an adventure game”, they reply. Oh, but *Star Control 2* is so much more than that!

You control a ship that starts off as a bare-bones hull, and as you acquire resources and credits, you can buy upgrades to improve your ship, as well as gain new crew and landing craft to replace any that were lost in battles and exploration. These features are a direct analog to the skills, items and hit points in a typical role-playing game, making *Star Control 2* closer to a CRPG than an adventure game. And like any good CRPG, *Star Control 2* offers three areas of activity for the player: exploration, storyline, and combat.

The area for you to explore in *Star Control 2* is huge. It’s nothing less than a whole galactic arm (and then some), with hundreds of star systems to explore. While a minority of these systems are important to the game’s storyline, most of them contain valuable resources that can be harvested by landing probes. You’ll find everything from minerals to lifeforms to special items needed to advance the storyline.



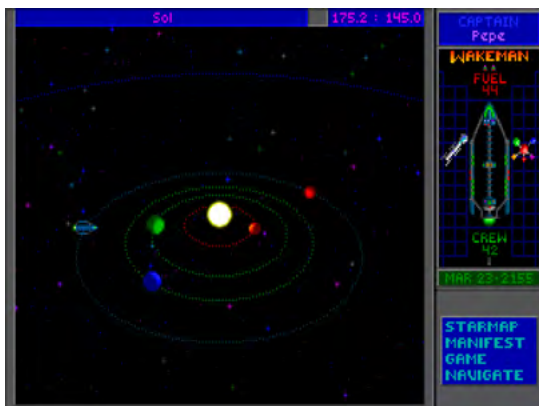
Combat is very similar to *Asteroid*, but each of the various ships plays differently.

To me, one of the most amazing things about *Star Control 2* is that the explorable area is entirely open and free form. True, you are limited in your exploration radius by your fuel reserves, but within that restriction you can go anywhere. The dialog you have with main characters often gives you clues on where to go, but you are free to ignore that advice and go anywhere you want.

Like any CRPG, there were some areas that needed to be unlocked before you can visit them (or get any results from visiting them). The best example of this is QuasiSpace, the strange dimension that the Arilou Lalee’lay race comes from. Portals into QuasiSpace were randomly scattered around the galactic arm, and you are eventually granted the ability to enter QuasiSpace at will by using a Portal Spawner that you can create from pieces found on a wrecked enemy ship. But until that time, many distant systems are difficult to reach, and some are downright impossible.

The universe of *Star Control 2* is filled with many races, and the dialogs with those races are varied and always humorous (if darkly so). Most races have a unique perspective, ranging from the insult-flinging Pkunk to the depressed Utwig to the mysterious, multidimensional Orz. The conversations with representatives of these races can be hilarious and confusing, but they are needed to advance the plot.

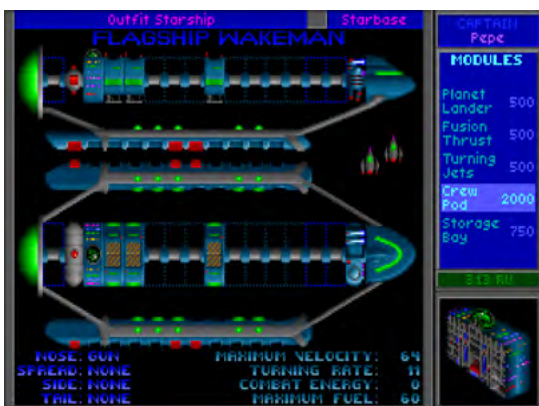
The pacing of the game was remarkably well controlled by the designers, especially given the open-ended nature of the play space. New races were found regularly, and each one gave you additional information about the history of the conflict in the region, as well as hints on where to go next and even new avenues of exploration. It always felt like there was somewhere to go and something to do that was important to advance to the story.



There are hundreds of systems to explore, ranging from our own solar system to even other dimensions.



Engaging in conversations with any of the numerous alien species in *Star Control 2* is always amusing.



At the Starbase you can upgrade your flagship, trade resources, recruit crew members and buy new ships.



When landing on planets you must weigh the danger of hazards such as electrical storms and intense heat.

The storyline of *Star Control 2* unfolded over time, as you explored the stars and spoke with the races you discovered. Some were friendly and some were not, which led to one of the best features of the game, the combat system.

Combat in *Star Control 2* is nothing short of fantastic. Each race has its own ship, with unique weapons, defenses and propulsion. The ships fight in a 2D top down arena reminiscent of the old arcade games *Space War* and *Asteroid*. Some ships have powerful but short range weapons, while others have self-guided attack missiles, and others have inertia-less propulsion and can literally turn on a dime. The crew on your ship acts as its "hit points", because successful strikes will kill crew members and the ship is destroyed when all crew are dead. One ship even uses its own crew to power its weapons!

Each combat consists of one ship fighting one ship. Like the old rock-paper-scissors game, some ships can handily defeat other ships, but unlike RPS, a highly skilled player can sometimes overcome a deficiency in a ship's capabilities. And with over two doz-

en races, by the end of the game there is a huge variety of ship types to choose from, not counting the player's own flagship, which is itself uniquely upgraded.

No review would be complete without mentioning the music. Each race had its own music that played during its dialog, and this music was based in MOD format, which uses digitized samples of instruments to play the notes, which are stored independently of the samples and in a much smaller format. This allowed for wildly varying music for each race, but without the large computational overhead (in 1994 terms) of 100% digitized music like an mp3. At the time, *Star Control 2* had some of the best sounding music of any game on the market, and that music helped define the tone of each race that you encountered in the game.

Since its release in 1992, *Star Control 2* has been considered one of the best computer game ever developed, and for me, it remains my favorite CRPG of all time. You can see its influence in the open-endedness of *Fallout* and *Arcanum*, and I will always remember this game fondly. Thank you Toys for Bob for making such an amazing game! TC

Toys for Bob was acquired by Activision in 2005. Fred Ford and Paul Reiche III, the creators of *Star Control*, went on to create the popular *Skylanders* games.

Darklands



Microprose, 1992
DOS

Darklands comes with an extensive 110-page manual that is required to play the game and even includes a detailed historical background on life in the Holy Roman Empire.

Obviously opening with a warning that “in Medieval Germany, reality is more horrifying than fantasy,” *Darklands* keeps its word, whether the horror is a child-gobbling Satanist or just the tedium of digging your scabbed and beaten body out of jail with a spoon. Despite its age, the unique mix of choose-your-own-adventure progression, immersive historical setting and classless builds make *Darklands* a refreshing and original experience.

Set in the 15th century Holy Roman Empire, *Darklands* covers a large swath of medieval Europe and portrays Greater Germany in the full glory of its grim day-to-day survival, arbitrary law enforcers and superstitious beliefs both rampant and fantastic. The game world itself is history come to life, thorough and well researched. Dialogue and exploration choices are littered with Germanic linguistics, beautiful pixel art depicts lush medieval scenes with accuracy and detail.

With a setting so rich and detailed, it is fitting that *Darklands* is an open-world RPG, encouraging free exploration from the start while you slowly unravel your ultimate goal: avert an apocalyptic disaster.

From character creation, the game is admirably committed to the time period, with a system that raises characters from infancy to adulthood with a multitude of options for occupations and backgrounds commonly found in medieval Europe, each adjusting the stats and skills in minor ways. If it’s your dream to role-play a country commoner turned alchemist turned hermit, this is a game for you.

In *Darklands* you’ll never gain experience points or level up. Progression is the result of your actions, successes and failures, increasing and decreasing your attributes in small increments. With a massive variety of skills and stats based off your chosen background, the game creates an interesting party dynamic where characters have a multitude of skills they are good at, instead of the more typical singular focus of classes. Although classless builds are not uncommon in RPGs through the years, it was a rarity at the time, and is still an exciting challenge to build a character without the crutch of a pre-defined class.

A diversion from typical fantasy, the game has no Mage character – the closest you’ll get to the arcane arts is a brilliant system of alchemy and divine prayer. It’s a welcome change, as your builds take on qualities not often seen in RPGs, most notably with characters that can call on specific saints to intervene in a myriad of social and hostile situations.

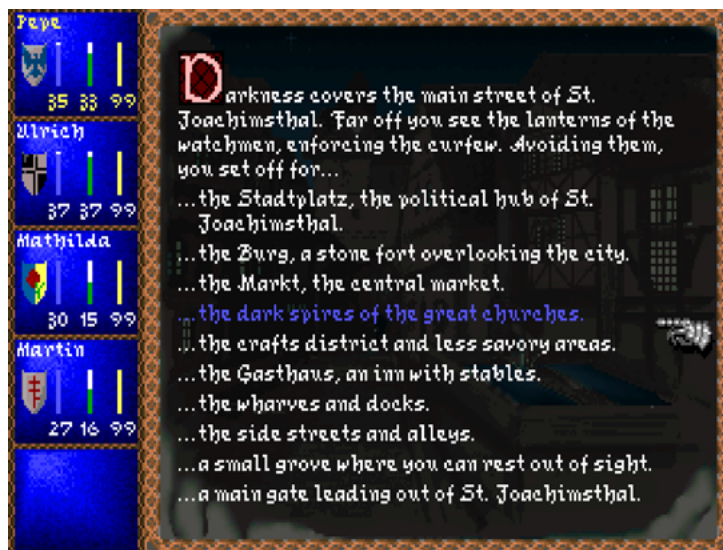
The historical accuracy is charming and immersive, all the while being consistently fun to play, proving that once-existing nightmares, beliefs and folklore can be just as entertaining as the usual fantasy genre tropes. Similarly, equipment and loot are wonderfully time period appropriate. It’s refreshing to equip a pike because in the 15th century it was the best way to skewer a wolf with your arm intact, not because it does +25 fire damage.

The character system is classless and extensive, with seven different weapon skills and twelve non-combat ones, such as Stealth, Alchemy and Religion.



“At the very start, I wanted the *Darklands*’ ‘hook’ to be that it would use some beliefs from the era to “justify” fantastical elements, rather than trotting out the usual bog-standard wizards, clerics, bards, etc. Where possible, I like my game designs to provide an insight into history – a “you are there” feel. When searching for tactical tradeoffs and interesting details, why goof around conjuring up stuff when there is plenty of interesting historical material to use?”

– Arnold Hendrick,
Darklands’ Lead Designer



Locations, dialogs and events are explored through “choose your own adventure” screens like this, with nice hand-drawn illustrations in the background.

Besides the unique setting and character system, *Darklands* also shines in its choose-your-own-adventure gameplay. Locations, dialogs and events are all explored primarily through illustrated screens offering multiple choices based on your stats/skills and a surprising amount of free will. These screens are all expertly written, with vivid descriptions that enhance the role-playing aspect of the game.

Whether you’re deciding how to enter a town when you don’t have the money to pay the tax, deal with an unwelcome bandit visit in the forest, or discuss a loan with a shrewd banker, the game often allows for multiple outcomes and consequences, many of which do not end well. *Darklands* is as challenging as it is rewarding, and your choices inevitably lead into undesirable scenarios such as crawling through sewers to escape a landscape of horrors, or surrendering against a vicious pack of creatures only to see one of your companions devoured as a penalty.

Interrupting your explorations are fast-paced isometric battles, fought through a real-time with pause combat – both innovative concepts at the time. These are usually prefaced with an opportunity to put some divine power on your side or toss an alchemical potion into the fray for a chance to escape. Without the right equipment these encounters can be brutal, leading to bandits robbing you of everything but a few pfennigs hidden in your boot.

Despite all these notable systems and a carefully crafted setting, the release of *Darklands* was met with a mixed reception, mostly due to an unwieldy amount of bugs and a tendency to crash. The game endured, however, and has retroactively been labeled one of the best RPGs of all time, with a content-filled scale and scope that would influence games like Bethesda’s *The Elder Scrolls* series and the real-time with pause combat in the Infinity Engine games. **H&JW**

Hendrick hinted at the possibility of creating sequels for *Darklands*, set in historical eras such as the Hundred Years’ War, the War of the Roses or featuring Vlad the Impaler but, sadly, those were never realized.



Darklands’ map is huge and features many cities, villages, keeps, caves, mines, churches and other places of interest.



Most battles end as soon as you slay all enemies, but a few of them take part in large, trap-filled dungeons.

Shadowlands



Shadowlands. The mere name inspire sweet and dark memories. For most people, it's the title of an Anthony Hopkins movie about the live of writer C.S. Lewis, a good friend of J.R.R. Tolkien. But to me, it recalls all the great time I spent inside dungeons, accompanied by four adventures with Japanese manga-styled faces. Of what is – without a doubt – one my favorite RPGs.

Shadowlands was published in 1992 by Domark, who would later would give birth to the best-selling *Prince of Persia* games, but at the time known for their arcade games. In this context, it isn't strange that doubts were cast over Domark's ability of delivering a good RPG.

These doubts vanish as soon as you begin playing *Shadowlands*. A 3D, real-time isometric world awaits the four heroes chosen to avenge Prince Vashnar and defeat the mighty Overlord in his underground lair.

Before reaching him, you had to define the heroes, which was relatively simple, since each one was characterized by four basic attributes: Combat, Magic, Strength and Health.

Although these stats are important at the start of the game, you'll also be able to further define your heroes as the game advances, since they gain Magic and Combat points with practice. So the more spells they cast, the better they become at casting. This is the same system used in the classic *Dungeon Master*, from which *Shadowlands* takes many cues.

The game was created in a way to allow players to control the four heroes either individually or in group. Today this may sound trivial, but at the time it was a real revolution in role-playing games. Until then there were basically two systems: either the group moved and acted together, with each character performing his specific skills, or there was a lone hero, typically in a top-down view.

The ability to spread the members of your party and control them individually opened countless combat and puzzle possibilities unheard at the time. In fact, in certain moments of the game it is of vital importance the formation in which the group advances: walking in a line isn't the same as advancing as a block to face an enemy, for example. It was a strategic dimension entirely new to RPGs.

But, without a doubt, the most fun and challenging are the puzzles. Besides the usual key-and-lock, sliding blocks and pressure plates, *Shadowlands* added – for the first time – puzzles that use light. I'll explain.

The game features a system called Photoscope, where each light source – in the scenery or carried by characters – illuminates the environment in real-time, fading away with distance and creating multiple levels of shadows (thus the name of the game). This system was cleverly used by the game's designers to introduce a new type of switch, that required a certain level of light to be activated.

Two characters control the door switches, while a third one battles a skeleton and the fourth rests in peace.





When creating your party the game allows you to roll their stats and also to customize their appearance.



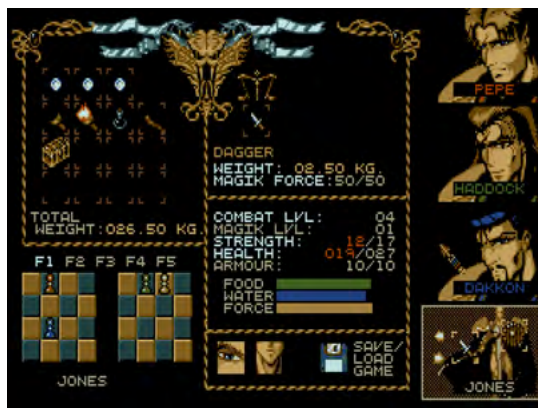
You control each character by clicking on his body parts, such as clicking the right arm to interact with objects.

The control scheme is simple and intuitive, allowing players – after a bit of practice – to easily control each of the four characters. And quickly too, something vital in the more complicated situations found later in the game. Among the things that players have to master is how to throw objects, as the range varies according to the nature and weight of each object, plus the strength of the character throwing it.

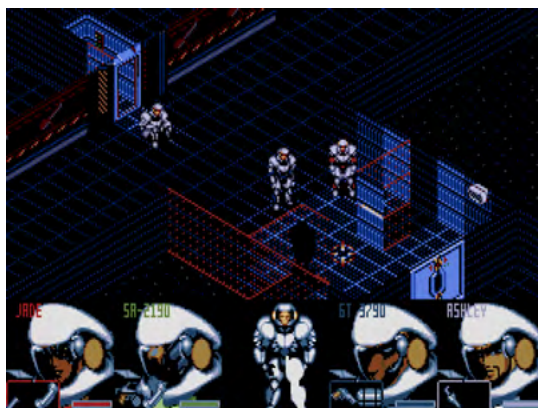
There's little to talk about the other elements of the game. The plot was simple and linear, basically an excuse to introduce a series of dungeons, packed with monsters to kill and traps to solve.

Your adventure begins in a grove, that's no more than a tutorial. From there you'll enter a dungeon, five levels deep. Beating it leads you back to sunlight, where a hedge maze leads the heroes into a pyramid. Inside, you'll face four levels packed with the game's most challenging traps.

Once you're out, there's another labyrinth garden, followed by a cave full of enemies and, finally, the palace – where the Overlord awaits beside Vashnar's body, ready for a final battle.



Each characters can only equip two items at a time, but the game allows you to split the party into two groups.



The sequel, *Shadowlands*, was also released in '92. It has a sci-fi setting and an updated UI, but feels uninspired.

Regarding the enemies, there isn't much to see. The first levels bring undead, as well as the usual dungeon fauna: rats, snakes and deadly scorpions. Further on you'll face the memorable minotaurs, as well as hell hounds and burning men. Among their dangerous weapons are fireballs, which have unique effects in *Shadowlands*' Photoscope system. Since said projectiles also harm monsters, you can use them to find clever solutions to tough situations.

The graphics aren't very attractive and offer little variety to the alleged different environments. And while the game's theme song is memorable and eerie, there's no music in-game, and barely any sound effect. Of course, none of this diminishes the attractiveness of the game.

In the end, *Shadowlands* was (and still is) a magnificent and revolutionary game in two aspects: the individual control of heroes and the use of the Photoscope system. It's rare to see a game bring this level of originality. The game also had a sequel called *Shadowlands*, set in space and using the same engine, but without the same attractiveness of the original. **FHG**

Veil of Darkness



Event Horizon Software, 1993
DOS, FM Towns and PC-98

After releasing *Veil of Darkness*, Event Horizon changed their name to Dream-Forge Entertainment.

Veil of Darkness is an odd game. You play as a cargo pilot whose plane suddenly crashes in a remote Romanian region. Saved by the daughter of a local baron, you quickly realize that leaving the valley is out of the question. Indeed, an evil vampire called Kairn magically sealed the region using mist, hence the name *Veil of Darkness*.

The good news is that an ancient prophecy foretold your arrival and nominates you as the “chosen

one”. Your task in the game is to fulfill the prophecy stanza by stanza (it’s a HUGE pamphlet), following it almost as a quest log, to learn the tragic tale of Kairn and eventually kill him.

Your biggest allies are in a camp of mysterious gypsies, acting as advisers and healers. The story feels unique, the dialogues are well done and the gothic atmosphere itself is gripping. If you are half the nerd as I am, you’re already screaming “dark lord, gypsies, fog: *RAVENLOFT!*” Too bad that the generic protagonist feels out of place with his lack of personality and outrageous yellow jacket.

Even if it’s sold as an RPG, *Veil of Darkness* is more like an adventure game in the end. It’s possible to smash hordes of enemies without breaking a sweat and most of the bosses or special enemies are glorified puzzles. Indeed, combat is in real-time but not very difficult, that is IF you possess the right weapon. Like in every horror story, each monster is weak to a certain type of weaponry. Movement and combat are solved through clicking, giving serious *Diablo* vibes.

Before dealing with Kairn directly, various tasks given to you by villagers and linked to the prophecy must be dealt with: hunting down a werewolf, curing a child from madness, laying a ghost to rest, etc... Progression is left to the player’s freedom but lack of certain key-objects or weapons tend to limit your options. Quests are solved through specific actions, chain of dialogue or just getting a unique item. It’s not rocket science but some thinking might be required.

In a nutshell, *Veil of Darkness* is a great adventure game but not really a good RPG. It was Event Horizon’s last tentative to mix both genres, as they went back to make more orthodox CRPG and the excellent point & click *Sanitarium*. Still, I would recommend it for the nice story and the *Ravenloft* vibes. **TR**



The dialogue system uses both highlighted keywords and a text parser.



Combat is real-time and based on clicking on the weapons in your hands – an odd mix of *Diablo* and *Dungeon Master*. Your health is measured by a body in a coffin.

BloodNet



MicroProse, 1993
DOS and Amiga

Vampires are pretty cool, but you know what is cooler? Vampires in a cyberpunk setting. At least, that is what Microprose thought when they created *Bloodnet*.

The premise is quite simple, you play as Ransom Stark, a private-eye living in a futuristic Manhattan. One night flirt with a cute girl ends up goes south as he is bitten by a hundred-years-old vampire cleverly called Abraham Van Helsing. Stark escapes but is doomed to slowly turn into a full fledged vampire. The objective of the game is simple: destroy Van Helsing and find the ultimate icebreaker to destroy once and for all the vampire “virus”. It’s mostly *Shadowrun* with a touch of *World of Darkness*.

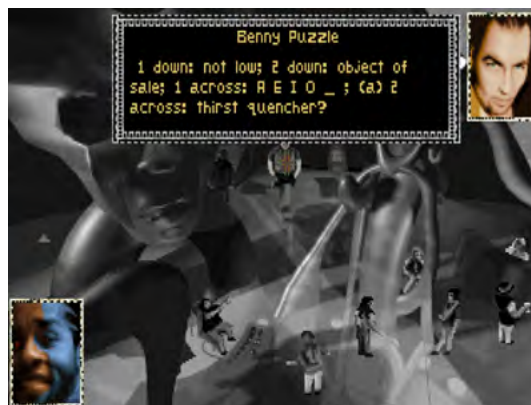
Being half-vampire, Stark has a humanity and a bloodlust pool. You must drink blood to keep the bloodlust under control, but you lose humanity when biting humans. The story and the dialogues are intriguing and usually well done. Ransom is a funny character, the supporting cast is extremely colorful and the vampire/cyberpunk concept eventually grows on you.

Bloodnet uses a lot of stats: combat, hacking, social but also vampire-related skills. Party members can be enrolled to expand your panel of actions. The controls ape point & clicks with gigantic environments and very tiny pixelated characters evolving through them. It’s not very good looking and some cut-scenes use those god awful old early 3D renders. You can also hack into the cyberspace to access “pits”, private sectors through specific keywords to solve major puzzles or reach sub-quests.

Combat is awful and badly explained. It’s a basic turn-based system, but some statistics don’t make sense and other are of no use at all. For example, initiative never works and damage ratings seem com-

pletely random. It’s just a mess and once you understand that only firearms and high-tech weapons are useful, you just power your way through and save scum like a madmen.

Bloodnet starts with an interesting premise, develops it but never really succeeds in turning it into a fun game. The ending is also a cop-out and feels like a sequel-hook. Too bad for Microprose, *Bloodnet 2000*, the next game, was eventually canceled. **TR**



One of the characters, Benny Puzzle, speaks in crossword puzzles. Here, he’s offering to buy you a drink.



Besides the skill trees, there’s also a good amount of items for you to equip your characters, including unique weapons and armor.

Dark Sun: Shattered Lands



Strategic Simulations Inc., 1993
MS-DOS

The *Dark Sun* setting was quite popular in American prisons. TSR received a lot of fan mail from prisoners, who identified themselves with the slave gladiators.

Athas, the world of *Dark Sun*, was once planet full of life. It was turned into the desert by the power hungry and mad wizards thousands of years ago. Here we follow the story of four unlikely heroes. Slowly rotting away in prison of city state Draj, awaiting their death in the gladiator arena. Will they rise and change the face of unforgiving Athas? Or will they become another forgotten souls whose corpses will be buried under never ending sea of sand?

The game starts with party creation. *Dark Sun* is an AD&D campaign setting, so things should be quite familiar. You can choose race of your characters, alignment, their profession and adjust basic attributes like strength, dexterity or wisdom. There are no skills, feats or perks as we expect from the games of today. There is however one thing that puts it apart from other RPG games of its time: Psionics. Each character has psionic abilities that allows them to disintegrate animate objects, absorb diseases or transform your arm into weapon. Beware though, almost all intelligent creatures on Athas have such abilities, and they will not hesitate to use them.

Your party begins as slave gladiators, forced to fight monsters to the death at the arena. The world of *Dark Sun* is presented in top drawn slightly isometric view, and fights are turn-based. The well-designed interface is entirely mouse-driven, presented with self explanatory icons and is very easy to use.

In between the fights you wander around pens talking to its inhabitants, solving small puzzles and mini quests. This is where you'll slowly notice some of the great elements of *Dark Sun*. The dialogs offer a great amount of text and options for the players, and most, if not all, of the quests have multiple solutions, allowing you to choose whichever approach you like.

Since you don't want to spend the rest of your days counting hay straws and occasionally fighting for the amusement of average Joe, you need to escape. If you want to use the brute force approach you can hack your way out, even teaming up with another gang; or if you want to avoid confrontation altogether you can try to bribe the templars. This gives the game an enormous amount of replayability. You can play *Dark Sun* over and over and you will always find new quests and new ways how to complete them.

After escaping the pens, the main quest begins: to rally the free villages in a fight against mighty army of city-state Draj. They are preparing a military campaign that is supposed to wipe out all ex-slaves. This is another example where *Dark Sun* shines: its openness and non-linearity. You want to help all villages or none at all and face the army by yourself? You can! Want to investigate a remote cave, visit the traveling caravan or go deep into the lair of a mad wizard? It's up to you where to start and where to go next. The game is divided into over 30 areas, each a huge opened space with many quests, adding to nice 40+ hours of gameplay.

Dark Sun is an AD&D campaign setting, but its ruleset allows you to play with some exotic races and classes, such as a Thri-Kreen Psionist, a Half-Giant Gladiator or a Mul Preserver.





Dark Sun's dialogs look average today, but they were novel at the time, offering players plenty of text and options.



Every character in Dark Sun can use pisonics, but you'll also see many of the traditional AD&D spells.



The combat system is turn-based, using the AD&D ruleset, but the UI keeps things simple and accessible.



The sequel, Wake of the Ravager, expanded the game in every sense, unfortunately even in the amount of bugs.

While exploring the game areas you'll face many adversaries. There will be zombies and spiders, but these are just a nuisance. The real test of your skills will be fighting extra-planar Tanar'ri, 15 feet tall Mountain Stalkers or the huge Mastyrrial scorpions. And it's not only the fauna that wants to kill you. Forget what you learned about fantasy races from all the Tolkien-derived worlds out there – here Halflings are xenophobic cannibals, elves are honor-less nomads and none of the other races are any better.

Graphically, *Shattered Lands* is very pretty, with nicely drawn environments, each area with its own distinctive look, feel and unique variety of monsters. Unfortunately the game was set back by low quality animations and numerous bugs. While I have not encountered a critical one, there were occasional hiccups where I had to restart the quest or go back to previous save position.

The story continued in the follow-up game, *Wake of the Ravager* (1994). Our heroes arrived at the city of Tyr and need to stop coming of the dragon.

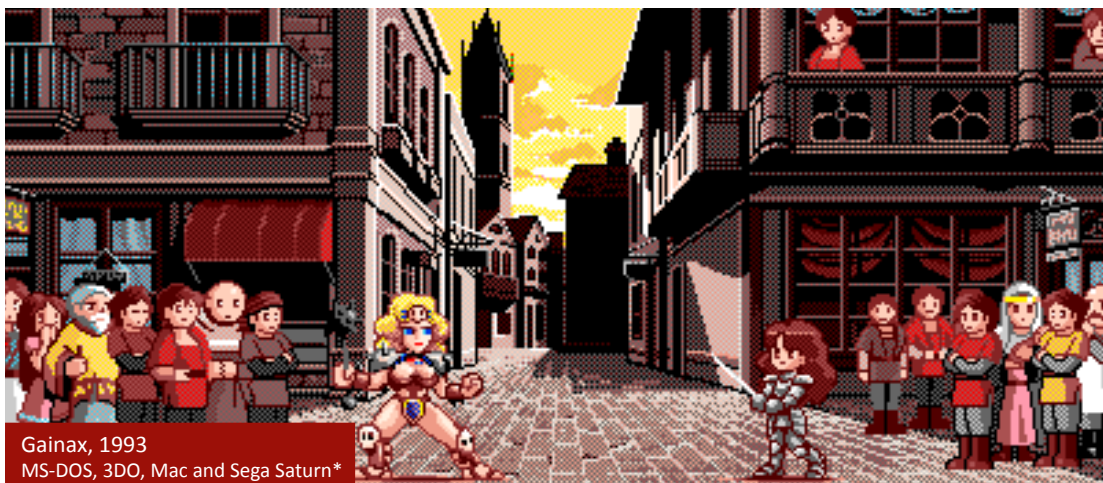
Shortly said, *Ravager* is bigger, louder and much more buggier. Sprites got much bigger, animations were improved and overall mood became much grittier and dark. The atmosphere was improved by voiced dialog, new cutscenes and a great CD-audio soundtrack. Sadly, some of the bugs were game breaking and you could face complete restart of your game due to inability to finish one of the main quests.

The *Dark Sun* saga was concluded in *Dark Sun Online: Crimson Sands* (1996), a short-lived online RPG, preceding the likes of *Ultima Online*. It's brief history is one plagued with development and budget issues, many bugs and rampant cheating by players.

Dark Sun: Shattered Lands was supposed to be a breakthrough for SSI, but it was plagued by bugs and delayed releases. Furthermore, the game was the product of a transition era – ahead of its peers in many aspects, such as the UI, the open areas, the dialogs and the multiple quest solutions, while also struggling on how to implement these features. Give *Dark Sun* a spin, you won't be disappointed. **BM**

You can transfer your party from *Shattered Lands* to *Wake of the Ravager*. This, however, will cause all enemies to have twice the HP, which will make the game really hard.

Princess Maker 2



Gainax, 1993
MS-DOS, 3DO, Mac and Sega Saturn*

Princess Maker 2 is a Japanese RPG, but its US release is an (unfinished) adventure by itself. In 1995 SoftEgg Enterprises started to localize the game into English, but ran into countless delays, prejudice and their publisher partner going bankrupt. By the time things were sorted out, it was already 2002 and no one cared anymore for a MS-DOS game. To this day, no official English release exists, yet the game became a cult hit after a beta version of the translation was leaked and started to circulate on the Internet.

Such fame is well-deserved, as *Princess Maker 2* pioneered the raising simulator genre, spawning many sequels and inspiring similar games. It also helps that the game was developed by Gainax, the anime studio famous for *Evangelion*. So let us abandon all prejudices and examine this often overlooked gem!

Princess Maker 2 takes place in fantasy-medieval setting, where players take the role of a retired war veteran to whose protection was entrusted a young girl. As her father, players must raise the girl from her 10th birthday until she turns 18-years-old, taking care of her jobs, studies, trainings and adventures.



*In 2004 a new version called *PM2: Refine* was released in Japan for Windows and PS2, featuring updated art and full voice acting.

Each job has its own pros and cons. Working as a farmer helps to raise stats that are important for a fighter, but socially pays badly.

Each of those activities takes 10 days of a monthly schedule you must plan for you daughter. Working increases some of her stats but decreases others and a potential pay depends solely on her performance. For example, working as a lumberjack will increase strength but decrease her sensibility. If she works well, she returns home with a pay. Schools are expensive, especially in the early game, but as your daughter studies, she can advance into more expensive master classes, which yield even more skill points.

She can also participate in more traditional RPG activities: going on adventures bringing back money, rare items and having special encounters (tip: usually by camping near interesting locations). There are four places to go in, each moderately more difficult than the previous. Every area has plenty of surprises, even if their size feels underwhelming. Adventuring won't usually take more than a third of the games time for most players. Sometimes random enemies will appear, engaging your daughter into battle. Combat is very simple, and consists only of attacking with either physical hits or magical spells and using items.

Stats include many skills and attributes, both visible and hidden ones; oddly enough, attributes don't affect skills in any way. Your daughter's starting stats depends on her sign and blood type and she'll face various hidden checks during the game.

Depending on players goal each stat is more or less useful (although some may take a part in a wider variety of goals). Increasing them may be sometimes a challenge in a face of ever decreasing funds, especially since developers have foreseen the most players would make their daughters warriors on a first playthrough, thus making it the most difficult path. But pure might won't take her far and only investing in social skills can take her up in the social ladder.

"It's own type of game. It really 'fathered' so many things. The *Tamagotchi* wouldn't have existed without *Princess Maker 2*. *Pokémon*, I think, goes a great deal into *Princess Maker 2*. [...] It's a shame that it didn't make it to the US, but I think we can still see the influence of that game on other games, you know, from now and well into the future."

- Tim Trzepacz,
Princess Maker 2's localization
Producer at SoftEgg



The game overflows with stats, skills and numbers, but only part of them are visible. If you don't treat your daughter well, she might become a stubborn delinquent.

Don't want your daughter to become a fighter? Worry not, *Princess Maker 2* features more than 70 different careers. Once she completes 18 years the game ends and she'll follow a path depending on how she was raised, as well as her friendships and actions during the game. She can become a hero, a dancer, a painter, a general, a queen, a martial art teacher, a BDSM queen, a nun, a writer, a luxurious prostitute, a thug, a knight or even the Princess of Darkness. Sometimes there is also an extra check to see how well she'll perform in a given profession. Dancer's success depends on constitution and only intelligent thugs can avoid pursuit.

At mid-game your daughter gets, based on her stats, a rival which she will have the pleasure of facing on festivals. These festivals take place once a year and she can participate in a combat, cooking, painting or dancing challenge – all which wield fantastic rewards and a great deal of fame.

What really sets *Princess Maker 2* apart are its choices and consequences. Is your daughter refined and charismatic? Then a rich man in love will start appearing and giving her free money. Did she sell the sword she got from a king? It will be found and her reputation will go down. Did she befriend a prime minister? Then as a judge of a dancing competition he will make sure she gets an easier time beating the challenge. Did she slain many monster? Then she will stop having any remorse about it. Should she paint a good painting, it will be displayed in her room. Those little moments are what make or break a game, and *Princess Maker 2* is outstanding in this regard.

Driven heavily by stats and by player decisions, *Princess Maker 2* is a great game for those who enjoy that aspect of an RPG. You won't find challenging combat or deep plotline here, but rest assured, it's a game you WILL want to replay again and again. JM

There are six *Princess Maker* games, all of them released only in Japan. However, there are various western spiritual successors, such as *Cute Knight*, *Spirited Heart* and *Long Live the Queen*.

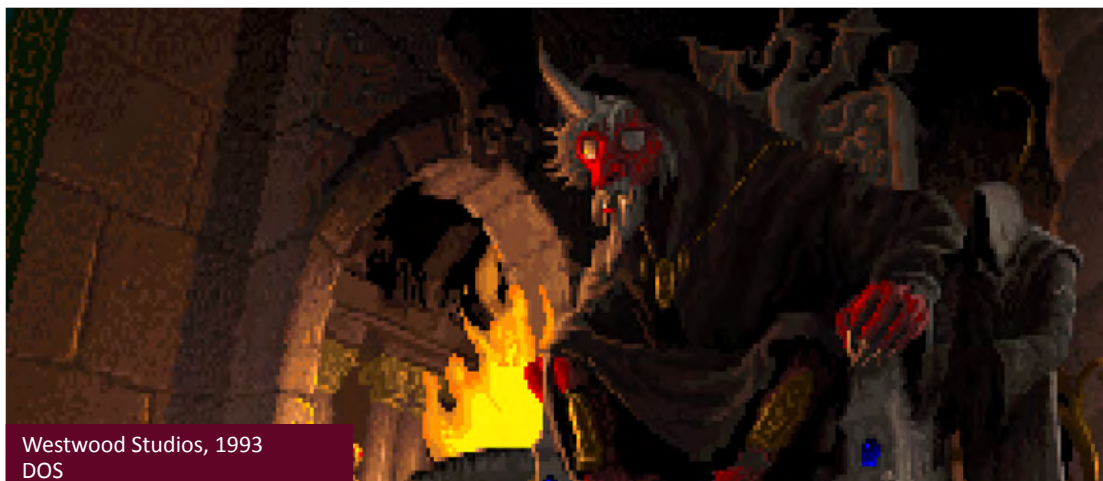


During battles you simply choose between using physical or magical attacks, and hope that all that training was enough.



When out on adventures, your daughter might find wild beasts, treasures and some very special encounters.

Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos



Westwood Studios, 1993
DOS

Westwood Associates had a great run with SSI's *Eye of the Beholder* and its sequel, before Virgin Interactive snatched them up in 1992 renaming the development house Westwood Studios. In 1993, they put their experience to good use with *Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos*.

Now free to build their own rules, they took the AD&D crunch found in *EotB* and tried to make it less intimidating, while providing no less of a challenge.

Much like titles from the Gold Box and *Ultima* series, the game came with a more technical manual explaining the interface and broke the fiction out into separate book. It detailed the evil of Scotia, her Dark Army, and a short, mythic history of the land which laid out the foundations for Westwood's new world.

Players chose one of four heroes to take up the quest with, each with their own strengths and weaknesses from the scaly Ak'shel and his magic to the roguish Kiorean, the well-rounded Conrad or the straight-up basher Michael. Up to two NPCs could eventually also join your chosen hero making it more of a "blobber" experience.

Attributes were cut down to two catch-all bins – Might and Protection. Skills were similarly shortened to three major categories – Fighter, Rogue, and Mage. But instead of using experience points to determine your character's development, *Lands of Lore* followed the example of titles such as *Dungeon Master* in making it so that using actions most associated with each would improve them over time.

The game was also relatively linear as you fought through one zone after the next during the quest, but the first-person 3D world Westwood put together was like *EotB* on pixelized steroids. Outdoor areas, towns, and traditional dungeons peppered with traps, hidden switches, beasts that could dissolve weapons or disarm players, and interactive NPCs celebrated Westwood's last dalliance with grid-based dungeon crawling all automapped for your pleasure.

Tough, brutal encounters and dungeons later in the game were offset only by the ability to rest anywhere, but *Lands of Lore* knew when to take the gloves off and punished unprepared players despite its deceptively simplicity. It's a formula that holds up well even today, and a crawl still worth delving into. **RC**



Not only the artwork is fantastic, but the game is fully voiced, with Patrick Stewart cast as the King.



The game is full of little details, such as how the characters' portraits reflect their injuries.



Dungeon Hack is, sadly, a good idea poorly implemented. The game employs a reworked version of the *Eye of the Beholder* engine to create a real-time single character graphical roguelike that allows you to customize its random dungeons. It also offers some new features, such as the addition of an auto-map and a new class – the Bard.

However, making it a real-time single character roguelike that uses the *AD&D* 2nd edition rules is also what virtually damns it.

Dungeon Hack is a very straightforward roguelike, where you descent a dungeon without any sort of shop or rest stops along the way, killing monsters and finding loot in a randomly generated labyrinth with simple puzzles normally involving putting a good dozen odd keys into a dozen odd door types until you find or kill the objective at the bottom of it. Along the way you'll battle some of the over fifty monsters present in the game – including liches and invisible feyrs – plus face hazards such as underwater levels, anti-magic fields and starvation.

Yet between the over-reliance in dice rolls, the awkward challenge of quickly controlling your actions in real-time and its *AD&D* adaptation, having a properly fun time is distressingly just out of range.

Given that TSR's *AD&D* rules are designed for turn- and party-based RPG combat, it should be no surprise that they are troublesome in a game built around a single character exploring a dungeon in real-time. There was no effort in adapting the rules, so classes such as the Bard, Mage, and Thief are practically useless, as the game hardly provides any benefit to playing them. Most locked objects require specific keys, and the combination of real-time combat with a slow spell interface make the Mage virtually useless and easily killed here.

Had *Dungeon Hack* been a party based roguelike the issues with its constant "Save or Die" elements would have been lessened, and more than a handful of character builds would be genuinely viable.

As it stands, the game is only worth trying if you are a big fan of the roguelike genre, willing to look over the obvious gameplay flaws. It's just sad that the concept behind *Dungeon Hack* had so much more potential than the game was able to deliver. **RM**



The graphics are improved over the already excellent *Eye of the Beholder*. The added minimap is also welcome.



One nice touch is being able to customize the random dungeon and then share it with your friends. (You can also get rid of unfun level draining undead.)

X-COM: UFO Defense



Mythos Games, 1994
DOS, Amiga, CD32, PS1 and others*

*X-COM had an official Windows port in 1998, and recently got versions for Linux, Mac and even Android thanks to *OpenXcom*.

I still fondly remember that rainy day back in 1994. A friend told me that he had just gotten a CD-ROM full of different game demos. So I went over and fired up the demo for *UFO: Enemy Unknown* (known as *X-COM: UFO Defense* in the US). I was 13. I had no idea what I was doing but the art style, the haunting soundscape and the fact that my soldiers could throw grenades – or more likely, blow themselves up with their own grenades, and boy was I sold. Of course, in just few months, *Jagged Alliance* would blow my mind again but *UFO* was the first and, as they say, you always remember your first love.

Originally intended as merely a sequel to *Laser Squad*, input from MicroProse led to a growing scope of the game, including both *UFOPedia* and the Geoscape, the strategic element in the game. This was ultimately a huge boon for the game. As good as the tactical battles are it's hard to see the game becoming the kind of cult classic that it did without the strategic side. More importantly, MicroProse UK's head of development Pete Moreland suggested Gollop use a UFO-theme. Rest is history.



Every action requires a set number of Time Units to be executed, X-COM's version of action points.

X-COM/UFO is played on two distinct levels: the strategic side based on the Geoscape, and the tactical side based on turn-based squad-level battles.

In the Geoscape, players decide where to build bases, what to build in those bases, what to research and manufacture, how many personnel must be recruited, what gear will be bought and how it will be distributed, which UFOs will be hunted by airplanes and where will the squad(s) of soldiers be sent.

Various countries world over are funding the X-COM initiative but unless you tackle the alien menace inside their borders, they will not happily keep giving you money. And it's possible to lose countries completely, as they are taken over by the aliens.

The second level is the tactical combat, which honestly is the meat of the game. Your transport planes will take your troops – ranging from 12 to whopping 26 soldiers in larger planes – to the main street of an American city, the potato farm of some Polish farmer, between the dunes in Sahara or even to the cold wasteland of Antarctica. The maps are all randomly generated, which help stave off boredom.

Missions can happen both during the day and during the night. Aliens usually have time to spread out from their craft and prepare ambushes, so the player needs to carefully recon the area instead of just rushing in. When an alien is encountered, it's better to be behind at least partial cover – that wooden fence might stop a single shot and thus save your soldier.

But take care, as absolutely everything in the environment can be destroyed. Bullets and laser beams will knock out walls, grenades take down trees and bigger explosives can wreck entire buildings or even the near-impenetrable alien craft. Which you usually need to enter to bring the battle to a close, especially if you want to take prisoners.



The Geoscape is where you'll monitor for UFO activities, dispatching jets and later ground teams to investigate.

Your soldiers begin as wet-behind-ears greenies, protected by gray overalls, carrying automatic rifles and puny hand grenades. They will get winded, scared and even mind controlled. But with careful mixture of in-game knowledge and real-world small unit tactics, the player can lead them to victory, neutralizing all aliens on the map and hauling a trove of alien tech back to base, where scientists will swarm over it. And while soldiers are generic, you quickly form bonds with your veteran troopers, and losing them is a hard blow – both emotionally and game mechanics wise.

The sparse story is conveyed through the various scientific breakthroughs – alien autopsies shed light on their background and interrogation of captured aliens, especially their commanders, unveils their sinister plans, ultimately leading to a risky operation to take the fight back to the aliens and thus saving Earth from a fate worse than death.

The game didn't pull any punches – the story is bleak and the fact that civilians can easily be killed by both the player – “accidentally” – and the aliens in combat – lends additional gravitas to it. Not to mention the content of the ending slides when the player failed. And I say “when”, not “if”, because the game was punishingly hard.

OpenXcom

This open-source clone of the original game adds many quality of life improvements, allows fixing the remaining bugs and modifying the game to a previously impossible level, plus the creation of various ports. It uses the original art and sound assets and in fact, owning the original game is required for the installation. The website contains a handy database with over 140 mods available for the download.

Grab it here: <http://openxcom.org>



You can build eight bases around the world, allowing you to handle multiple threats at the same time.

Unlike so many other games, were the Big Bad is patiently waiting for the Heroic Party to finally reach the Castle of Doom, in *X-COM* the aliens are actively waging a campaign on their own and will also try to locate and then invade your bases! The first time I was raided was a thrilling experience – getting to see up close all the facilities I had built, being on the defensive for once and having to deal with large numbers of hostiles without destroying my own base.

The sequel *Terror from the Deep* (1995) increases the difficulty even further – if you thought you had mad skills, the game soon proves you wrong. Aliens are now awaking near the bottom of the oceans and raiding not only coastal towns but cruise liners and cargo ships. Battles are fought both underwater and on dry land, introducing an additional problem, as not all weapons can be used in both environments.

Unfortunately, both the original game and the sequel suffered heavily from bugs. Some were bad enough to cripple the game, but by now fans have mostly fixed all of them, thanks to years of hard work.

To sum it up – *X-COM/UFO* is a groundbreaking mix of strategic and tactical game play married with RPG elements and an intriguing plot. There is really no reason for anyone not to play it, even today. **GA**

X-COM was followed by *X-COM: Apocalypse* (1997) and many other attempts at a spiritual successor, such as *UFO: Aftermath* (2007), *Incubation: Time Is Running Out* (1997) and *Xenonauts* (2014). It also got a modern reboot in 2012, called *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*.

The game also got a number of spin-offs, among which are some shooters, a flight simulator, a board game, a Russian MMO and even a play-by-e-mail game.



OpenXcom allows you to use many mods, including new weapons, armors, soldier sprites and random levels.

Ultima VIII: Pagan



ORIGIN, 1994
MS-DOS (Windows, Mac and Linux)*

*Pentagram is a fan-made open-source program that enables *Pagan* to run on modern computers.

Ultima VIII: *Pagan* is overall the thirteenth game to bear the *Ultima* name, and it is one of the franchise's most controversial entries. Rushed to market in 1994, many aspects of the game were scaled back, cut, or – at worst – left unfinished in the final product. The material that remained in the game unscathed suffered from a strangely disjointed sense of direction, as if competing development ideologies had not yet been hammered into a cogent whole. A dark – at times even morbid – tale of Machiavellian ethics and moral expediency contrasted sharply with an inexplicable focus on jumping mechanics and Mario-esque platforming – leading some to derisively dub the game “Super Avatar Bros.”

Yet despite its monumental development woes and lack of overarching direction, *Ultima VIII* remains a compelling and distinct entry in the *Ultima* series – foreboding, unfamiliar, viciously morally ambiguous, and possessed of a truly unsettling, claustrophobic atmosphere. Had it been given the care it deserved, it may have proven a worthy successor even to the mighty *Ultima VII* duology. Instead, it is an en-

during testament to the way in which the “business” side of the gaming industry can cripple a project brimming with potential and creativity – a hard lesson, and unfortunately still a very relevant one today.

The narrative of *Ultima VIII* begins directly where *Ultima VII: Serpent Isle* ends. The Avatar finds himself helpless in the hands of the Guardian, an evil invading deity hell-bent on conquering the Avatar's adoptive fatherland, Britannia. In order to punish the Avatar for continually meddling in his plans, the Guardian exiles him to the eponymous Pagan, a barren land of darkness. From there, the Avatar must search for a way to return to Britannia – all along in a desperate race against time, as the Guardian has already begun his grim conquest.

Though *Ultima VIII*'s story functions as a direct continuation of the *Ultima VII* duology, the gameplay mechanics are substantially different from its two immediate predecessors – and even, to varying extents, from any of the previous games in the series. Gone is the slant-overhead camera perspective of *Ultima VII* – *Ultima VIII* was the first, and is currently the only, game in the series to have a pure 3D-isometric perspective. The Avatar's “Companions,” iconic party members present even in the earliest games, are missing for the first time – the Avatar must journey alone.

The turn-based, battle-scene combat of earlier *Ultima* games had already been simplified in *Ultima VII* into a more fluid, real-time action system; in *Ultima VIII*, that system was even further simplified – some would say devolved – into what is, for all intents and purposes, “hack ‘n slash” combat. The magic system was also overhauled from the one found in *Ultima VII* – spells now require a lot more effort and time to cast, arguably marginalizing them in favor of weapon-based attacks.

You witness an execution as soon as you arrive, setting the grim tone of the game. No one knows about the Avatar here, and they won't hesitate to execute you.



“With *Ultima VIII*, I wanted to be even more severe with the sinister elements. That’s where your character went off to the land of Pagan, which was the Guardian’s home world. This world wasn’t your standard, virtuous goody-goody-two-shoes setting, to the point where if you tried to uphold the goody-goody-two-shoes life in the game, you couldn’t get anywhere. [...] The storyline is basically one of those ‘sometimes you have to fight fire with fire’ stories where, when you’re faced with true evil, you’ve got to cheat in order to win.”

– Richard Garriott,
Ultima VIII: Pagan’s Producer



The Guardian is worshiped in Pagan and his voice constantly taunts you, providing false hints, laughing at your actions and describing how he’s destroying Britannia.

The newly added platforming sequences are a chore by any metric, but the initial release of the game coupled them with absolutely horrific jump controls, clunky enough to be virtually broken. The initial uproar caused by these jump mechanics was so vehement that EA released a patch altering them into a significantly more manageable endeavor.

So – with all of these caveats, flaws, questionable design choices, and development woes, what worth does *Ultima VIII* offers? For one, the atmosphere holds up incredibly well. Despite the many cuts and revisions, the developers have still managed to craft a compelling, alien world, full of oppressive dread and an inescapable sense of vulnerability. The Avatar is a stranger in Pagan, and the player, too, is meant to feel like a stranger – alienated from the grim, featureless landscape, the vile NPCs, and even from the Avatar, who commits progressively more uncomfortable atrocities in his urge to return to Britannia.

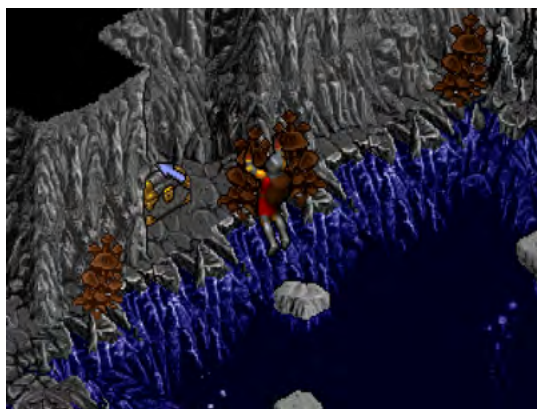
Even today, *Ultima VIII*’s depictions of bloody human sacrifice and demonic summoning can still provoke shock and disgust. The narrative – though fraught with plot holes, dropped arcs and other inconsistencies – nevertheless communicates its main theme quite viscerally: that the Avatar, in pursuit of his own “just” ends, is systematically perverting and shattering his own code of virtues – Courage, Honesty, Compassion, and so forth. At the game’s conclusion, it is clear that the Avatar’s victory is Pyrrhic at best; and at worst, it is not a victory at all, but rather the final collapse of a moral code that the Avatar has spent many *Ultima* games striving to uphold and protect.

Ultima VIII is one of gaming’s most disappointing examples of squandered potential. And yet, beneath all of its faults and missteps, there lies within it an important philosophical counterpoint to the optimism of *Ultima IV*: take care that you do not abandon your virtues, even in pursuit of the greater good. **CR**

An expansion called *The Lost Vale* and a CD-ROM enhanced version where planned, but both were canceled due to poor sales. Read more about *The Lost Vale* at page XXX.



Each school of magic has a different way of preparing spells – such as arranging reagents in a pentagram.



To jump you must press both mouse buttons at once. I assure you, it’s even more awkward than it sounds.

The Elder Scrolls I: Arena



The *Elder Scrolls: Arena* is the first game in Bethesda's long running *Elder Scrolls* series. It came out in 1994, roughly two years after *Ultima Underworld* opened everyone's eyes to the concept of a first-person, free-roaming RPG.

But Bethesda had their own ideas. In 1990, they sharpened their open-world teeth with *The Terminator* license, casting players as either Kyle Reese or the Terminator and set them loose in an open-world slice of Los Angeles. It was crude, but it paved the way for *Arena*. Instead of a dungeon, or a city, Bethesda set out to create an entire continent filled with both.

Lead Designer Vijay Lakshman and his team went out to create their own world and lore, inspired by old pencil-and-paper RPGs. The continent of Tamriel (*Arena* is the only game in the series to feature the entire continent) measures "three to four thousand kilometers east to west", and is populated by a variety of races, environments, flora and fauna. It also includes a day-and-night cycle and even its own calendar, with holidays and special dates unique to each region; all that inside a stack of eight 3.5" floppies.



Seasons alter the weather, clothing and races change with each region and even landmarks such as Morrowind's Red Mountain can be seen in the horizon.

Tile-based CRPGs have been doing that for years with smaller, 2D worlds, but taking those concepts into the interactive intimacy of a free-roaming 3D experience raised the CRPG bar as much as *Ultima Underworld* did.

Fiction filling the opening pages of the manual lay out a familiar starting point that *Elder Scrolls* fans will immediately recognize – a captured prisoner. In *Arena*, you languish in a dungeon beneath the Imperial City, where careless exploration could easily kill you even before beginning your epic quest to find the pieces of the Staff of Chaos and end the rule of the usurper hiding in the Emperor's skin, Jagar Tharn.

Eighteen classes await in *Arena*, along with *D&D*-like stats to shape their ideal character from one of the eight races in the game. Or, borrowing a page from Origin's *Ultima IV*, a series of questions suggest which class will be best for the player. I remember spending an hour or so carefully mixing different classes and races together, testing them in the opening dungeon against sewer vermin, and then starting over again to try another class and mix of statistics.

Despite the *Ultima IV* inspirations, there's no alignment or strict moral fiber tying players' hands. You're free to bash down doors in the middle of the night to break into stores, steal everything and kill the guards on the way out with the loot if you want, while searching for a way to end Jagar Tharn's rule.

Combat appears to be simple button-mashing, but hides some unexpected depth. Melee attacks are done by holding the right mouse button and moving the mouse across the screen. Each movement executes a different type of attack; moving sideways leads to a slash, while a vertical movement results in a thrusting attack. Attacking at the same time as your enemy will parry the attack.

“Up to that time, Bethesda had never done a role-playing game, only action games like the *Terminator* series and sports title like *Wayne Gretzky Hockey*. I remember talking to the guys at Sir-Tech who were doing *Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant* at the time, and them literally laughing at us for thinking we could do it.”

- Ted Peterson,
Arena's Designer



In *Arena* the Khajit descend from an intelligent feline race, but have human appearance due to memory limitations.

To help vanquish your foes, *Arena* features about 21 weapon types and 26 armor pieces, all of which can be made from one of eight different kinds of metal – such as Iron, Mithril or Ebony – each with a different bonus. Furthermore, enchanted items might be found in dungeons or bought in stores. And if you're lucky, you might even hear rumors pointing you towards one of the legendary artifacts of Tamriel.

Also, if the 50 spells available are too boring you could always try and create your own from a huge number of factors and effects (which could sometimes lead to making mages wildly overpowered).

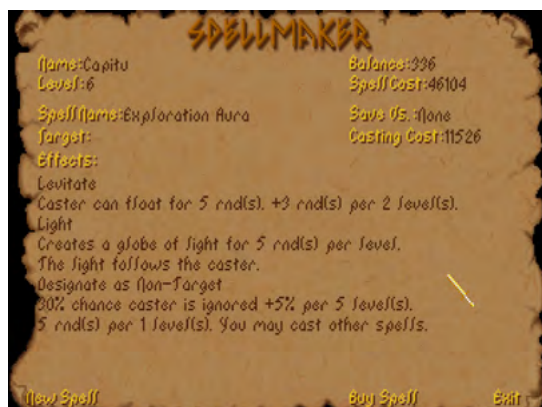
As you keep playing, the randomly generated quests made it easy to ignore the main campaign. The way that the game randomized the end goals for side quests, dungeon locations, and the rumors one could hear from one town to the next fed into that sandbox illusion with more and more hours spent wandering through each province just to see what was there.

As compelling as the smoke and mirrors were, technology only went so far. Despite seeing it on the map, there was no Red Mountain (or mountains for the most part) and doing so many side quests would make some of those dungeons in the wilderness seem a little too familiar after so long with a bit of repetition thrown in.

But it was the sheer geographic vastness and the idea of infinite adventure that made the world of Tamriel a sandbox of possibilities that other CRPGs had only paved the way forward for.

With a 3D viewscreen, action-oriented combat, and blending all of that in with attributes, player-driven morality, and a world filled with a wide variety of equipment and empowering loot, *Arena* lived up to its name as a crucible for players to find their own way and become the first stepping stone to Bethesda's biggest series. **RC**

Arena can be somewhat tricky to run properly under DOS Box, so we recommend the handy *ArenaSetup* package, that comes pre-configured: http://wiwiki.wiwiland.net/index.php?title=Arena:_ArenaSetup_EN



At Mage Guilds you can pay to create your own spells, combining up to three effects in any way you want.



It's vital to talk to NPCs and ask them directions. They also provide side-quests and useful rumors.

Ravenloft: Stone Prophet



DreamForge Entertainment, 1995
DOS

Stone Prophet has an interesting use of in-game music, featuring a spirit that sings the "Song of the Elusive Ghost", which tells the story behind the events happening in Har'Akir.

After traversing a mysterious wall of light, two adventurers are trapped in the desert land of Har'Akir. A wall of searing heat, known as the Wall of Ra, prevents their escape. A flesh-rotting disease and devastating storms threaten the survival of the remaining inhabitants of the desert, most of whom are concentrated in the Village of Muhar. Thus begins *Ravenloft: Stone Prophet*.

The game takes the form of a first-person dungeon crawler, using an early 3D engine that feels very much like that of *The Elder Scrolls I: Arena*. It includes an auto-map, that is extremely useful to maintain one's orientation, and also supports jumping and flight by means of the appropriate spells – although these game mechanics are much less polished and useful than in a game like *Ultima Underworld*. The party begins with two characters you create at the start of the game, and can grow to include two additional NPCs for a maximum party size of four. *Stone Prophet* also features day/night cycles, and the blazing sun battering the desert by day requires players to maintain a supply of water in order to survive.

The combat system is real-time, very similar to titles such as *Eye of the Beholder* and *Lands of Lore*. The game features a rich bestiary, and being aware of the abilities of each creature is important to be able to overcome them – enemies can poison, diseasing, paralyzing, stunning, exploding upon death, or casting certain spells. While most creatures can be defeated using normal weapons and spells, some require a special approach. For instance, desert trolls can only be killed by acid, fire or water, and the three greater mummies in the game are so powerful that they cannot be destroyed by normal means.

There are few friends to be found among the frightened and superstitious inhabitants of Muhar, who believe the party to be responsible for the plague and the storms. Nonetheless, many NPCs contribute to the quest with interesting conversation and bits of history, that add a lot of atmosphere to the game.

Some of these NPCs are willing to join the party, believing that they stand more of a chance to leave Har'Akir as part of a group effort than on their own. These NPCs range from regular humans to exotic creatures such as a wemic, a desert troll, an undead warrior and even a jackalwere. Choosing which NPCs to keep is a strategic decision, as each of them has his strengths and weaknesses. For example, the desert troll is an excellent combatant, especially during the earlier stages of the game; however he can't gain experience, has limited inventory space, and can't hold anything in his hands.

The inventory is very elegant, with a simple drag & drop interface and mannequins that display your current equipment and held items with nicely drawn artwork. The inventory capacity, however, is quite limited, both in slots and in maximum weight.

The inhabitants of the Har'akir desert are suffering from a terrible curse and blame outsiders such as yourself for their fate. Some quite disturbing scenes are presented.





Whenever you enter one of *Stone Prophet*'s dungeons, the interface changes to fit the theme of the level.

These harsh inventory limitations forces players to make tough choices, as the world is so full of useful items that one is frequently faced with the dilemma of which items to keep. Especially since characters also need to carry plenty of water skins to survive the blazing desert – or rely on a Create Water spell.

Spellcasting follows the typical *AD&D* magic system, and is quite similar to that in the *Eye of the Beholder* trilogy, featuring typical spells such as Fireball and Magic Missile. Some spells are particularly useful (such as Knock or Teleport), and a few are actually essential to complete the game (such as Speak with Animals, which allows conversation with key NPCs).

Strahd's Possession & Menzoberranzan:

Stone Prophet is actually the third title in a series of similar RPGs developed by DreamForge using the same engine. The first of these is *Ravenloft: Strahd's Possession* (1994), which shares some common themes: after being drawn into a strange land crawling with undead and trapped by a border of poison mist, the party must find a way to defeat the dark lord of the land and find the necessary items to secure their safe passage back home.



Ravenloft: Strahd's Possession was the first of the three games and featured a distinct horror atmosphere.

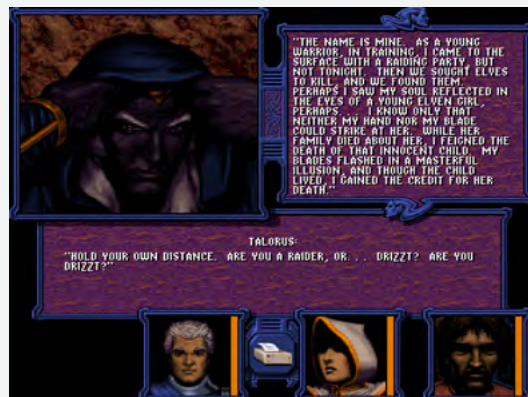


The game's exotic companions all have different abilities. The wemic, for instance, can jump to reach high places.

Ravenloft: Stone Prophet provides a welcome departure from typical sewer treks with its massive Egyptian-style open world. The desert of Har'Akir is vast and fraught with dangers, but also provides many interesting encounters, in terms of NPCs, items, and dungeons to visit. Each of the dungeons, ranging from ancient burial catacombs to richly decorated temples, provide important insight into the plot as well as items necessary to progress in the quest to leave Har'Akir.

A delight for avid dungeon-crawlers, *Ravenloft: Stone Prophet* was the third – and best – title in a often overlooked series by DreamForge. So, if you're curious, be sure to give the other games a try as well. **DD**

The second game is *Menzoberranzan* (1994), which is set on the popular *Forgotten Realms* setting. In order to rescue villagers captured by Drow, the party descends into the Underdark, to eventually reach Menzoberranzan, the city of the Drow. On the way, they enlist the aid of Drizzt Do'Urden, a legendary Drow ranger who has abandoned the evil ways of his people. The party eventually becomes embroiled in a feud between various Drow houses, in a bid to free the villagers and Drizzt himself.



Menzoberranzan capitalized heavily on the presence of Drizzt, one of *AD&D*'s most popular characters.

Witchaven



Capstone Software, 1995
DOS

W*itchaven* is not a full-fledged RPG – it's a first-person shooter (or rather, hack'n'slasher) with RPG elements. There are quite a few of those elements: XP, leveling up, degrading weapons, different types of armor, spells, traps, secrets and other goodies. There are five different types of potions to collect, various combat and utility spells to learn. But there's no character creation, no NPC interaction and not a single choice to be made – besides gore and difficulty levels. You are stuck with the knight Grondoval, who is tasked with eradicating the witch Illwhyrin, period.

Gameplay-wise, that's not a problem, because this knight is a one-man army! You're just as proficient with physical weapons as with casting combat spells (though you will rarely have to rely on the latter, except for tougher enemies of later levels), and you soak up experience like a sponge. Killing trolls, imps and other enemies (or finding treasure, for that matter) will make you level up and become tougher still. Higher levels also mean less weapon corrosion and access to more potent spells – and you will need those to be able to defeat Illwhyrin.



The neat fake-3D clay sprites that were so fashionable in the 90s.

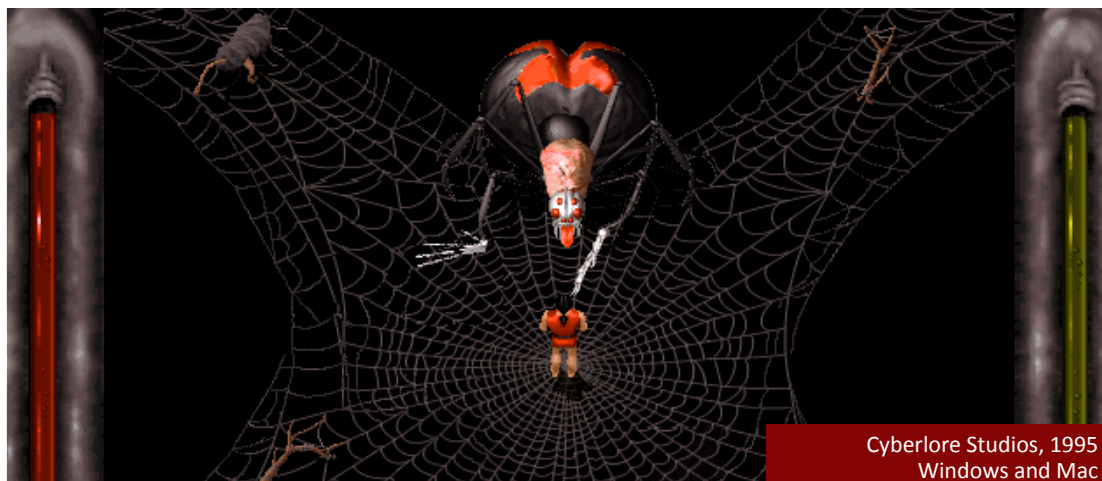
Talking about defeat: The need to think tactical or die is exactly what makes *Witchaven* so compelling (another strong point are the neatly rendered fake-3D-sprites). In the beginning, combat is mostly a close-quarters affair, but you will soon find out that the combination of degrading weapons and imprecise controls makes it an especially dangerous one. Thankfully, most of Illwhyrin's minions are just as susceptible to terrain-induced damage as you are, so using the environment to your advantage will end many fights early.

In later levels and at higher difficulty, Illwhyrin's miserliness comes into play: You will find less potions, scrolls and even weapons, and chances are that you will run out of essential supplies at the most unfortunate moment. Discovering that you have no spell scroll left when the trapped corridor you reached by flying turns out to be a dead end (and you haven't saved in a long while!) would be such an example. But if you were a little thrifty yourself, you might still be able to cross the corridor with the help of your bow and arrows – provided you saved up some of those.

Witchaven might have a few shortcomings (mainly squishy controls and – as opposed to the detailed sprites – visually poor interior design), but the game scores with its clever use of physics and gripping combat. Defeating opponents with environmental help is even more rewarding than dropping the 'Nuke' spell on them.

Witchaven stands today as a product of his time, when games like *Doom* and *Hexen* were kings and everyone wanted a piece of the pie. Too bad that the sequel expanded primarily on the shortcomings: *Witchaven 2* suffered from horrible controls that rendered it nearly unplayable. **NS**

Entomorph: Plague of the Darkfall



Cyberlore Studios, 1995
Windows and Mac

The second game set in the World of Aden and the last RPG published by SSI, *Entomorph* is somewhat of an hybrid title, featuring a bit of puzzle and item hunting, light role-playing elements and a heavy dose of arcade-like real-time combat.

However, the exotic setting and plot are where the game really shines. The island of Phoros was once a thriving nation, raising giant beetles for both labor and food. When an incident known as The Darkfall led the beetles to vanish, it fell into chaos. Ten years later, a group of nobles start to bring the beetles back into the island, but multiple reports of missing people and savage insect attacks begin to appear as well.

You play as Warrick, a squire who returns from training in search of his sister, last seen heading for Phoros. In an interesting change, your adventures here are narrated by a storyteller, as he recounts it to your younger brother – sometimes spicing details up a bit. Another cool twist is that, as your quests advances, you will eventually mutate into an insect yourself.

Unfortunately, there ends *Entomorph's* appeal. The game uses *Al-Qadim's* engine and tries to follow its blend of RPG, action and adventure, but none of the different elements work very well here. It opens with a big village full of interesting NPCs and a few side-quests, but quickly devolves into a linear and poorly told story, that feels rushed and incomplete.

Combat is crude – there are no skills, armors or even weapons, you literally just punch your enemies. And there are no stats or experience points either – you only grow stronger by progressively mutating into an insect. The magic system is more robust, featuring 22 different spells, and you can set how much mana to spend when casting each one. A nice idea, but you have so little mana that you'll rarely cast anything but healing spells, except during the rare boss fights.

Above all, what really dooms *Entomorph* is just how frustrating its quests are. The game is horrible at directing players, and you'll likely spend hours walking without any clear goals, blindly trying to find a quest item or where you were supposed to go.

It's a shame really, as the concept behind the game is refreshingly original, the presentation is rich and the soundtrack is great. But, unless you are starved for exotic games, it's best to avoid *Entomorph*. **FE**

Joe Minton, one of *Entomorph's* designers, wrote a short story called *Rise of the Fire*, which serves as intro to the game's plot.



You'll morph into a giant mantis as the game advances. More insects will appear as well, and the island's vegetation will slowly be destroyed.



Some NPCs have nicely detailed backstories, and there are a few side-quests you can take to earn magic items and healing potions.

Albion



Blue Byte Software, 1995
MS-DOS

Albion began as a sequel to *Ambermoon*, but Thalio Software closed down and the development team moved to Blue Byte, creating a new story and setting.

In 1995 I went to my local computer shop and asked the owner for a new good game. He knew my preference for role-playing games and suggested a game called *Albion*, from Blue Byte Software. A Sci-Fi RPG made by German developers? I was a bit skeptical at first, but after hearing that the game designers were also involved in *Amberstar* and *Ambermoon* – two of my all-time favorites – I was convinced and bought the game. I was starving for a new good CRPG and was positively surprised when I realized after a few hours of playing that I already was in love with this new fantastic game.

First of all, *Albion* shines with an immersive and detailed story. In the 23rd century powerful multi-national companies from Earth try to mine natural resources from uninhabited planets with great mining spaceships. You play Tom Driscoll, a pilot from the mining ship *Toronto* who crashes with his shuttle during a reconnaissance flight onto the exotic planet Albion. Albion is supposed to be a barren world, ready to be mined, but Tom discovers quickly that nothing could be further from the truth.

Barely surviving the crash, you wake up in an village, surrounded by Iskai – exotic and intelligent cat-like creatures. Together with your scientist partner Rainer you must earn their trust through good deeds and intelligent conversation, while trying to find a way to warn the mining ship about its mistake.

Albion is full of alien tribes and factions to interact with, historic places to explore, rich and varied landscapes and various useful equipment to find. Blue Byte decided to make a game for a mature audience that addresses alien first-contact, environmentalism and anti-capitalism, similar to the 2009 movie *Avatar*. The story features also some twists, betrayal, murder and ancient Celtic magic.

The main plot is linear, but each major location offers plenty of things to discover. You can feel that the level design in *Albion* is a labor of love. Every little detail, creature, item and puzzle is carefully planned, created and placed manually. Around every corner a new little adventure or secret is waiting for you to be discovered. This makes exploring a rewarding and exciting experience. The limited inventory, the deep dungeons, the serious wounds or conditions, the lack of provisions, the need of rest and some adventure-game style puzzles will force you to backtrack quite a lot. And you'll discover many optional areas as well.

Albion is a very long game, with over 166 NPCs and 60 different monsters, and interacting with them is always interesting: You can ask everyone about many topics (listed in a dialog screen) or type in keywords to learn about new topics, secrets, culture, language, quests, potions, gossip and relations. The story develops slowly through interacting with people, so you have to read, guess and ask a lot. Of course often you'll only get answers by doing some side-quests and sometimes by recruiting new party members.

Each race and class has access to different items, equipments and spells. For example, the Iskai can wield an extra small weapons in their tails.





Albion features various different types of perspectives. Dungeons are usually explored in a 3D first-person view.



Inside buildings you usually play with an isometric view, exploring rich environments full of items and NPCs.



But not all dungeons are in first-person, some of the more puzzle-intense ones are explored in isometric view.



When a monster reaches you, combat begins. It's turn-based, set on a 6x5 tactical grid and very challenging.

You can build a party with up to 6 members. Each party member has a predefined class and a specific background related to the story, and every character has an inventory which is limited by their strength, so you'll have to micromanage your items and provisions. *Albion* features many different items, some with very unique purposes. For example, you'll only get an in-game time display if you find a watch at some point in the game, which is good for monitoring the day/night-cycle and the shops' opening hours.

Battles are turn-based, very challenging and take place in on a five-by-six grid. Combat is very tactical, featuring whopping 52 spells and enemies are quite clever - so be prepared. As long as one party member survives you can heal the rest of the party after battle. Strategic positioning of the characters on the battlefield and tactical decisions like protecting magic users, getting the first attack by moving a character relative to the enemy, luring enemies into weapon/spell ranges etc. are critical to win.

Albion has beautiful graphics; featuring a 2D/3D hybrid system. When in most towns and dungeons the game switches to a 3D first person view, while in interior locations and outdoor areas a 2D isometric view is used. The controls are simple and easy to learn, and the game includes a helpful auto-map feature..

With *Albion*, Blue Byte has created a fully believable alien world including the fauna, flora and architecture. Exploration is interesting, there are a lot of NPCs to interact with and you'll have to learn their customs and culture to succeed. The storyline is gripping with many surprises, and the whole game features many different gameplay elements, with an attention to detail rarely found elsewhere.

Albion is a beautiful, fascinating, serious and entertaining game that I recommend to all CRPG-fans that are patient and mature enough to understand and enjoy demanding game-mechanics and challenging tactical combat. Dsarii-ma, my friends! **HX**

Diablo



Blizzard North, 1996
Windows, Mac and PS1

Diablo was inspired by David Brevik's addiction to *Moria*/*Angband* during college, and was pitched to Blizzard as a turn-based DOS game.

“Ahh, fresh meat”. Those now immortal words of *Diablo*'s infamous first real antagonist, the Butcher, give an apt foreshadowing of what is to come. *Diablo* and its sequels are like a butcher's meat grinder. A haunting experience where players find themselves faced with a never ending onslaught of ungodly creatures. Your journey concluding by facing down the ultimate evil himself: Diablo.

A player's journey in *Diablo* starts off simple enough with the choosing of a character class and a name. Each class has attributes pre-allocated and a special skill. The Warrior specializes in melee weaponry and repair. Archery and trap disarming are handled by the Rogue. Finally the Sorcerer specializes in powerful spells and the ability to charge magical staves. Further abilities however are not locked in to your class selection – new skills and spells are acquired by finding or buying arcane tomes and can be learned by any class – as long as they have the required attributes. Classes also have assigned speeds of attack, casting, and blocking. Great depth in customization wouldn't come until *Diablo II*.

Diablo excels at world building. Tristram is a quaint little gothic town that's church sits on top of a mysterious labyrinth. Each new game has a randomly generated dungeon where the adventure takes place. But your first experience isn't killing monsters or grabbing items. It's the serene sounds of one of the best single tracks in gaming history. Strong voice acting and nuanced dialog introduce you to the world in *Diablo*. Each of Tristram's cast tells a part of the story through quality voiced dialog in addition to their gameplay functions.

The cast of characters, music, and gothic styled art of the town create an atmosphere where the player always wants to learn more. As you delve deeper into the dungeon you'll find books detailing past events such as the possession of the prince, the King's subsequent madness, or details on unique quests. The plot itself fails to live up to such great world building as your mission is laser focused on ridding the town of evil and defeating Diablo.

Diablo's core gameplay is built on an addictive foundation of killing monsters, leveling up, finding items, and doing this over and over again. This gameplay loop became so popular that it spawned an entire sub-genre known as “*Diablo*-clones”.

Killing monsters is simple. Left-click to attack, right-click to use spells and press the numbered keys to consume potions in the hot bar. Monsters comes in various shapes and forms – including color palette swaps – and occasionally you'll also encounter unique fiends that come with special abilities and resistances. Experience gained from killing monsters eventually leads to a level up where you can allocate 5 points to Strength, Dexterity, Vitality, or Magic. Each of these affect derived statistics like damage, chance to hit, life, and mana.

“Stay a while and listen” says Deckard Cain, one of the most recognized NPCs in gaming. He'll tell you tales and identify items, but will charge you for that.



"A bit into the development, the idea of turning *Diablo* into a real-time game started whispering around the office. I resisted for a while, but eventually I decided to give it a try, and I remember it like it was yesterday. I spent the day converting the code to real-time, and the first time I pressed the mouse button, the warrior walked over and smashed a skeleton apart in a smooth and satisfying motion. *gasp*! The clouds parted outside, a ray of light beamed into the office and angels sang."

- David Brevik,
*Diablo's Senior Designer
& Lead Programmer*



The Rogue faces the macabre Butcher, one of *Diablo's* unique boss enemies. His room is covered in blood, full of mutilated corpses that didn't exactly please parents.

What makes this loop fun is the item system. Each item you find will be randomly generated from a preset pool of qualities. Regular items have no special properties; just a damage or armor rating. Magical items combine a prefix and suffix attribute which provide various bonuses to your character. It could be faster attack speed, additional character stats, or even curses. And Unique items are extremely rare and powerful. *Diablo* captures players with the constant promise of a better item just around the corner, maybe in the next chest or enemy, driving you to keep fighting monsters till the early hours of the morning.

Together with *Diablo*, Blizzard also launched the Battle.net service, where you could play competitively or cooperatively online. The big downside was the rampant cheating, as Blizzard did not police hacks and exploits much. This alienated some from online play, so the company was much fiercer in enforcing anti-cheating measures on future titles.

Diablo also saw an expansion called *Hellfire*. It brought some welcome convenience features like the ability to move faster in town. Oddly, *Hellfire* was not developed by the same team or even company, so it lacks the same consistent quality as the base game. Still, extra content in the way of a new class – the Monk –, item upgrades and quests make *Hellfire* worthwhile for *Diablo* veterans, and some features would eventually work their way into *Diablo II*.

Not many RPGs succeed in minimalism like *Diablo*. The game world is not to be missed and the seminal loot system provides limitless replay value. There's always another item to find, another monster to kill and a new gothic labyrinth to navigate. **SD**

The *Hellfire* expansion added the Monk class, but the disc also contained two unfinished classes – the Barbarian and the Bard. Both can be played by editing the game's files.



The small grid-based inventory forces players to go back to town frequently, for a brief moment of respite.

Mods:

Belzebub: Also known as *Diablo HD*, it adds widescreen support, new content and extensive gameplay changes, such as rebalanced classes and features from *Diablo II*.

Diablo Awake: Adds new monsters/bosses, spells, quests, and items, plus a few bug fixes and gameplay changes.

The Hell: Boasting to be the hardest of all *Diablo* mods, it adds new classes, items and over 500 named monsters.



The Belzebub mod also adds some content that was cut from the game, such as the Butcher's Chambers.

Lands of Lore Guardians of Destiny



Westwood Studios, 1997
Windows and DOS

Luther is played by Paul Bastardo, who was an employee at Westwood Studios and had also acted in *Command & Conquer*.

Westwood Studios had a strong tradition in 2D art, creating some impressive artwork in *Eye of the Beholder* and *Lands of Lore*.

But the 3D craze and the popularity of the FMV scenes in *Command & Conquer* clearly changed something, and so *Guardians of Destiny* came as a 3D title, with real actors, full voice acting and many pre-rendered cutscenes – enough to fill 4 CDs. Despite the effort, time wouldn't be gentle, and the game's graphics have aged far worse than those of its predecessor.

Sometimes transformations will happen at the worst possible time, turning you into a small, fragile reptile right next to an angry skeleton.



The game never explicitly tells you that, but it offers a few alternatives, such as killing the King and stealing his treasure, instead of trying to persuade him.



Guardians of Destiny puts you in control of Luther, son of Scotia – the evil witch defeated in *Lands of Lore*. However, Luther isn't a villain in search for revenge, but rather a wise-cracking reluctant hero, who must find a cure for the ancient curse he bears.

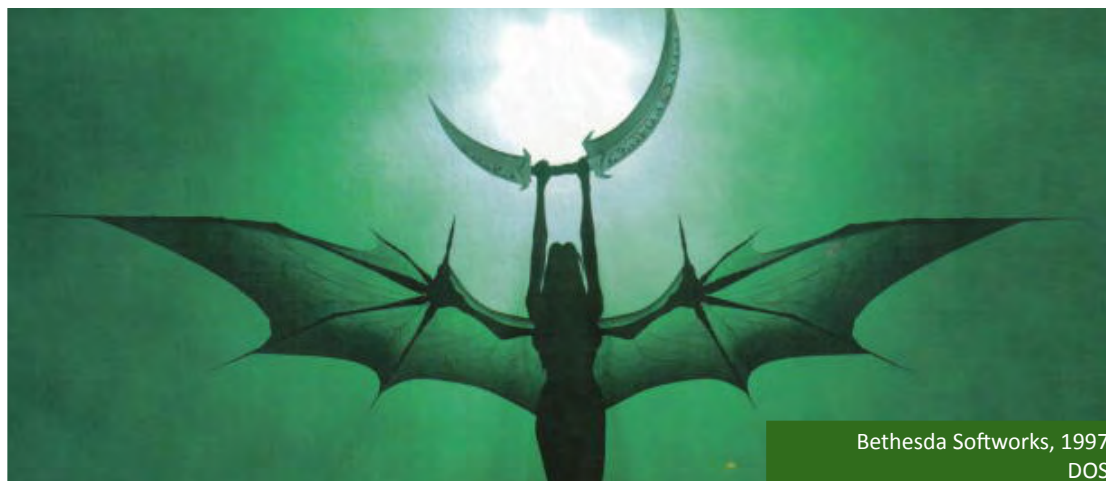
This curse causes Luther to randomly (yes, it might happen at any time) transform into a tiny lizard – that can pass through small openings and cast powerful spells – or into a huge beast, strong and able to move large objects. Apart from that, however, the gameplay is very simple. There are no party members, no classes to choose from, level-ups are automatic and the real-time combat usually boils down to clicking the attack & magic buttons as fast as possible.

Luckily, combat and stats aren't the focus of the game. *Guardians of Destiny* features a design that clearly favors exploration instead of combat, with its well-designed levels populated by just a few enemies. Instead of monsters, the areas in the game are filled with alternative paths, for each of your transformations, and secrets – not only a few hidden rooms and treasures, but entire levels, items, spells and even lore-related cutscenes that players might not see. There are also various interactions with the environment, such as stacking boxes to climb a ledge, igniting oil or destroying pillars to cause a cave in.

Better yet, the game features two paths – a good and a evil one – each offering a few unique events and endings. There are no dialog choices in-game, everything is made through direct interactions, such as killing NPCs or using/destroying key objects.

These fine details remind you that *Guardians of Destiny* was made by Westwood Studios, long-time veterans of the genre. While it may look cheesy, it's still a charming RPG, with a charismatic main character, great level design and many secrets to uncover. **FE**

An Elder Scrolls Legend: Battlespire



Bethesda Softworks, 1997
DOS

The Battlespire is a training center for aspiring Imperial battlemages. It is built into a secret corner of the Daedric realm of Oblivion. When you enter the premises to take your final test, you discover that the academy has been taken over by Daedric invaders! And now that a seal blocks the portal you entered by, it looks like your only way out of this nightmare is through...

Originally planned as an add-on to *Daggerfall*, *Battlespire* was published as a stand-alone game in 1997. All the action takes place in the seven levels of the Battlespire and the regions of Oblivion intertwined with it. The character and class creation system is classic *Elder Scrolls*, even if only six player races made the cut. Also missing are the rest function, gold and shops. But it's not as if sleep was a good idea, anyway, with all those Daedric minions breathing down your neck ... and if you need more equipment, find it on-site or take it off dead bodies. By the way, loot is the only randomized instance in *Battlespire*: Unlike the *Daggerfall* dungeons, the complex maps are entirely handcrafted, so you won't end up starving in a mis-built labyrinth.

No, you'll pretty likely die in combat instead.

Enemies in the Battlespire are a lot tougher than those you encountered in *Daggerfall*. You need to outmaneuver hostiles if you want to survive! Now don't get me wrong: *Battlespire* may be more action-oriented and linear than *Daggerfall*, but it's not all about bloodshed. You'll have plenty opportunity of getting to know the invaders... and make allies. Yes, you heard right: Allies. Not all Daedra are evil, nor does everyone agree with Mehrunes Dagon's plans of conquest. While you can get far by being impolite or just resorting to violence, you would be a fool to not take advantage of all the political intrigue going on.

It's not as if this grey-on-grey morality had to keep you from being evil: If it's more your style to betray your allies after they outlived their usefulness, just do so!

Playing Clan leaders off against each other or teasing horny (but impotent) Spider Daedra can be insanely funny. In addition to that, *Battlespire* adds to and draws on established *Elder Scrolls* lore. You enjoyed *Oblivion* and want to learn more about the Daedric realm, Mehrunes Dagon and his infighting court? Go play *Battlespire*!

My only minor gripe are the bugs. While vanilla *Battlespire* is not the bugfest *Daggerfall* was, you might have to start levels over again. Glyphs tend to fall through floors (these things are needed to progress, mind you). But if you plan on ignoring this fun and demanding game just because of this, you'll commit a grave error, because patching it to version 1.5 will help a lot. The scheming, the voice acting and the (often hilarious) dialog options are too brilliant to miss out on. **NS**



Always horny: The denizens of the Battlespire.

King's Quest: Mask of Eternity



Sierra On-Line, 1998
Windows

The fabled designer Roberta Williams had a big problem in the late 90's. The gaming market was booming, titles were selling millions, but adventure games – her trade – were considered dead. Sierra, the company she founded in 1979, was still a giant corporation, but Roberta and her husband had sold it in 1996 (although they still worked there), and Sierra's new owners were desperate for a big hit.

So Roberta took some of the most popular games

at the time – *Quake*, *Tomb Raider* and *Diablo* – added then-innovative 3D graphics and tried to create a new style of adventure game, one that would attract this modern gaming audience into her *King's Quest* series.

The result is an action-RPG that can be played in either first- or third-person mode, complete with real-time combat, platforming sections and even a grappling hook that allows you to climb walls. Many RPG elements also were added, such as levels and experience points, various weapons and armors and even a *Diablo*-like toolbar of potions and healing items you can devour during combat.

However, little from the previous *King's Quest* games is present. While occasionally you'll come across one or two puzzles – such as using an axe to chop down a tree, so that it diverts the flow of a river and stops a nearby mill – those are extremely rare. And don't expect a single dialog tree either. Most of the time you'll progress by killing everything that moves, and then clicking on everything that doesn't.

All could eventually be overlooked had the rest of the game been good. But it just isn't. Moving and jumping feels clunky (the infamous “tank controls”), combat is nothing but clicking on enemies while chugging potions, environments are dull and empty, the writing is childish and the game simply never manages to excite the player in any way.

Looking back, Roberta was in a difficult position and tried her best to reach this new gaming audience. It's easy to criticize her now, but such wild bet made sense at the time. In fact, *Mask of Eternity* was released in the same year as the much revered adventure classic *Grim Fandango* – and outsold it 2-by-1.

Does that make it a good game? Definitely not, but serves as a cautionary tale about the whims of the gaming industry and its fans. **FE**

Shooting enemies in first-person mode during a platforming section isn't exactly what the fans expected from a *King's Quest* game.



One of the three endgame trials to prove yourself a worthy champion is a sliding puzzle. How exciting.



Gorky 17



Gorky 17 (known as *Odium* on American shores) is a title I didn't mind replaying for the sake of giving it a modern review. The primary reason being that it's short and sweet, elegantly borrowing elements from many other genres.

The game places you in command of three NATO Soldiers who are dropped in the middle of nowhere (ahem, 'a military complex somewhere in Poland') with limited supplies and equipment, unsure what they are about to run into.

First thing to know: *Gorky 17* is tough. Healing consumables are very limited, and if anyone in your party dies, you have to restart the battle or reload the game. The battle system is standard tactical phase-based RPG fare. During your turn, each character gets to Move, Select a Weapon/Item, Face a specific direction and Act (Shoot, Defend, Heal, etc...) in almost any order. The interface is easy to pick-up and provides plenty of visual cues as to what is going on.

The game attempts to keep combat fresh, and for the most part succeeds. Many objects can explode or be pushed to form makeshift barricades, and the player must also consider factors such as obstacles, armor type, weapon ranges, directional facing and so on. For example, attacking a target from the sides or back will grant bonus damage. Additionally, various status effects eventually come into play. Combatants can be made 'Flammable' and subsequently be set aflame for devastating damage using a variety of weapons... or simple matches.

Typical enemies appear to come straight out of a cyberpunk nightmare. The AI is aggressive, but not suicidal, and even just one of these mutant creatures can be a serious threat. Then there are the monstrous bosses, each introduced by a short cinematic, which must be typically approached with different tactics.

Your characters become more proficient the more they use a weapon, and experience points are gained from attacking in combat. Every level grants 5 points to distribute in a handful of stats but, unfortunately, there isn't much gameplay deviation from those stats except for 'Calmness'. Unlike other stats, 'Calmness' can be decreased, making the character go berserk more frequently – which can be good or bad.

Outside of combat, the emphasis is on semi-linear exploration, character banter and light puzzle-solving. Battles and events are all scripted, triggered at certain locations, and areas have pre-rendered backgrounds that look nice, if a bit crowded. You are starved for ammo/supplies most of the game, making efficient tactics and loot discovery fairly rewarding.

Gorky 17 offers what not many game publishers dare to offer nowadays, which is a mix up of many different genre staples in one tough, slightly unforgiving package. It has the experimental goodness of an indie game, coupled with the quality that could be expected from a 15 years-old AAA title. Definitely worth the 20 hours playthrough. **MA**

Two other *Gorky* games exist: *Gorky Zero* and *Gorky Zero 2*. Both are third-person stealth action games, set around characters from *Gorky 17*.



Gorky 17 has some elements from adventure games, requiring you to collect objects and solve simple puzzles to move forward or acquire extra loot.

Jagged Alliance 2



Jagged Alliance 2 is an isometric turn-based strategy game where you hire and command a band of mercenaries in order to free a fictional country called Arulco from the rule of its ruthless dictator, Queen Deidranna. Or is it?

Reassessment and reflection occurs each time I'm asked what JA2 is. I've seen people drawn to this game for all possible reasons, from professional soldiers loving its strategic layer to gun nuts drooling over immense arsenal available, expanded even further by mods. Others praise the game for a creative, alchemical approach to RPG genre and its chess-like tactical depth.

Aye, *Jagged Alliance 2* is generous enough to allow you to enjoy it from all perspectives and play-styles. If you want to treat it as an isometric shooter, one-man team, fine, there's enough action for every Rambo out there; if you want to instead take an armed stroll and explore the country, you'll have a laugh and a whale of a great time too.

Such flexibility is achieved through unique blend of strategy and RPG. While borrowing some

rules of combat system from its predecessor, JA2 sets its narrative in brand new colourful world filled with dynamic characters. Want to be BFF with the local ganglord? Help him solve some "problems". Want to get rich quick? Rob his silver cache and spend the rest of the game stalked by assassins he sends. And who knows, they might catch you with your pants down just as you're visiting the local brothel.

Having played so many games where your units are just cannon fodder, you'll be surprised how much this old-school game tips its hat to your mercs' personalities, especially in comparison to its siblings like *Fallout Tactics* or *X-COM*. You do not command clones with different stats; in Arulco, you get to create your own custom merc fighting alongside men and women. From all walks of life, each have their own fears, quirks, opinions and they are unafraid to voice them. Several unforgettable one-liners will stick and you grow to loathe a few and adore many.

When you're called upon to sacrifice one over another you will find yourself doing your best to save your favourite rather than that obnoxious one. It's what you called virtual character bonding, something you could hardly experience in a cinema or literature. You get to be both an actor and director in your very own B-action movie.

On top of that, JA2 offers a solid gameplay. There's place for climbing roofs and cutting fences or blowing up walls, full auto shootouts and karate brawls or stealthy night assassinations and sniping from behind a cover, disarming mines or setting booby-traps and much, much more. Deep game mechanics, where the devil is in the details, are an integral part of its vast possibilities and seductive allure. All in all, when it comes to squad tactics and turn-based strategy, there's yet a game to match JA2's level of complexity.



*Since the release of the source code, dedicated modders managed to create ports of the game for Mac and Android.

JA2 brought multi-level fights to the series, with many underground hide-outs.

“Even though it wasn’t the focal part of the game, I found some of the NPCs to be the coolest part—especially watching people theorize on how the game worked in this respect. Whether it be Pablo, Kingpin, Deidranna, or any other NPC, there was more talk about this aspect of the game than the actual combat. And I’m happy with that, the combat in JA is a given, so it’s the “extras” that I get off on.”

- Ian Currie,
JA2’s Director and Producer



You can command various squads at once, and the locals show their support by fighting alongside you as militia.

Released two years later as last brain-child of Ian Currie and the already dying Sir-Tech, *JA2 Unfinished Business* was the swan song of the series. The new campaign is short and leaves you hungry for more. Sadly, there was nothing more to be had.

But everyone back in the day wanted *JA2UB* because it came with the much awaited map editor.

The irony is huge. The game that ended the original series actually was the one that kept it alive until today, thanks to the massive modding boom that it sparked. This and the decision by the publisher to call the curtains on *JA2* and release the source code were *Jagged Alliance*’s bite of the vampire. It died, but it went on to live forever. **SH**

MODS:

The *JA2* community has added tonnes more of absolute goodness, fixing bugs, improving features and adding new ones, creating new stories and expanding it to a level no sane developer today would only dream about.

A short-list hardly does them justice, but we’re sure these will give you a taste to try more. All mods are featured and available for download at: www.bears-pit.com

Mods for Jagged Alliance 2

JA2 Urban Chaos: The very first complete fan-made sequel of *JA2*, offers a complete new adventure in Danubia, with some revolutionary changes to systems and tactics (the name implies urban warfare and you will get plenty). It was rated by Finish Pellit gaming magazine as a 8.5/10 (the same score as *Jagged Alliance 2* itself).

JA2 Stracciatella: A complete overhaul of the *JA2* source code, started by modder Tron, transforming the engine into a true platform independent piece of software. It allowed ports of *JA2* to Linux, Mac-OS and lately Android.

JA2 v1.13 platform: Revered among fans for completely overhauling *JA2*, v1.13 brings thousands of new features and items to the game. And the beauty of it all, it transformed *JA2* into a mod-friendly game, spawning an impressive array of v1.13 based mods and features. Oh and it adds multiplayer...

Mods for Jagged Alliance 2: Unfinished Business

JA2UB Vietnam SOG’69: BecomingX’s campaign lands you in Vietnam, together with some very interesting new characters. One of the most played *UB* mods.

JA2UB Shady Job: Shady Job is an amazing Russian community response to the *JA2 Urban Chaos* success. The mod takes *JA2UB* and turns it into a whole new game, with new tactical map, new markets, new characters and new weapons.



SOG’69 is the first *JA2UB* mod to completely change the face and story of the game.

Ultima IX: Ascension



ORIGIN, 1999
Windows

Around the time *Ultima IX* was released, Richard Garriott hinted at the possibility of remaking the entire *Ultima* series using the *Ultima IX* engine, releasing them as online episodes.

Shortly after, Garriott departed from Origin and the project was canned.

Ultima IX, published over 16 years ago, is the last single-player *Ultima*, and the conclusion of both the Age of Armageddon trilogy (which began with *Ultima VII*) and the story of the Avatar. It's also the most controversial entry in the series; no other *Ultima* game has so sharply and clearly divided the opinions of the fandom.

Development on *Ultima IX* began soon after the release of *Ultima VIII*, with Mike McShaffry as the project lead at the time. An enhanced version of the *Ultima VIII* engine was selected as the technological base for the game, which McShaffry soon converted from a 2D engine to a software-accelerated 3D engine. However, he was soon removed from the project.

It would have been after his departure that the well-known Bob White Plot was written, likely based on Richard Garriott's own designs for the plot of the game (a leaked version can be read online at websites such as the *Ultima Codex* and the *Ultima Wiki*). At the time, EA felt the game worthy of significant investment; many of the CGI cutscenes used in the final game were rendered around this time.

However, much of the team was reassigned to assist with completing *Ultima Online*, and work largely paused on *Ultima IX* until mid-1997. Much had changed in the intervening months; hardware accelerated 3D had taken off, and it was decided that *Ultima IX* should make use of this new technology.

A new team was hired, and Ed Del Castillo was brought over from Westwood Studios to serve as the game's producer. He rewrote the plot treatment significantly, but was soon dismissed from Origin Systems. With pressure from EA to cancel the game and focus on *Ultima Online* mounting, Richard Garriott took direct control of the project, and the plot was re-written once more. EA gradually removed funding and resources from the *Ultima IX* team, and eventually imposed a firm release deadline which left the team scrambling to complete a playable build of the game. With only weeks to spare, a playable build was achieved, and the game was greenlit for release.

Upon release, *Ultima IX* was – as might be expected given the above – very buggy and unstable, so much so that Origin Systems opted to re-release an updated version of the game on new CDs to all who had purchased it.

The game was also heavily criticized for paying little heed to the canon of the *Ultima* series; the ending of *Ultima VIII* and many other key events from the series were ignored or re-written, upsetting fans who had followed the *Ultima* lore for almost two decades. Other common complaints include that it lacked party members, that the game world felt overly small, that combat was crude, the plot limited, the dialogue unpolished and the voice acting poor.

There is validity to all of these criticisms. There was little time during the race to finish the game for designers and editors to iterate the written dialogue;

Ultima IX's inventory is still based on multiple containers, but they are now grid-based, making them much easier to organize.



"He [Richard Garriott] wanted Britannia to come alive. And we did our best to do that. We had birds that actually flew out of trees and went and had a place for their nest, and they sat back in their nest. We had all kinds of cool features to just make the world come alive. And the amount of effort that took robbed us of the ability to put in a lot of the more traditional RPG elements, like a party, like NPC schedules, like who owns what object, like crafting."

- Bill Randolph,
Ultima IX Lead Programmer



The game's plot revolves around the corruption of the Virtues by the Guardian, who raised mysterious black columns all over Britannia.

designers would often write a scene and hand their first-draft script directly to the audio producer, who would get the actor(s) involved to record it that day. The game's technology and scripting were very complex for their day, and more polish was required than *Origin* had time to apply.

And yet, *Ultima IX* was – and in some ways remains – a technical marvel. It features a fully open 3D world, and offers some of the best dungeons – Hythloth excepted – to be found in the *Ultima* series. Many objects in the world can be freely manipulated, and container objects (e.g. barrels) even have buoyancy. The ability of the player to manipulate scenery objects at whim is a feature that largely disappeared from 3D RPG design for about decade after *Ultima IX*'s release.

Ultima IX also brings the story of the Avatar and the Guardian to a satisfying end, and drives home the now commonly-accepted point that ultimately, it was the Avatar who was the cause of many of the misfor-

tures that befell Britannia. And the soundtrack, by George Oldziej, is truly excellent.

Despite its reception, *Ultima IX* is not without a legacy. German RPG developers Piranha Bytes drew significant inspiration from the game whilst developing *Gothic* and, later, *Risen*; both games improve upon the formula that Origin Systems never had the time to fully develop, and are classics in their own rights.

For me, personally, there was one other thing that *Ultima IX* offered. You see, I grew up playing *Ultima*. I love the series and its setting; Britannia was my Narnia, my magical land hidden just out of view. And in *Ultima IX*, finally, I could see its sky. **KK**

Mods:

Dialogue patch: a re-writting of the game's dialog, to better fit the lore and continuity of the *Ultima* series.

Forgotten World: provides several patches and updates for *Ultima IX*, improving its performance, fixing some of the remaining bugs and restoring some of the content that was cut late in the game's production. Follow it here: www.forgottenworld.de

Beautiful Britannia: improves the game's textures and adds several areas there were cut from the game.



Combat in *Ultima IX* is simplistic; most of the time you'll just hit the left-mouse button as fast as you can.



Modded *Ultima IX*, with enhanced graphics, wide-screen support and restored content.

Silver



Infogrames, 1999
Windows, Mac and Dreamcast

Silver is a game of many contradictions. It was developed as a Japanese console-style game by a European studio and released for the PC in 1999. It was marketed as an RPG, yet many of the fundamental elements of the genre were overlooked. The polygonal characters were represented with very little detail, but the pre-rendered backgrounds were lifelike and beautiful. It is, therefore, hardly surprising, that *Silver* was released to wildly mixed reviews.

The one aspect of the game, the critics almost universally dislike, is the story. It is your standard fantasy fare: in the world of Jarrah a young knight David sets out on a quest to defeat Silver, an evil sorcerer who kidnapped his wife. The mood is set by brilliant, atmospheric music, composed by Dean Evans. The presentation, however, is a mixed bag. While the detailed 2D backdrops and animations shine, the 3D characters could use some polish.

The adventuring party consists of up to three members. You can directly control one character, or select a group and give them basic orders. This is achieved via a radial menu, which can also be used to access equipment and spells. Real-time combat is fast-paced and surprisingly complex. Apart from basic attacks, magic and artifacts, you can use mouse gestures to perform thrusts, swings and dodges. Unfortunately, clunky controls and the lack of active pause, detract from the experience. Since the focus is on action and the screen is often crowded with enemies, getting the most out of the available tools requires skill, reflex and precision. As a result, combat is the most satisfying when you only control David against a single adversary. Those duels often play out as puzzles: you have to learn the opponent's behavior and use his weak points and the environment to your advantage.

As a fan of classical RPGs, I cannot but notice *Silver*'s shortcomings. Character development is automatic, dialogs play out with hardly any player input and there are no meaningful choices and consequences. Yet, despite those obvious flaws, the game managed to win me over with its wonderful music, diverse world and the indefinable sense of adventure. When the credits rolled, I was left with that feeling of satisfaction you only get for a few seconds, after you read a good book or see a great film. **AM**

Some enemies are more susceptible to certain elements.

The goblins, for example, hate fire.



An early version of the radial menu popularized in some modern RPGs.



Final Fantasy VIII



Square Co., 1999
Windows and Playstation

The *Final Fantasy* series always had one very unique characteristic: every game is different. After the huge success of *FFVII*, it would be easy to just make a more-of-the-same sequel (and some fans still want one), but Square had other plans.

The first change is obvious: the art is completely different. In the two years since *FFVII*, Square went from crude, cartoonish characters to very realistic models, especially on the superb FMV cutscenes.

The combat has been changed as well, and *FFVIII*'s magic system is the most exotic of the series. Gone is the concept of mana; you now must stock magic spells, that are acquired from enemies. So if you own three Cure spells you'll only be able to cast Cure three times, then it will be unavailable until you collect more of it from monsters. Of course, this can lead to grinding enemies for spells, and to help counter that the game scales all monsters to your level. As a side-effect *FFVIII* is arguably the easiest game in the series, as enemies are never too strong for you.

Summons work very differently too. Now called Guardian Forces, they must be assigned to characters and each offers different abilities and passive bonus, allowing you to customize your party. They still can be used as regular summons, delivering powerful attacks that can be used at will. This doesn't kill the challenge, but will test your patience, as every time you call a Guardian Force you'll have to watch the entire summon animation over and over again.

All of this is honestly a side-show. When talking about *FFVIII*, there's no escape: the story is the main attraction here, and it goes everywhere; high-school drama, love during wartime, political struggles and even time travel. But, at its core, it's a coming of age story. The main character, Squall Leonhart, is a reluctant hero, a loner struggling with his own feelings.

Many consider him to be too annoying in his teenage angst, and at times the personal moments of the characters are overwhelmed by the bizarre plot, but those who look past these faults may find themselves shedding a tear over the ending credits.

The music deserves a separate mention. Nobuo Uematsu composed an epic, emotional soundtrack that matches the story perfectly. Definitely worth a listen, even if you're not interested in the game.

Last but not least, *FFVIII* features the addicting Triple Triad card game, a great way to spend even more time in this "love it or hate it" masterpiece. **FE**

FFVIII was ported to PCs in 1999, and re-released on Steam in 2013. This new version supports higher resolutions, but uses a low quality MIDI soundtrack. A mod named *Roses and Wine* fixes that.

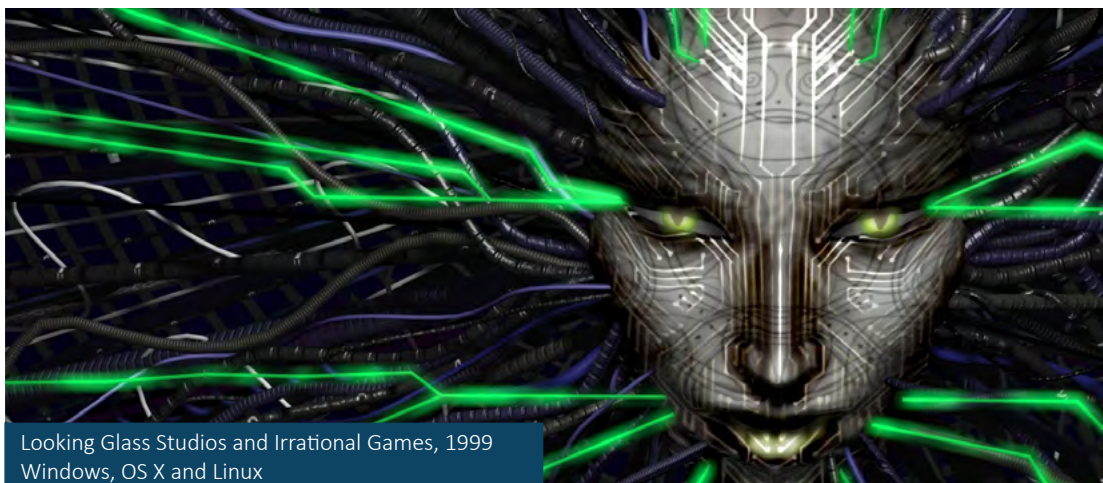


The "draw" command allows you to absorb magic from enemies and either cast or store them.



Final Fantasy VIII features almost an hour of pre-rendered cutscenes. No dialogs were added, in an effort by the developers to convey emotion through body language alone.

System Shock 2



Looking Glass Studios and Irrational Games, 1999
Windows, OS X and Linux

Who could ever forget playing *System Shock 2*? Who could forget the mindless, pipe-wielding mutants patrolling dimly lit hallways. The ungodly sight of blood and bizarre biological growths covering walls and ceilings while a horrific symphony of terror created by computer terminals, whirring security cameras and the ship's relentlessly droning engines plays in the background. The cyborg midwives tending to their "little ones" while rattling off motherly stock phrases of affection. The exceedingly polite, if somewhat pushy and accident-prone protocol droids, or the partially vivisected monkeys rising up against their captors. The creeping feeling that the very environment you inhabit is your mortal enemy. How could anyone possibly forget playing – No, experiencing! – that?

Whether the 1994 *System Shock* can be considered an RPG is up for debate. The fact remains that in an age where games like *Doom* limited its content to navigating mazes, finding keys and shooting stuff, *System Shock* featured a complex (if convoluted) UI that allowed the player to jump, crouch, peek around

corners, jack into cyberspace, read logs and manage an extensive inventory. Sadly, in what would become a pattern for Looking Glass, releasing a product that was years ahead of its time didn't pay off. *System Shock* obtained wide critical acclaim, but sold poorly.

However, the game managed to develop a cult following over the years. Among the select group of aficionados was a young Ken Levine. His company, Irrational Games, was granted the rights to work on a sequel, allowing for a proper, triumphant return of SHODAN, the devious rogue AI that had so masterfully served as the first game's main adversary.

Developed on a shoestring budget in an office that can be aptly described as Looking Glass' broom closet, there was constant symbiosis between the two companies. First and foremost, Irrational had access to the Dark Engine, which would first come to use in the 1998 stealth classic *Thief*. As a result, *System Shock 2* shares many of its strengths with the original *Thief*: The player is able to hide in the shadows of the large, intricately designed levels, with different surfaces generating different levels of noise, potentially alerting nearby enemies.

What truly separates SS2 from its predecessor is the use of a complex character system, resulting in a game that is both FPS and RPG in equal measure. Early on the player chooses one of three classes: the gun-toting marine, the psionically-endowed OSA agent or the techsawvy navy hacker. Throughout the game the player can customize his character however he chooses: improving his attributes, selecting traits, training the skills required to equip and repair more powerful items, finding implants or learning any of the 35 available PSI-powers, that range from temporarily buffing stats to firing mental projectiles and even the ability to teleport yourself.



By demand of the publisher, SS2 has a multiplayer co-op mode. But beware, the developers stated many times that it's a game best experienced alone.

Besides shooting, you'll also have to hack, repair, modify and even research stuff you find.

"For me the important part of *System Shock 2* is the difficulty and the resource scarcity. I would probably describe it more as being about tension than horror. There's a horror element to the story and characters are terribly disfigured or in pain or whatever, but that's actually less important to me than the fact that the game is really, really hard. It requires you to constantly be very focused and intense. There are a lot of things that can go wrong."

- Jonathan Chey,
*System Shock 2's Project Manager
and Lead Programmer*



Enemies roam the halls and a rogue AI watches over your every step. There's no safety in *System Shock 2*.

Resources are scarce though: weapons degrade with every single shot and have a nasty tendency to either break or jam during tense firefights. Enemies respawn over time, and even areas which have been previously cleared can become death traps. The high difficulty crowns SS2's unrivaled sense of danger.

To add to the atmosphere, the ghosts of the Von Braun – the faster-than-light spaceship where your descent into hell takes place – still inhabit the vessel. Both figuratively – in the form of increasingly desperate audio logs – and literally, as apparitions that recreate the crew members' final, ghastly moments.

System Shock 2 struck a nerve, but despite an overwhelmingly positive reception and the fact that it would go on to inspire both FPS/RPG hybrids and horror games to this very day, it sold below expectations. And with Looking Glass going out of business in 2000, the jarring cliffhanger that concludes the rushed final levels remains unresolved to this day.



Managing the inventory, saving resources and keeping weapons functional are mandatory for your survival.

Irrational Games would live on to see the financial success that Looking Glass was never allowed with the 2007 release of the popular *Bioshock* series, which – to the disappointment of many fans – did not turn out to be the next step in the logical evolution of FPS/RPG hybrids they had hoped for.

System Shock 2 stands unchallenged both in its seamless blending of genres and in its ability to truly make the player feel like a pathetic creature of meat and bone, panting and sweating as you run through SHODAN's corridors. **NH**

SHODAN is voiced by Terri Brosius, who not only worked as writer and level designer for Looking Glass, but was also part of an early 90's rock band named *Tribe*.

Mods:

A very active community at www.systemshock.org still offers advice and releases great mods. Here's a selection:

Shock Community Patch: big collection of fixes from the devoted SS2 community. Highly recommended.

TF's Secmod: rebalance things, change enemy position and add new skills, items and guns. Perfect for a replay.

System Shock Fan Missions: adventures that range from sequels to SS2's story to exploring medieval crypts or snowy planets. Most are very polished and even offer voiced logs. Christine's *Ponterbee Station* is a must-play.



Some fan missions, such as *UNN Polaris*, offer new monsters and environments to the players.



2000-2004

The rise of the modern gaming industry

If the 90's were a time of great technological jumps, then the start of the new millennium was a time of drastic changes in the business side. It was a period of consolidation, that re-shaped the gaming industry.

Previously, the successful fifth generation of consoles, led by the Playstation and the Nintendo 64, had sold millions and greatly expanded the gaming audience. Now the Playstation 2 was spearheading the 6th console generation and breaking all sales records, but the development costs also kept rising at an alarming pace.

While a few PC companies like Maxis, Valve and Blizzard struck gold with hits such as *The Sims*, *Counter-Strike* and *Diablo II*, the top selling list became entirely dominated by consoles and handhelds.

Former PC giants like Sierra, Brøderbund and Origin had already been sold in the late 90's, and the harsh climate of the early 00's saw the end of Interplay, SSI, Hasbro Interactive, Infogrames, MicroProse, Acclaim and the 3DO Company, among others.

EA and Activision purchased many of these, further consolidating their position as rulers of the US market, while others had no choice but to close doors and declare bankruptcy.

In Japan, Square would merge with Enix and become Square-Enix, an attempt to fight the ever increasing development costs. Even on the hardware side things were getting tighter, with 3Dfx being acquired by Nvidia, leaving the graphic cards market as the duopoly between ATI and Nvidia that stands to this day.

One of the biggest changes happened in the console market; SEGA left the fight with heavy losses after the consecutive failures of the Saturn and the Dreamcast. But a new challenger, Microsoft, rose in its place. And what a challenger that was.

The first successful US console since the Crash of 1983, the Xbox would have a major impact in the industry. Culturally and geographically close to western developers and with the mighty Microsoft providing a sense of economical stability, the Xbox was the gateway for companies eager to try their hand in the blooming console market. To ease them in, the Xbox (a contraction of "DirectX Box") was designed from the start so that veteran PC developers could easily understand and work with.

In the early 00's, the Xbox managed to bridge the gap between PCs and consoles, and the US market became almost entirely controlled by few large companies.

Trends:

“The Death of PC Gaming”: The late 90’s had already been rough, but the early 2000’s saw the end of some of the biggest and most respected PC companies of the past decades, such as SSI, Interplay, Origin, New World Computing, Westwood Studios and Microprose. Some were acquired by giants like EA and Activision, others closed down. Next to the ever growing popularity of the consoles, this crisis led many to weave grim prophecies about the “Death of PC Gaming”.



Westwood, Origin and Bullfrog were all bought by EA in the 90’s and shut down in the early 2000’s.

Diablo Clones: *Diablo*’s success in 1997 had already led to a few followers, such as *Darkstone* and *Ancient Evil*, but with the blockbuster hit that was *Diablo II* they became a popular sub-genre, with games like *FATE*, *Sacred*, *Heretic Kingdoms*, *Throne of Darkness*, *Nox* and many others to this day. Unfortunately, this trend was harmful to some titles – the isometric action-RPGs *Prince of Qin* and *Divine Divinity* featured elaborate quests and storylines, but were overlooked as “just another *Diablo*-clone”.



Diablo II sold 1 million units in its first two weeks, a record at the time.

Handheld Consoles: The phenomena that was *Pokémon* In 2001 Nintendo introduced its successor, the GameBoy Advance. A few other companies tried to follow, such as Nokia’s N-Gage – a cellphone/gaming device hybrid. Nintendo DS, released in December 2004 and to date the best-selling handheld console of all time. In the same month Sony would release its Playstation Portable – the PSP –, starting a rivalry that still continues today with their successors, the 3DS and the PSP Vita.



All Nintendo DS models combined have sold over 150 million units, second only to the PS2.



The Playstation 2 is released. It dominated the 2000’s and became the best-selling video game console in history, with over 155 million units sold.



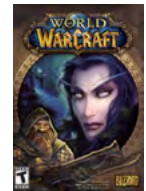
The Gamecube was a bet on “family-friendly” consoles, but the lack of third-party games made it struggle. It sold 22 million units.



The Xbox was Microsoft’s entry into the console wars. It would revolutionize the gaming scenario in the US and sell 24 million units.



Warcraft III is released. Its mod community would create *Defense of the Ancients* (aka *DOTA*) and popularize tower defense games.



World of Warcraft is released and becomes the standard for MMOs. It peaked at 12 million subscribers in 2010, but remains extremely popular.

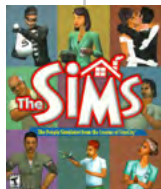
2000

2001

2002

2003

2004



The Sims is a surprise hit, selling 12 million units and dethroning *Myst* as the top selling PC game. As a whole, *The Sims* franchise sold over 175 million copies.



Bejeweled is released, at first as a browser game. Later it would get multiple ports and sequels. A success with casual players, the series has over 150 million downloads.



Grand Theft Auto III takes the world by storm, selling 14 million units across all platforms, popularizing open-world sandbox games and leading to a new debate over video game violence.



AMD creates the first 64-bit processors for home use, allowing for PCs to use more than 4GB of RAM. By 2005 AMD and Intel would also introduce new multi-core desktop processors.



Half-Life 2 brings in an innovative physics engine and a more cinematic approach. It also comes with Valve’s newly-released Steam and lead to popular mods, such as *Garry’s Mod*.

Diablo II



Blizzard North, 2000
Windows and Mac

Blizzard provided a great amount of support for *Diablo II*, patching the game and adding new content for over 11 years.

Back in my youth, I'd received a CD from a gamer's periodical, 'PC Gamer'. Containing a myriad of game demos, one of those happened to be *Diablo*. Thrown into a world of dark fantasy, I was immediately enraptured by its atmosphere and its addictive looting system. The pilgrimage into the town of Tristram had become love at first fright, and I was hardly the only one. *Diablo* sold millions, with the game's popularity spawning countless clones trying to mimic the formula. And in the summer of 2000, the sequel arrived. Welcome to *Diablo II*.

After witnessing the demonic Soulstone being wedged into the hero of the first *Diablo*, our dark wanderer fights to control the darkness within...and is losing. Wrestling with nothing short of the devil himself, his journey heads east. Always to the east. It would've been easy enough for the studios of Blizzard to make "just another *Diablo*"; repeating the formula and throwing in a few new enemies. Instead, they chose something different. Something ambitious.

The main quest of *Diablo II* is a global matter, as your champion follows the trail of destruction left by

our troubled stranger. New and awe-inspiring characters will make their debuts through thrilling and visually-impressive cinematics; something Blizzard is still very well-known for. It's a well-written story that aims far higher than the original, which essentially boiled down to "Satan's in the basement, go whack him a few times". While not nearly as complicated if juxtaposed with the *Planescapes* and the *Fallouts* of the RPG world, it still comes to mind as one of the more memorable ones.

Split into multiple acts, your travels will be far more than a level-to-level affair. The four diverse locales you'll explore are open-world, and come with a handful of quests outside of quelling the threat ahead. *Diablo* has always employed a very simple core formula for combat, and its sequel isn't drastically far off. There's no need for a roll of the die or fancy mathematics to muddy the action; Left-Click to attack, Right-Click for magic. The major difference between the two games, however, is that the sequel strives to build more in-depth roleplaying systems through skill trees and the characters' abilities. Instead of having to frantically search for books to find your wall of fire spell, new movesets become available while leveling up and are yours to choose. And with 3 different skill trees for each class, the divergences of your character are numerous.

Straying away from a repeat of the classic Warrior/Rogue/Mage trifecta of the original, you'll be given more exotic options like the Necromancer and the Amazon. Not just a new name on the label, the gameplay options can vary wildly between classes with abilities like the Paladin's Aura System, or the Necromancer's ever-so-elegant corpse explosion. To top it off, *Diablo II* came with a robust multiplayer system using Battle.net. The game was designed spe-



Diablo II branched its loot into the now famous colored tiers, going from Low Quality up to Unique.

“We used the term “kill/reward” to describe our basic gameplay. Players continually kill monsters and get rewarded with treasure and experience. But the rewards don’t stop there. We offer a steady stream of goals and accomplishments to entice the player to keep playing. There’s always a quest that is almost finished, a way-point almost reached, an experience level almost achieved, and a dungeon nearly cleared out.”

- Erich Schaefer,
Diablo II's Project and Design Lead



While *Diablo* battles were always underground, its sequel takes you through all sort of environments, from battlefields and tombs to jungles and palaces.

cifically with online in mind, both co-operative and otherwise; It’s a treat for those looking to get their dungeoning on. PvE Partying, PvP dueling, and a ladder system added a greater replay value to the original campaign.

The music is sublime. Composer Matt Uelmen makes his return after the previous title, and manages to retain the brooding vibe of the original. As the game goes on, however, the instrumentals take on a more international and experimental sound than fans may be used to, due to the notable change in location. The mystery and mystique in these new settings are still very present, a testament to the talent going into the aural department of *Diablo II*.

The graphical side is at the top of its game. While still working off its isometric 2D engine, the art style and the animation quality was exactly what it needed to be. The randomly generated worlds of *Diablo II* felt like a living, breathing, haunting experience. The orig-

inal did as well, but not quite to the same degree. The worlds were more detailed, less confined, and encouraged exploration a bit more than its predecessor.

The *Lord of Destruction* expansion pack arrived a year later, building off a significant story arc and adding a fifth act to the game, as well as two new classes: the Druid and the Assassin.

Diablo II is a beautiful thing. It captures the essence of what made the original such a success, while venturing far from a dreaded case of “sequelitis”. The story will grab you, the enemies will haunt you, and the sheer variety of options will pull you back in. The new characters, the fan-made mods, the expansion pack, and the multiplayer components are more than enough reason to travel once again through the shady sands of Lut Gholein, or the dire docks of Kurast.

Diablo II is a must for dungeon crawlers who hunger for dark atmosphere and an entertaining action-based roleplaying experience. **GT**



The addition of skill trees made character’s progression much more interesting than the previous game.

Mods:

Back to Hellfire: Aims to recreate the experience of the original *Diablo*, changing classes, skills, music and more.

Le Royaume des Ombres: A huge total modification mod, it offers a new world to explore, new skills, quests, monsters, crafting recipes and over 2000 new items.

Hell Unleashed: Enhances the game, increasing the size of dungeons, adding new tougher enemies and making boss fights more complex. For multiplayer play.

Median XL: Ultimative: One of the most popular mods, completely change the skills, adds various new monsters with reworked AI, new unique items and a series of uberquests and challenges for *Diablo II* veterans.

Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn



BioWare, 2000
Windows, Mac (iOS and Android)*

*An Enhanced Edition of the BG games has been recently released. It adds new content, wide-screen support and also iOS and Android ports.

Baldur's Gate II: Shadow of Amn for me was more than a game; it was an unforgettable journey throughout the world of Faërun that came alive before my eyes, with friends and villains with believable yet interesting and unique histories and personalities of their own. It was my first CRPG ever, and one that I fell absolutely in love with.

BG2 continues the story of the first game, but you can skip *BG1* if you wish without losing much. Set in the Forgotten Realms, rich in detail and history, you assume the role of Gorion's ward, one of the many off-spring of the deceased God of Murder, Bhaal. The story unfolds as your unique heritage draws the attention of a powerful mage, Irenicus, whose sole motive is to "unlock your power" for his own use. I loved how the villain's true nature is cleverly disguised with his seemingly unemotional nature in the beginning and his powerful dialogues are delivered with masterful voice acting which blew me away. Ultimately, the story of *BG2* is a personal one; a journey of discovery and the protagonist's struggle against their own nature that is mirrored by the villain.



Dream sequences are the key interaction with Irenicus in the early game and really add atmosphere to *BG2*.

Naturally, it is fitting that your companions play a huge role in *BG2*, influencing your decisions as you bond with them throughout your journey. The NPCs are extremely well-developed, with their own unique quests, personality and banters with you or with each other, which was biggest improvement compared to its predecessor. Each NPC will remember their previous conversations with you and react to your decisions accordingly, allowing you to be their friend or enemy, or even start a romantic relationship. This is the part I enjoyed the most in *BG2*; it was such a satisfying experience, to get to know them, help them develop and even save their soul.

Most of your companions can be found within the city of Athkatla, which functions as your base of operations in the early game, where you are given freedom to explore and experience the city and other neighbouring regions. Athkatla is a delight to explore; each part of the city is well fleshed out, populated by townsfolk of different status or professions. While it outwardly appears that the city is co-governed by a merchant council and a sinister group of mages, there are other powerful organisations that play prominent roles and soon you will find yourself caught amidst their struggle over control of the city. You also have the chance to increase your standing within Athkatla through the stronghold quests which vary depending on your player character's chosen class.

During your journey, you'll find a wealth of side-quests; so much that you might feel overwhelmed at times. Most of the quests are varied, well-written, and often incorporates puzzles, ranging from simple riddles, to elaborate plots with you playing the role of a detective – for example, one has you attempting to prove your sanity by answering riddles in order to escape from a prison where mental "deviants" are held.

“The real-time pause combat system on top of the deep roleplaying game is one of the best things that has ever happened to the RPG genre. That extra element of tactics from the realm of games like *Warcraft II* or *Starcraft* really opened up the combat experience of the game, and I think it also drew some of the really cool elements out of the AD&D system while keeping combat fierce and action-packed.”

- Kevin Martens,
Co-Lead Designer of *Baldur's Gate II*



BG2 uses the Infinity Engine, featuring beautiful isometric graphics and real-time with pause combat.

Your quests will take you to many different places in Faerûn – from a pirate island, a beautiful elven city, the Underdark (where the most fearsome and terrible creatures reside) – or even to different Planes. You will encounter interesting and often hostile inhabitants of the places you visit, which adds variety and fun to combat. You will have to come up with different tactics to survive some tough battles. Just one misplaced spell can make a battle extremely difficult as some spells affect not only your enemies, but your companions or even innocents in the area – and you will have to deal with the deadly consequences!

Magical combat is engaging and strategic, involving more than just blasting targets with fireballs, and the high level cap means you'll see some of the most powerful spells AD&D has to offer. Mages often have layers of protection spells which will need to be dispelled, and will turn invisible or even stop time itself to prepare a devastating attack on your party. Of course,

your mages have the same abilities, and making best use of the limited number of spells they get per day can turn a nasty beating into a thrilling victory.

For the non-caster classes, there is a huge range of weapons available. The majority of weapons come with their own history and lore (or sometimes humorous conversations!), often interesting and fun to read. There are also a number of legendary weapons which can be forged using parts found during your journey - most of the time it's well worth it to hunt for these parts!

Baldur's Gate 2 is one hell of a journey; there is so much to experience, so much to see, it is hard to describe it all using words alone – you will have to experience it for yourself! By the end of your journey through both *Shadows of Amn* and the *Throne of Bhaal* expansion, you will be as eager to share your experiences with others as I am. **SN**



BG2's game manual is an attraction by itself, spiral bound and 262 pages long, describing all the 298 spells in the game.



The great artwork and item descriptions add a lot to the game, and the UI is easily one of the best among RPGs.

Mods:

There are hundreds of mods available for *Baldur's Gate 2*; they rebalance the game, fix bugs & issues and even add new companions and areas. Here's a small selection:

Baldur's Gate Trilogy-WeiDU combines all *Baldur's Gate* games and expansions, allowing you to play them as a single game, using BG2's superior engine and UI.

Sword Coast Stratagems is an elaborate tactical/AI mod that makes combat really challenging. For experts only.

Spell Revisions fixes and balances the spells in the game, nerfing overpowered ones and improving others.

Ascension Mod: created by David Gaider, one of the game's designers, this mod aims to make the ending more satisfying, adding new content and challenges.

For more mods, visit: www.pocketplane.net/modlist/

If you wish to use various mods at the same time, the *BiG World Project* offers a comprehensive compatibility guide for over 500 mods and a handy automatic setup tool.

Vampire: The Masquerade Redemption



Nihilistic Software, 2000
Windows

Vampire the Masquerade Redemption has always been overshadowed by its big brother *Bloodlines*. It might not be the best CRPG ever, but it's still a bloody good game. With a small team, Nihilistic Studios was able to construct beautiful environments and a compelling story with colorful characters.

While convalescing in Medieval Prague, a young French crusader called Christof Romuald falls in love with one of the nuns taking care of him. His overzealous attitude leads him straight into conflict with local vampires and paints him as a worthy candidate to undeath. Turned into a vampire by the Brujah, a clan of warrior-philosophers from ancient Carthage, our hero wanders through Prague and Vienna by night to save his lost love and prevent the awakening of an ancient wicked vampire. Halfway through the game, Christof is projected through time and awakes on the Eve of the New Year 2000 in London to end his quest.

The story itself is simple and extremely straight-forward but the unique setting created by White Wolf is well-explained and keeps its density.

A few occasional choices are given to the player, but they don't change much and only impact on the ending. Through the two time periods, three companions will join Christof on his desperate quest. Entertaining and diverse, they will comment on every place and every character encountered by distilling interesting tidbits about *Vampire's* universe.

While the timeskip doesn't really change anything gameplay-wise (except the weapons, the UI and the characters), the cultural shock felt by Christof is pretty entertaining to watch. Putting aside the cheesy love story, the cast and the writing are good enough to keep your attention. Strangely enough, self-conscious humour is also present and works pretty well.

Aficionados of the original pen-and-paper game felt deeply betrayed by *Redemption's* gameplay. Indeed, while the profound political nature of the vampires is quickly established, the game is exclusively based around combat. *Redemption* plays as a deeply narrative *Diablo*-like. Love it or hate it but there is no way to avoid it. If you accept it, it is an entertaining and original experience.

On the surface, *Redemption's* gameplay is very similar to *Diablo*: click on enemies until extinction, get loot, rinse and repeat. The vanilla formula changes quite a bit once you become a vampire. Your PCs have three bars : life, blood & frenzy. By draining humans (or enemies), you get blood which allows you to heal yourself and fuel disciplines, vampire magic. If your blood bar gets low, your frenzy rises up making your character prone to enter a state uncontrollable rage. Those simple facts become matters of life and death in combat as a simple fight can turn into a total party wipe with thirsty characters. Vampire weaknesses, such as sunlight or fire, can make things go south pretty fast.



Fighting Cappadocians inside the catacombs of Medieval Prague .

- Ray Gresko,
Redemption's project lead



Every vampire gets basic disciplines (such as feeding) but also more exotic ones linked to his/her clan. In *Redemption*, there are more than ten of those and each one unlocks up to five different powers. The range is extremely large: wolf form, fireballs, invisibility, summoning, celerity, cauldron of blood, etc. Combinations are pretty fun, and tailoring the disciplines used by your characters usually end up being as important as the weapon they use, maybe more. Arsenal and enemies are pretty varied: Swords and spiked maces turn into guns and flamethrowers in the modern era, each class of weapons affecting enemies differently. Non-vampiric enemies range from humans, ghosts to other monstrosities from the *World of Darkness* – the Werewolf probably being the nastiest of all. While the game isn't very difficult, bosses are tough, usually spamming high-end disciplines and draining most of your resources.



The polarizing gameplay aside, *Redemption* succeeded in offering a nice atmosphere through a coherent art direction. Graphics have aged well, except the blocky-handed characters, and offer a nice vision of the *World of Darkness*. Sound design is creepy as hell and the soundtrack is fantastic. Composed by two different artists to follow the story's division, music is probably one of the best in the genre. The medieval bits are dark and dreary while the modern elements relies on techno and rap vibes.

Only remembered by a few, *Redemption's* multiplayer was extremely original. More than a year before *Neverwinters Nights*, it tried to recreate the tabletop experience with an omnipotent storyteller as a host. The storyteller could change everything in the multiplayer sessions: add monsters, props, give experience points, etc. Unfortunately, only two scenarios were built within the core game and no user-friendly toolkits were given to the players.

Redemption is a schizophrenic game using a well-thought universe and a compelling narrative to promote a *Diablo* variation. It is definitively a good game and is worth a look. If you manage to bypass the boring tutorial dungeon, then you will definitively enjoy yourself. **TR**

Redemption has a wide range of mods, but the highlight is *The Age of Redemption 2014*, a mod that allows you to play the game's single-player campaign in multiplayer. Also worth mentioning is *Within The Darkness*, a huge mod that attempts to be more faithful to the source tabletop game. You can check those mods and many more at: www.planetvampire.com

Soulbringer



Infogrames Studios, 2000
Windows

With its isometric perspective, real-time combat, simplistic character system and a cliché story about a chosen one fighting demons, it's all too easy to dismiss *Soulbringer* as a yet another of those *Diablo*-clones so abundant in early 2000s. You couldn't be further from truth, however.

First, its combat, while real-time, isn't anywhere near the frantic click-fest you'd expect from an action-RPG. It strives for the very opposite – to make

single-character melee as tactical as it can. Each weapon has up to 5 possible attacks, that differ in a variety of areas like speed, reach, damage type, etc. You can also combine those attacks into combos, presumably tailor-suited for different enemy types. In fact, you are encouraged to do so, as it's only while performing a combo that your character can dodge or parry.

Attacks are also aimed at different body parts – or more exactly different height levels, as the game takes the attacks trajectory and elevation into account. Unfortunately, elevation seems to be the game's Achilles heel, as the AI, while quite competent in other areas, just can't understand it properly. This manifests in a variety of ways – from some very weird pathfinding, to enemies not noticing you two steps from them, to other enemies wasting all their spells on a bump separating them from you.

Combat isn't the only area where *Soulbringer* tries to innovate. Its magic system has spells divided into standard five elements, that have associated skills that grow with use. However those skills provide you not with spell power, but with protection from said element – up to the point where enemy spells start to actually heal you. The trade-off is, of course, decreasing the skill with a subsequent element – developing water takes away from fire, fire – from spirit etc.

In its less innovative areas *Soulbringer* is also quite solid. Its story is well-developed and fairly non-linear, if somewhat cliché and not without a bit of signature French weirdness. Level design is competent, with plenty of nooks and crannies to explore and adventure-style puzzles to solve, and visuals, while obviously dated, are quite atmospheric nevertheless. So if you're able to turn a blind eye to the AI quirks, you're in for a very enjoyable and unique RPG experience. **VK**

At the right of the screen there are eight slots where you can assign combos, even mixing spells and melee attacks.



The interface is oversized and looks very confusing, but it's easy to use once you're used to it.



Grandia II



The original *Grandia*, released in 1997 for the Sega Saturn (and later the PS1), is often listed among the best JRPGs of all time, thanks to its light-hearted story, the challenging, puzzle-filled dungeons and – above all – its combat system.

While most JRPGs use similar turn-based combat systems derived from *Wizardry* and *Dragon Quest*, the *Grandia* series has an entirely new system, where battles happen in real-time, but follow an initiative order. During battle, a gauge displays the order characters will act, as their icons travel from left to right through three phases – Wait, Command and Act.

During the Wait phase characters will, well, wait. As each character reach the Command phase, you'll give them an order and they will execute it at the end of the Act phase – with each type of action requiring a different amount of time to be executed. Not only it feels dynamic, but both the player and the enemies can use attacks and skills to delay their foes' actions – or even cancel them all together, if timed correctly.

Grandia II, the only game of the series ported to PCs, further improves the combat system by featuring a fully 3D combat area. Now characters must move close to their foes to attack, making position and speed play a big role when timing your actions.

Unfortunately the whole system feels underused, as the encounter design is quite poor and battles are very easy. You characters all have multiple powerful attacks, vast pools of mana and bags full of items, overpowering most obstacles – even boss battles.

Grandia II puts you in the shoes of Ryudo, a young mercenary hired to protect a priestess during an exorcism ritual. Things go bad, the girl gets possessed and they both set on a journey to save her soul. It's a good premise, with a few memorable characters and plot twists – but also many cliché JRPG tropes.

While it's an entertaining title, *Grandia II* lacks the impact of its predecessor. The plot works well and will please JRPG fans, but the main attraction here, the excellent combat system, is wasted on easy battles and boring enemies. Overall, the game stands more as a curiosity than a solid recommendation.

If you're interested in the combat system, be sure to take a look at its recent copycats: *Child of Light* and *Penny Arcade's Precipice of Darkness 3 & 4*. **FE**

Grandia II's excellent soundtrack was composed by Noriyuki Iwadare. A few of the game's releases came with an additional CD of his music.

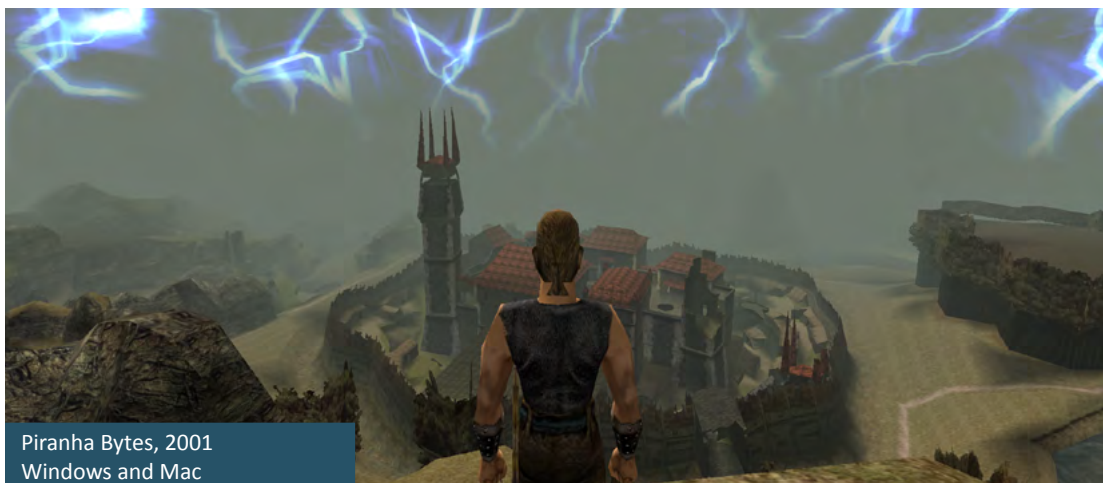


Grandia II's dungeons are very simple and straightforward, even displaying a compass that points the way out. Enemies are visible on the map and can be easily avoided.



The initiative gauge at the bottom corner shows the order and stage of the character's action. Attacking someone during their ACT phase can interrupt them.

Gothic



Piranha Bytes, 2001
Windows and Mac

Gothic supports widescreen resolutions without the need for mods, but you must set it directly in the game's .INI file.

Gothic came literally out of nowhere in 2001, and, in my view, set a whole new standard for single-character hiking simulators, aka “The Piranha Bytes RPG”. Funny how the developers didn’t even label it as an RPG at its release.

When talking about why *Gothic* was something fresh and unique when it was published, it’s definitely important to start with the general theme and story, since it’s essentially “*Escape from New York...* with swords!”. You are just a bloke, who’s nameless for all intents and purposes because nobody even lets you introduce yourself. You are thrown into a prison mining colony surrounded by a deadly one-way-entry forcefield, where the prisoners managed to rebel and take over the whole establishment. After that you are beaten senseless (“baptized”) by a bunch of cops and left on your own. The premise in *Gothic* is a very good hook because it presents a mix of low key matters with a fairly unique setting. It also manages to uphold that to the end, as even though bigger and more fantastical events start happening, your character’s only motivation is basically to get the hell out of the colony.



Combat is quick and deadly. You can perform front, left and right attacks or block. A trained fighter can also chain attacks together.

The general writing style, which would stick with Piranha Bytes henceforth, also emphasized the dichotomy between the vulgar and the fantastical very well, as you’d be coming across various really colorful characters, who are on the one hand rather typical – pompous mages, brutal thugs, dumb peons –, but on the other extremely believable and amusing.

But *Gothic*’s biggest strength was not just showing you this strange prison colony, but also letting you visit its every nook and cranny. The world of *Gothic* was simply massive, as well as beautiful, with tons of places to check out, beasts to murder, secret caverns to penetrate and ancient tombs to raid. And above all, it was hand-crafted, full of verticality and almost without barriers, so you could just go off and explore whatever you wanted – provided you could survive.

And that was where *Gothic* was tricky, because surviving was a lot harder than in most games. You know it isn’t fooling around when your first opponent is a turkey that can horribly murder you in a few hits. And it was this ridiculous brutality that gave the game most of its unique charm. It simply didn’t cut you any slack. If you wanted to get somewhere, you had to work for it, and the simple thought that straying off the beaten path could mean certain death made every step into the wilderness something special. Especially at night. Through a forest. With no map.

The key to thrive was to quickly get better gear, beg people to train you in combat and master the fighting system, which I consider one of the best ones in Action-RPG history. At first it seems clunky and unresponsive, but once you get accustomed to it and take on harder opponents, every fight becomes an adrenaline-pumping effort where every mistake could mean death. Various enemies would also fight in different ways, and force you to adapt new tactics.

“We wanted to create a living world, so we decided to make it small and interesting, rather than very large and boring. And instead of a bright faery-tale atmosphere, we preferred to create a dark and gloomy setting. Combine these two things and you end up with a prison camp surrounded by a magical barrier.”

— Alex Brüggemann,
Piranha Bytes co-founder
and *Gothic*’s designer



To succeed, you must not only work for the factions, but also earn the respect of individuals as well, so they might agree to help or train you.

The final outstanding quality of *Gothic* was its character system and how it tied into the game and story themselves. Sure, you could gain massive XP from monsters and quests, but once you leveled up, essentially nothing happened. You only got a bunch of skill points that required visits at specific trainers that would teach you, but only to the best of their capabilities – if they even respected you in the first place.

Furthermore, while your character started as a classless bloke, to actually acquire a specific class you needed to join one of the three very distinct factions, each of which had its own agenda and quests. Not only was this very neat because tying the leveling to the narrative was a nice throw-back to P&P RPGs, but also because it piled up many layers of choices and consequences. You might agree with one faction, but joining it will prevent you from learning something from another, or completing quests for the third, etc.



Gothic allows you to climb on ledges, offering a level of verticality and exploration that few other RPGs provide.

I’d lie if I said that I wasn’t not an obnoxious fan of Piranha Bytes’ RPG formula. I remember how amazed I was by the openness of the world, the feelings of seclusion and the brutality of the entire setting in just about all aspects when I played it for the first time. I also remember how glad I was when they took all that and made it even better in *Gothic II*. After that both the series and the developer would start meandering, but no matter what happened, it would never take away the first two games from me.

And while the sequel very much improved everything from *Gothic*, skipping this one “because it’s the same but a bit less” would be criminal. Honestly, both games are just parts of one great whole, and you can’t have one without the other. **DR**

Gothic Reloaded is an ambitious fan project seeking to completely overhaul *Gothic*’s visuals with HD textures, new models and UI. It’s currently under development, scheduled for summer 2015.

Mods:

Unofficial Patch: Fixes most of the few bugs left.

Player Kit: A handy tool that allows you to run and manage *Gothic*’s mods. Required for some mods.

Textures Patch: Offers new, higher resolution textures, mostly made based on *Gothic II*’s textures.

Golden Mod: Restores cut content, adding alchemy, a few new quests, items and a new area, while also making the whole game less linear. Great for a replay.

The Trial: Adds a new short adventure about a Count accused of massacre and allows you to recruit NPCs.

Dark Mysteries: A fan-made expansion for *Gothic*, with new areas, quests, items, NPCs and features such as wearing helmets, blacksmithing and cooking.

Diccuric: A huge mod with an entirely new campaign and world, both about the same size as the original game. Also features improved graphics, taken from *Gothic II*.

Severance: Blade of Darkness



Rebel Act Studios, 2001
Windows

An Xbox port and a sequel was under development, but Rebel Act closed down in 2002 after weak sales. Former members founded MercurySteam and developed the *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow* series.

Made by the Spanish studio Rebel Act Software, *Severance: Blade of Darkness* (also known as *Blade: The Edge of Darkness*) is an interesting hack & slash game which heavily relies on CRPG aesthetics and conventions. The story is pretty cliché but does the job: a dark god is going to escape from his prison and it's up to you to put him back to his place, using the fabled Blade of Darkness.

In a straight-up *Gauntlet* fashion, four characters are available, each having their own strengths and weaknesses. The amazon is an extremely fast and nimble fighter who specialize in bows and lances, but she is also very frail. The knight is a balanced character using a sword-and-shield fighting style, and can equip some of the best armor in the game. The sluggish barbarian is a powerhouse using gigantic two-handed swords and having plenty of combos. Last but not least, the dwarf is an unsinkable tank but his lack of combos and his short reach make him the hardest character to master.

Blade of Darkness is a third-person hack & slash with a very strict sense of timing and a high difficulty.



The lighting engine remains impressive to this day. Not bad for an independent Spanish studio.

In par with your health bar, your character possesses a power bar which depletes after each attack à la *Dark Souls*. The more powerful a weapon or combo is, the more energy it will consume. Coming from a very large bestiary (orcs, demons, tainted knights), enemies are restless and won't go down easily. To make things worse, they use the same tactical array as you: blocking, poisoned weapons and deadly combos.

Don't be fooled by the hack & slash nature of the game, cautiousness and tactical progression are the only way to progress through the game. Tackling more than two enemies, even weak ones, at the same time is always a perilous task. Fortunately, you get a few edges to fight the relentless hordes thrown at you. Weapons start pretty weak but new ones can be picked up along the way. Every class of weapon offers different combos, so it's always a good idea to keep a spare mace to crush skeletons for example. Few ranged weapons are present but only the amazon will find them useful, puzzles non-standing.

Severance employs a lock-on system, similar to *Ocarina of Time*. You can dodge and block attacks, but range and durability are always an issue, so be careful. A few types of armor are hidden through the levels making your character a bit harder to kill. A small inventory allows to stock a handful of health and power-up potions for the most difficult passages. The RPG aspect is limited to a leveling up system automatically boosting your life, power and unlocking new combos. Leveling up also refills your life-bar making it a god-send in the middle of a tense fight.

Blade of Darkness is divided into a dozen of levels, with a first level specific to each character. The level design is so-so, some levels being pretty labyrinthine while others are just a succession of arenas. Fortunately, the general aesthetic is much better and the

"I didn't want a combat system that required button mashing to defeat enemies, I wanted a system that could turn every fight into a test, that any enemy could be a challenge, where you couldn't advance without being cautious. I wanted feeling, not a simulation, something that could transmit a kind of adrenaline surge when you see an enemy approaching, instead of thinking: "I can kill it by pressing [a button] twice."

- José Luis Vaello,
Severance's Lead Artist



Combat will be familiar to *Dark Souls* fans, but *Severance* adds combos, breakable shields, mutilations and blood galore.

game will send you to very different and exotic places such as Arabic oasis, abandoned fortresses and deep wilderness. Doors, gates and various mechanisms will always bar your way so you will keep most of the game looking for keys. Traps of all sorts are present at every corner and levels are extremely long, so saving often is always a good idea.

Once the titular Blade of Darkness is acquired, you can either choose to proceed to the final boss's lair or backtrack to previous levels. Indeed the magic weapon is weakened and its power needs to be unlocked by using eight runes, hidden through the entire game. It's better to keep a lookout for those early on because revisited levels are filled with high-end monsters. Collecting those runes will unlock an additional level and the true final boss. He is pretty tough but at this point you should have seen worse.

Beyond its tough as nails difficulty, *Severance's* novelty at the time came from its use of lighting. Completely coded in Python, the game engine displays beautiful shadows and make a clever use of light sources. Some levels, like the knight's starting level, offer a gothic and dreary atmosphere propelled by torches and eerie sound design. Fire can also be used to inflame wooden structures and solve a few puzzles which is a pretty cool feature.

The funniest thing about *Severance* and one of its most marketed features is the omnipresent gore. After a few exchanges, your character and the enemy alike will be covered with wounds and the ground repainted with liters of blood. Fights end up by dismembering most of the loser's body parts with arms and heads flying everywhere. It's pretty satisfying and completely ridiculous at the same time.

Mixing old classic deathtraps like *Dungeon Master* with hack & slash mechanics, *Severance* was reconsidered these last years in light of the *Demons' / Dark Souls* series. While I doubt that there were any influence from either side, the parallel is interesting and made new players aware of *Severance's* existence. Harsh but fun, as it definitively should be. **TR**

Mods:

Severance has a fantastic community, that created various mods with new combos, levels, features and even added new game modes. Here are some highlights:

BOD Loader: This exceptional mod manager makes installing and playing mods a cakewalk.

Gladiator: A survival mode where you fight increasingly powerful enemies. Highly customizable and replayable, with various maps and a even a score. A must-play.

Fugitive: A huge multi-chapter campaign, has amazing level design and extra RPG elements, such as dialogs. *Fugitive III* is arguably the best *Severance* map ever.

Dwarf Wars: You must protect a heavily guarded fortress against hordes of enemies, in a endless massive battle.



The *Blade of Light* mod uses ENB to add some heavy post-processing. Pretty, but not for everyone.

If you have an interest in mods, be sure to check Arokh's Lair, where *Severance* modders and fans still gather: www.arokhslair.net/forum/

Geneforge



Spiderweb Software, 2001
Windows and Mac

The gorgeous illustrations of the game are done by artist Brian Snoddy, who did numerous works for RPG books and card games.

Geneforge, to me, is what an RPG game should be about. A nameless protagonist walks into the world, and chooses their destiny. Skills are built, alliances formed, enemies made. You can be the loyal ally, the backstabbing traitor, or simply slaughter everyone before you have a chance to decide. At the end you have what is a personal experience, something built by the choices you have made.

The first few steps in *Geneforge* did not immediately grab my attention. Being from a small studio, the game is built with budget graphics, and the combat model is relatively simplistic. What first started to pique my interest was a well crafted backstory. The main premise of the game is a world in which a ruling clan, the Shapers, uses magical (genetic?) techniques to build servants, and retain tight control over those powers with the premise that abuse would be deadly. This creates in essence a ruling class, with complete dominance over their sentient creations. The moral questions raised by this situation continues throughout the series, and to my satisfaction is never resolved in black and white fashion.

The combat, while simple, can play out very differently based on character build and skill choices. You can focus on combat skills, magic skills, or shaping skills. Shaping skills tend to be my favorite, as eventually your character ends up with a group of creatures that gain strength as they survive combat. Do you sacrifice the little guy, who has travelled with you from the beginning, in order to create the newest monster you discovered? Do you even care? While the game can get repetitive with padded encounters, there is a nice feel of the progression of power that I feel an RPG needs. As the game progresses, the battles will play out differently depending on your character build.

Shaping is what differentiates *Geneforge* from a typical fantasy setting; you are creating and toying with life, and as the series progresses, the story reveals a more technological approach to creating creatures. The “art” of shaping often blurs the line between sci-fi and fantasy, or magic and technology. Shaping could be easily dismissed as another word for summoning, but regardless of the terminology, *Geneforge* allows for more control of “shaped” creatures than other games do. Shaped creatures consume a certain amount of energy from your character, and an experienced creature can be a valuable companion. The balance between the energy used for maintaining old creatures, creating new ones, and maintaining a reserve for spellcasting can be more strategic than the actual battles.

This all sets the stage for a beautifully open ended style of game. Your character, arriving on an abandoned island, meets different populations of humans and Shaper creations that have radically different views on the world of the Shapers. The world is yours to explore, at times limited by game events or necessary items, but mostly limited by the prowess of your character and the allies you have made.

The writing in *Geneforge* is solid, and choices you’ll face never have obvious answers.



“The basic idea was that I wanted a game where you could make this horde of creatures to serve you, and care for them or let them get slaughtered according to your whim. I had to think of what sort of people could gain this power, and how they would treat it. And then I thought about how they would interact with the world around them, and, more importantly, how they would interact with the creatures they make. And that’s where the plot came from.”

- Jeff Vogel,
founder of Spiderweb Software



You can use Shaper magic to create creatures, in whatever way fits your playstyle best.

This, in my opinion, is where the game truly shines. Your choices, both in character build and NPC interaction, have tangible consequences in the game world. What is one player’s hometown is another’s enemy fortress. Do you consume power at all cost, or do you try to do what you think is right? All options are available, and power is yours for the taking if you are strong enough or cunning enough. The sense of power, as I mentioned earlier, is satisfying as your entourage of creatures grows, your magic gets more powerful, and your combat skills improve.

The choices continue to lead up to the ending of the game. There are several endings possible, and not just of the “last minute good or evil” type. Your choices throughout the game lead up to set of ending slides, which describe the impact of your choices. Again, the game does not disappoint; “good” choices do not always lead to the type of ending that you might think.

For me, the first game was just a starting point to a wonderful series. What creator Jeff Vogel has done with this series is create a coherent story of the Shapers that spans all five games. There are highs and lows along the way, but taken in total they provided me with a wonderful experience, and a fantastic story of a strange world. Throughout the series, the choices continued to provoke my thoughts about the morality involving the control of power, and whether ends of containing deadly power or ending unjust slavery justify whatever means necessary. By the end of the 5 game series, I had become attached to the world of the Shapers, and sad to see the journey end.

The *Geneforge* games, like both *Fallout* and *Arcanum*, impress me as games where not only does the player explore the world, but the player shapes the world. **BL**

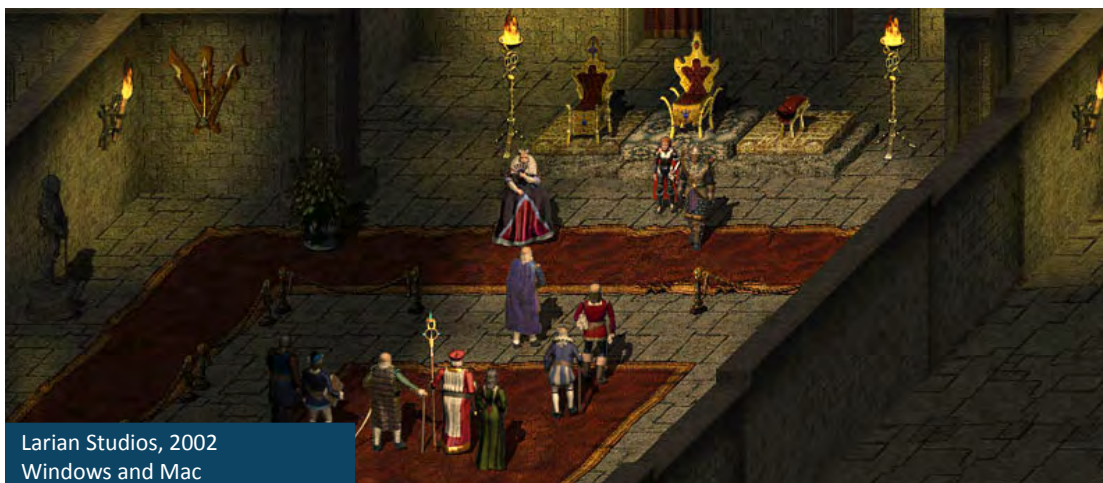


Sucia Island is massive, and exploration is node-based. You’ll have to search carefully to find hidden areas.



Combat is turn-based and somewhat simplistic, but the enemy AI can often surprise you.

Divine Divinity



Larian Studios' *Divine Divinity* has got a lot of undeserved reputation since its release. The problem is that it was released in 2002, a time when various *Diablo* clones were popping up left and right. Furthermore, if you looked at various screens or played it for half an hour or so, it really did seem to be just another *Diablo* clone, so the moniker's stuck even today. Even though *Divine Divinity* was so much more than that.

Sure, there are many elements of a generic hack'n'slash here. The UI, the randomised tons of phat loot, hordes of monsters and similar core mechanics are all something we've seen countless times already. However, these are only superficial, and *Divine Divinity*'s unique aspects only become apparent once you spend a few hours to find them. The easiest one to notice is the character system, which is much more RPG-y than your average H'n'S. Not only is it ultimately classless, since all characters can learn all skills as they see fit, but it also has quite a few non-combat qualities, such as pickpocketing, sneaking, haggling or alchemy. The game also tracks your reputation (in-

fluenced by various events), which changes merchant prices and people's personal opinion of you, which may in turn lock or unlock new quests.

But the most important difference that makes *Divine Divinity* an actual RPG and not just a slasher is the lack of procedural generation. All quests, maps, events and conversations are hand-placed, the only random element is loot. This is especially great when it comes to exploration because the land map is simply huge, while the dungeons and caves provide you with plenty of puzzles and secrets. Puzzles and secrets that employ *Divine Divinity*'s most unique feature – the *Ultima VII*-inspired environmental interaction. Literally every prop can be tossed around to reveal hidden chests and passages underneath, and various items can be activated to secret effects, which rewards thoroughness and perceptiveness. Sometimes this juggling can lead to rather interesting discoveries, often bordering on bug-exploitation, such as finding a bed that can be put in your backpack because it weighs nothing. But running aimlessly around the map simply looking for opportunities is also rewarding for more technical reasons – *Divine Divinity*'s graphics are really pleasant to look at, and its soundtrack is simply amazing.

It is also important to note that *Divine Divinity* very often focuses not only on combat, and some chapters will have you not draw your weapon for quite long periods of time. Instead, you'll be running around towns just talking to folks, doing various quests, robbing them blind and chasing secrets, and there are a variety of settlements in the game, all with different themes and problems to solve. These "pacifist" chapters are made even better by Larian's now-trademark witty writing. Everything is not just generally well-written, but the dialogues are often

Larian's first RPG was an called *The Lady, the Mage & the Knight*, developed in partnership with Attic Entertainment. It was canceled in 1999 and salvaged into *Divine Divinity*. An early demo and design documents were released as extras on the *Divinity Anthology*.

Combat is indeed very similar to *Diablo*, but you can pause at any time.



"The thing is: you always know where you start, but to be honest, you never know where you are going to end. So the best approach that I learned is that you try to have fun as you make it, and then hopefully that fun is going to brush off on the player and he's going to have fun as well. And you do your best. What more can you do?"

- Swen Vincke,
Larian's founder and CEO



The writing is always amusing, and have grown to become one of Larian's trademarks.

genuinely funny, employing various tongue-in-cheek methods, poking fun at the fantasy genre in general, and sometimes even going into self-parody. This also makes all the otherwise generic fetch quests much more interesting and fun to do because you can always expect some sort of a little twist to the tired old formula.

Unfortunately, it would simply be unfair to not mention *Divine Divinity's* biggest flaw, which is the endgame. Apparently, the game was much bigger and more ambitious than the developer and the publisher could chew, which resulted in the final chapter being terribly rushed. Most of the qualities that make *Divinity* unique simply disappear in the last chapter, leaving you with fully railroaded, non-stop mindless fighting against annoying, health-bloated mobs of enemies. Although at least you can just go ahead and run all the way through, ignoring all opposition completely.

Ultimately, if you really dislike hack'n'slash com-

bat, *Divinity* might also be not up your alley because there's no denying that it has a lot of combat in many places. I did like, however, how at times it can even get pretty challenging, and how the game's systems leave you a lot of room for personal customisation and ways to shamelessly break them to your advantage.

What is left to conclude, then? *Divine Divinity* is simply a neat game. Not flawless by any means, but ridiculously absorbing and long enough to entertain you for weeks – it's one of those games that make you think, "a combination of fetch quests and generic fighting has no right to be this damn addicting!". It was also the start of the whole *Divinity* series, which included some better (*Divinity 2*) and worse (*Beyond Divinity*) titles that are also worth more than a casual look. Because casual looks are deceiving and make you think *Divine Divinity* is a *Diablo* clone. Which it isn't. Get that into your head once and for all. **DR**



All the music in the *Divinity* series is done by Kirill Pokrovsky, a Russian musician, whose mix of orchestrations and new age electronics make the soundtracks an intrinsic part of the franchise.



You select a class at first, but you can learn any skill and use any equipment if you meet the requirements.



Being able to move and carry around almost every item in the game is pure fun. Here I stole the Duke's throne.

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind



Bethesda Softworks, 2002
Windows and Xbox

My first trip to Vivec City was an unforgettable hour of confusion and awe. *The Elder Scrolls'* cavalier attention to detail, both large and small, reached an apex there.

Vivec is like a cramped cyberpunk cityscape, but it's presented inside the brown sandstone of medieval fantasy. Eight floating stone pyramids comprise the city's eight districts, with a network of gondolas and bridges connecting them to each other and the mainland. Each district has four explorable interior levels each, containing innumerable businesses and residences that house hundreds of named NPCs.

They all have their own inventories, their own dispositions, jobs, haunts and hangs that combine to give each NPC their own personal little story. The fictional economy that supports these fictional lives is on full display--their houses, their businesses, the farms that grow their food and the sewers that funnel away their waste are not spared for detail. Administrative businesses, libraries, treasures and offices take up space next to the rowdy taverns and ghastly magic shops.

Vvardenfell, the massive island you explore in *Morrowind*, is one of the few sandbox maps that feels like it was built without any intention to turn it into game, as if it was designed and mapped to serve the lore more than playability. As far as the player's lofty quests are concerned, all those administrative details behind Vivec City's economy aren't relevant. You can learn all about the process of how the nearby Netch farms churn out Netch leather which turns into Netch armor, and it's only flavor text. There are almost two hundred different books to read (well, not really books so much as they are a few paragraphs, but still) that document everything from the world's history to directories of the council members that currently lead its political parties.

All this detail doesn't really make or break the game, mechanically speaking. It's just there. It's flavor text the player can skip. But what this massive amount of detail does do well (and indeed, its very purpose to the game) is to reify Vvardenfell as a world that is almost as complicated, ancient and dynamic as our own.

Look at how the game handles transportation for an example. Instead of pointing and clicking on a map screen to fast-travel (like in the *TES* games before and after *Morrowind*) you use Vvardenfell's public transit system instead. The people of this island use animal mounts, ferry boats, and magic teleporter booths to travel around. So during the early game you use those facilities too.

Critics during the game's launch rightfully bemoaned *Morrowind's* slow walking speed and constricting fast travel system, but those caveats serve as buildup for a divine payoff later on. They build anticipation for a revelatory moment that the player may not experience for tens or perhaps hundreds of hours later. Until then, *Morrowind* is a slow burning game.



The interface is the last in the series made with PCs in mind, making great use of tooltips and multiple resizeable windows.

Mods:

Bethesda released *The Elder Scrolls Construction Set* with *Morrowind*, allowing for many mods to be created. A good start is *Morrowind Overhaul* 3.0, a compilation of hundreds of mods, in an easy to use installation pack, vastly improving the game and graphics, while keeping the unique atmosphere of *Morrowind* intact:



Grab it here: www.ornitocopter.net/morrowind-overhaul/



Morrowind's dialog is very complex, being affected by both faction and personal reputation, and featuring a robust keyword system.

Transportation starts off slow. Combat starts off incredibly awkwardly. Since the world seems like it was designed before the gameplay was designed, it doesn't lead you through roads and villages that are cleanly organized to funnel you in the right direction. The names are hard to pronounce, there are no omnipotent objectives prodding you this way or that way, and wherever you end up there will be just way too much stuff there.

What gives you guidance is your own sense of adventure and a brilliantly self-aware main quest that tasks you with becoming the omnipotent God-king of Vvardenfell. Eventually some overpowering stat progression happens after level 10 that makes combat and walking much more fast, and during that time your understanding of Vvardenfell will also increase immensely. You will come to learn the hard-to-pronounce names of its numerous towns and locations.

You'll get to know its tribes, its council members, its politics and its religions because the main quest tasks you with meeting and manipulating every last one of them.

Soon you'll be able to teleport across the map, fly from city to city, and sprint with blinding speed! You'll forget about the public transit system because, just as all the flavor text of the main quest suggested you'd do, you'll become a godlike warrior-poet who knows this island inside and out whether you were trying to pay attention or not.

The most brilliant twist *Morrowind* takes is that you'll actually have a mental frame of reference to know how great your progression feels. It's not about increasing numbers on a stat sheet. It's about thoroughly understanding a large, intimidating and alien world that is almost as complicated as our own. **GW**

OpenMW is a project seeking to recreate *Morrowind* in a new open engine, allowing for greater modability, improving all aspects of the game and a Mac version. You can follow them here: www.openmw.org



Morrowind adds the option to switch to a third person camera, although the animations are quite simple.



The landscape of Vvardenfell is exotic and fascinating, going far beyond traditional fantasy clichés.

Prince of Qin



Object Software, 2002
Windows

Prince of Qin is a fascinating game, with aspects both familiar and alien to a western gamer. It seems to have been influenced by the *Baldur's Gate* series and *Divine Divinity*. Like *Baldur's Gate*, it is a real-time with pause, isometric CRPG in which you form a party of adventurers from a number of NPCs you meet along the way. Like *Divine Divinity*, you can learn special abilities through skill trees in order to later perform them in combat via an expendable mana pool. Also like *Divine Divinity*, it's commonly mistaken for just another *Diablo* clone.

Despite these influences, *Prince of Qin* runs in a completely unique direction, using a magic and combat system based upon five elements (Fire, Water, Wood, Metal and Earth). In this five element system, some elements are stronger or weaker against the others, similar to rock-paper-scissors or *Pokémon*. Each character in your party, and the enemies they fight, have an element associated with them, and so you have to keep this in mind in larger fights and set characters against opponents whose element they have an advantage over.

Exploration is interesting since the enemies are fairly diverse up through the middle of the game, and many of the sidequests are long and related to the game's historical lore. One aspect I found satisfying is that you can fail a quest if you do not make the correct decisions – it may frustrate some players, but it's a gutsy move by the game designers to force player to think about the consequences of their actions.

A poorer game design decision was the inclusion of respawning enemies in certain locations. I suppose they added those so that players could grind for experience if they so desired, but the creatures respawn so quickly that you party might get overwhelmed.

The story itself is a revealing microcosm of ancient and modern Chinese culture. You play a prince called Fu Su, a historical figure from one of the many chaotic revolutionary periods of ancient China. The actual Fu Su died through nefarious political maneuvers, but the story twists events slightly to enable him to survive and act against his conspirators.

The game is still somewhat of an educational experience as the plot progresses based on true historical figures and events, full of tragedy, hope, betrayals, and regrets. At the same time, the reform-minded Fu Su is sometimes made to be a sounding board of the writers, criticizing the plight of peasants and abuses of the ancient mercantile system with a voice that resonates more with modern liberal sentiment.

The character class system follows the same sort of strange, but familiar behavior as the rest of the game. Fu Su is a paladin in-game, but that does not equate to the typical Poul Anderson sort of paladin of *Three Hearts and Three Lions* fame that *D&D* ultimately adapted. Instead, a paladin in *Prince of Qin* is a warrior with artisan skills, allowing Fu Su to craft special equipment through the game.



The crafting system is very unique. There are only 5 types of ingredients, but each type features a wide variety of items and abilities.



The story offers a glimpse into Chinese culture, but the translation is wonky and the voice acting is quite bad.



It's important to carefully consider the elements of each character and enemy, as they'll heavily impact battles.

The game features an excellent crafting system in which Fu Su can produce magical-infused weapons and equipment, often quite a bit more powerful than many special items you find during the course of the adventure. The decisions you make during the course of the adventure will also create some variation as the cast of NPCs available will be affected by your choices. Due to the diverse cast of NPCs available, and the randomness of dropped loot and created artifacts, the final composition of the party is going to vary incredibly from game to game.

There are four more character classes, such as the well-named Muscleman, who specializes in melee combat and the summoning of creatures to help fight in battle. The Assassin character class is a helpful ranged combatant with trap springing skills, and the Wizard is your elemental-based spell slinger, firing artillery blasts from the back of the party formation, but in a twist he can also heal damage and status effects. Finally, there is the Witch who can also fire magical blasts from afar, but also has the capability of buffing your companions in battle.



Classes have a linear progression, but there's a bit of wiggle room to customize your attributes and skills.



In *Seal of Evil*, the prequel, you play as Lan Wei, who must find who killed her father and stop an impending war.

Although you are limited to five characters, you are not forced to have each character class represented in the party, and so you could have two Paladins, two Wizards and a Witch if you really wanted to roll that way. Without a Wizard, you have no healing magic and must really on different types of food to replenish health. Without an Assassin of appropriate skill, you will not be able to open every chest and find some of the uniquely powerful in game items.

Prince of Qin also came with a multiplayer mode, where you could play a separate (and simpler) campaign, which could support up to 500 players playing in a MMO-like fashion. Its success, mainly in China, led to the release of the online-only standalone expansion *Prince of Qin Online - The Overlord of Conquerors* (2003) – later renamed *World of Qin*.

Object Software would still a great single-player prequel called *Seal of Evil* (2004), with more magical elements and a story showcasing events that led to the creation of the Qin Empire, and *World of Qin 2* (2005), a full-fledged MMO. **DT**

Arcanum: Of Steamworks & Magick Obscura



Troika, 2003
Windows

A sequel to *Arcanum* was planned, titled *Journey to the Centre of Arcanum*. Inspired by Jules Verne's novel, it was to be created in Valve's Source Engine but Troika failed to secure the necessary funding.

Arcanum, in my opinion, offers the most complete role-playing experience of any CRPG ever created. The breadth and depth of mechanics and content ensure that one playthrough just won't be enough. Two or three won't cut it either. The diversity of character options is immense, not just at character creation, but through gameplay and dialogue choices throughout the huge open world of *Arcanum*.

Creating a character in *Arcanum* is a very involved experience. The system is classless, so you won't pick a class, but there are no less than 8 races and over 50 backgrounds to choose from, allowing you to tailor your character to very specific tastes and also getting the player into the role-playing spirit. The effects of backgrounds range from the minor to the extreme. If you just want to tinker a little or add some flavor to your character, you could be an apprentice to a shopkeeper or a halfling orphan for some minor bonuses and penalties. But if you want to go all in, you could be a supermodel, or an idiot savant or even a Frankenstein monster with huge bonuses and penalties across multiple stats and skills.

When you're finished creating your avatar, the opening cinematic plays. You are aboard the IFS Zephyr, a zeppelin on its maiden voyage from Caladon to Tarant, when it is attacked and shot down by two 'strange flying machines' (i.e. planes) piloted by Orcs. At the crash site you talk to a dying gnome who gives you a silver ring and tells you to 'Find the boy.' You are then engaged by a fellow named Virgil, a recent convert to the Panarii religion, who claims you are the reincarnation of the ancient god Nasrudin. Virgil offers to accompany you to the nearby town of Shrouded Hills to meet his superior, and your journey through the world of *Arcanum* begins.

Arcanum boasts a huge number of quests with several ways to resolve them, usually using the trio of solutions established by *Fallout* – combat, stealth and diplomacy. The complex character system adds a lot of depth here, as a beautiful elf in an elegant dress will have an easier time getting a murderer to confess, but an ugly mage can still try a charm spell, or even use necromancy to get a testimony from his victims.

The world is massive and very open, with few gates to pass through. There are many optional locations scattered across the map to stumble upon, from altars of old and forgotten gods to ancient dungeons, hidden villages and a few easter eggs.

A lot of smaller touches really add to the charm of *Arcanum*. For example, every skill in the game has an associated master. You'll have to find them and often do a special quest for them if you wish to be trained. You will also see your own actions, or the consequences of them, as headlines of the Tarantian, the most popular newspaper in *Arcanum*. You'll read and hear various rumors as well, that serve both as leads into obscure side-quests and as subtle hints about future areas and the game's antagonist.

Combat is the weakest part of *Arcanum*. It can be fought in real-time or turn-based mode, using action points, but neither really works well.



- Tim Cain,
Arcanum's Project Leader
and Lead Programmer



Arcanum's world feels alive and believable, with issues being born out of political, economical, ideological and racial conflicts, not of "good versus evil".

The scope and scale of *Arcanum* is astounding, and so it's hardly surprising that it shipped somewhat unfinished and quite buggy. Combat suffered the most of any element because of Sierra's demands that a real-time mode be implemented alongside the intended turn-based mode. As result, combat is quite unsatisfactory and unbalanced, becoming a chore during some of the larger, combat-filled dungeons.

Arcanum's greatest achievement is giving the player a real sense of agency. It is perhaps gaming's greatest strength but so few games, let alone RPGs, deliver on it. There is conflict everywhere and you have the power not only to solve these conflicts, but to prey upon them or exacerbate them according to your desires and skills.

More than any other title before or since, *Arca-num* showed us what CRPGs could be. Although it did not achieve all that it set out to achieve, the vision and ambition of Troika's debut is remarkable. **JM**

Terra-Arcanum is a fan site dedicated to *Arcanum*, where you'll find all mods released for the game, including the Unnofficial Fan Patch and the Widescreen Mod.



The character system is extensive, with various attributes, skills, schools of magic and technological disciplines.



You'll find a wild range of items, from ancient magical swords to electrical top hats – all beautifully rendered.

Fable: The Lost Chapters



Lionhead Studios, 2004*
Windows, Mac and Xbox

**Fable* was first released in 2004 for the Xbox. The PC port came in 2005, now called *Fable: The Lost Chapters* and featuring extra content.

Talking about *Fable*, unfortunately, is impossible without talking about its creator, the famous Peter Molyneux, and his ludicrous promises. *Fable* was hyped to the high heavens as an innovative RPG, an extensive simulated world where the years would pass, your character would age, form a family, the sons of murdered enemies would swear revenge and, famously, you would even be able to plant an acorn and see it grow into a tree in real time.

Unsurprisingly, the game didn't deliver all it promised, and more than a decade later that still taints any debate about the title. Which is a shame, since *Fable* is an excellent – if limited – game.

Designed for the original Xbox, *Fable's* isn't aimed at hardcore RPG veterans. Molyneux set out to create an RPG for all audiences, taking elements from *The Legend of Zelda*, *Knights of the Old Republic* and even from *The Sims*. The result is a streamlined action-RPG, where players will make binary moral choices and endure the consequences, while traveling across a simulated fantasy world that, while not as revolutionary as promised, is still quite reactive.

You begin as a child, just as your village is raided and your family murdered. Rescued by a wizard, you are accepted at the Heroes' Guild, where you'll learn melee combat, archery and magic. These are tied to three stats – Strength, Skill and Will, respectively – which are the core of *Fable's* character system.

Every enemy you kill or quest you complete yields XP, but you'll also gain extra points for how you act. Using magic yields Will Experience, which can only be used to improve Will-related skills. Thus, by casting spells you'll learn new ones and become a better mage, and the game will reflect that visually.

You'll exit the guild as a weak, skinny teenager, but your appearance will change as you play. You'll grow larger as you raise your Strength, taller as you raise your Skill and if you focus on Will arcane signs will appear over your body and begin to glow. Even more, you can grow fat by eating too much food, gain scars as you get injured, get a tattoo, cut your hair & beard, and even grow horns if you become too evil.

These details are where *Fable* excels. The game's simulation is in fact a collection of countless small systems, that while shallow and unimpressive on their own, bundled together create an immersive illusion. For example, you can marry almost any NPC in the game, by flirting with them, taking them to a house you purchased and gifting a wedding ring. You can even get divorced afterwards, and other NPCs in the street will comment on how unfortunate that is.

It all sounds very impressive, but looking closely you'll see the obvious limitations of the system. You can only interact with NPCs by choosing a limited set of expressions, such as "Flirt" or "Sexy Hero Pose", getting married serves no purpose, buying houses is almost useless and NPCs have just one or two lines to say for every important action you perform.

Misbehaving inside towns will result in fines, and the guards will try to make you pay. But you can ignore that, murder everyone and buy their now-vacant houses and shops.



"[...] we keep making games for these two separate audiences. We make them for the core gamers here, the casual gamers here, and there's a big great wall between them. If you develop games for casual gamers you're just frowned on a bit. And maybe part of *Fable* is about this – look, can't we create a game that both of these people can play and enjoy? Okay, you've got to give the core gamers all the carrots they love, and casual gamers the accessibility that they want. And that's what we tried to do with *Fable*."

- Peter Molyneux,
Fable's Creator



Interactions are limited to a few expressions and poses. NPCs will mostly cheer and admire a good hero or flee in terror from a dark hero.

While limited, *Fable* knows how to use its world. It's quite gratifying to come back from a quest and be cheered and applauded as you walk into a tavern, with NPCs commenting on how you acted. The excellent soundtrack and the colorful art style adds a lot to this, giving a light-hearted tone the game. The PC version fully supports HD resolutions and still looks great.

What haven't aged well are the small and linear areas. Instead of offering in a huge open world, *Fable* is divided into small interconnected areas, separated by a loading screen. Another flaw is the save system, which doesn't record your progress mid-quest.

Fable also offers very few weapons and armors to play with, and is quite easy and unbalanced. While that will frustrate players looking for a challenge, the game tries to compensate by offering plenty of secret treasures to find and a clever "boast system", allowing confident heroes to add extra challenges to quests, such as completing them without using weapons.



Boasts allow you to wager being such an epic hero you can complete a quest with extra handicaps or objectives.

After *Fable's* release, Peter Molyneux apologized for over-promising and claimed it happened because he was too excited with the project. The concept is indeed exciting, and even with many parts of it being underdeveloped – especially the stealth system and the consequences to some of your decisions – it's still an unique, and often exciting, game to play.

While you won't get the extensive role-playing options of something like *Arcanum* or *Fallout*, *Fable* offers an accessible, visually charming and instantly gratifying RPG experience. It's a great introduction to the genre, while also offering a few secrets and optional challenges for experienced players. **FE**

Fable has a very small mod community, but it made some nice new items and rebalance mods. You can find them at www.fabletlc-mod.com

Fable: Anniversary Edition:

In 2014 Lionhead Studios released a remake of *Fable*, called *Fable: Anniversary Edition*. It features a new difficulty mode, better save system, updated graphics and mod support. Unfortunately, the PC port is a mess, with a confusing interface that has no mouse support, longer loading times and an exaggerated amount of post-processing. Unless you intend to play with a controller or mod it, stick to the original game.



The remake adds heavy post-processing and a subdued palette, which clash with the original's colorful art style.

Space Rangers 2: Dominators



Elemental Games, 2004
Windows

The European and North American retail versions of *Space Rangers 2* came with a expansion pack called *Reboot*, plus the original *Space Rangers* game.

Space Rangers 2: Dominators is a space exploration RPG set in a fictional universe where several alien races are fighting for their survival against three factions of a robotic species intent on ruling over all organic life.

It is not as if the alien races are providing a united front, however, as often each race runs its own defined territory, and each planet inside these territories have their own focus on industry and system of government. Because the many planets in the game are so diverse, the prices of their goods and commodities also range greatly from planet to planet, resulting in a significant amount of trade in legal and illegal materials despite ongoing interstellar war. Piracy is also a factor, and it is not rare to see one trade ship with decent guns and shields target a richer, but less armed trade ship.

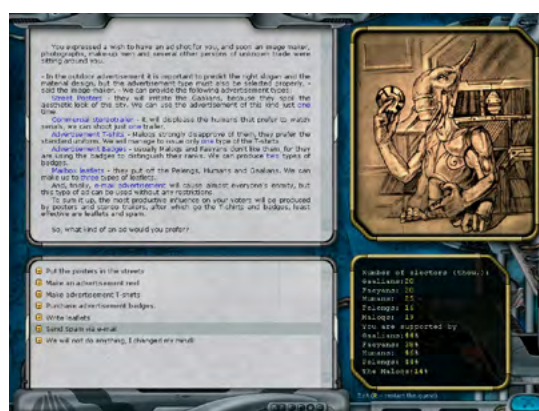
Due to all of this chaos, the aliens races create a loose confederation in order to deal with both the Dominators and growing crime, and the most important solution is the creation of an interstellar police

force known as the Space Rangers. This is where the player comes in, creating a character who is a trainee seeking graduation into the ranks of the interstellar police force. After some tutorial missions, the player is set loose into the open universe in order to do... well, whatever it is the player feels like doing really.

As hinted at before, the universe in *Space Rangers 2* is quite open-ended and the player will want to earn funds in order to beef up his space ship or to purchase a new and better vessel. To do this, the character can take missions to hunt pirates or protect convoys. Alternately, he or she can decide to be a miner of asteroids, a trader of commodities from planet to planet, or to engage in a little of that piracy action. Since there are so many various factions in the game and ways to interact with them, the player will find his popularity changing through his decisions. For instance, if the player saves a member of a certain faction from a pirate attack, then the aided faction will trust the player more while pirates will see him more of a threat and may start attacking him on sight.



When fighting the RTS battles on planets, you can make your own custom troops and even directly control them.



You'll face amusing choose-your-own-adventure mini-games, such as escaping prison or running an election.

“One of the things we really enjoy about it is the variety; it really pulls something from just about every genre out there and rolls it up into one really great game. It’s not just about turn-based space combat, or RTS robot battles. It is an RPG with you customizing your character’s abilities to create just the character you want, it’s an adventure game where you explore an immense living & breathing universe, it’s a game that’s packed with hidden details and things to discover!”

- David Mercer,
Space Rangers 2 Producer



Space exploration and combat are turn-based, and you can contact allies and enemies at any time to trade, make requests or join forces.

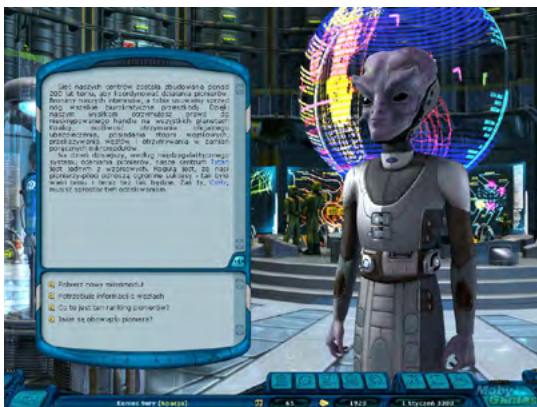
There are also important mini-games inside the main space game. There are ground combat missions that can be taken which hearken back to the real time strategy games like *Command and Conquer*, complete with vehicular combat, tower defense and resource gathering. For those that enjoy choose-your-own-adventures, *Space Rangers 2* have several text-based scenarios available such as managing a ski resort, underwater exploration and trying to escape from a prison. You truly get the feeling that the Russian developers who made this game were themselves gamers who truly loved games that were popular when they were in school.

There is a sandbox charm to *Space Rangers 2*, as the Dominator threat will never completely take over the galaxy. Territorial gains will ebb and flow between the coalition forces and the Dominators, but each side will eventually overextend themselves and be pushed back before making a final conquest. Therefore, the

player can explore, improve stats, and acquire wealth at his or her own pace. *Space Rangers 2* is a unique experience, full of charm, danger and a sprinkle of zaniness. **DT**

HD Version:

In October 2013 a new version of the game was released on Steam as *Space Rangers HD: A War Apart*. It supports modern computers, wide-screen resolutions and adds a lot of new content, such as new text adventures, quests, equipments, planetary battles and a new sub-plot regarding a pirate threat to the galaxy.



There are five races and five classes to play, and each combination has different ships and relationships.



There are various ships, an arsenal of equipments, skills, personal traits and even trophies to pursue.

Vampire: The Masquerade Bloodlines



Troika Games, 2004
Windows

Bloodlines features nine licensed music tracks, from artists such as Lacuna Coil, Tiamat and Genitorturers. However, these were all chosen by the publisher, with no input from Troika.

Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines was the third and final RPG from Troika Games, the company founded by the *Fallout* veterans Leonard Boyarsky, Tim Cain and Jason Anderson. The game was created using an early build of Valve's *Source* engine, was rushed out by Activision and suffered heavily from being released in the same day as *Half-Life 2*, resulting in numerous bugs and weak sales. However, over time it became a cult classic. What's so great about *VtM:Bloodlines*? A lot of things, ranging from the overall storyline to minor details.

The game manages to do the impossible, merging classic RPG gameplay with modern FPS visuals. You experience the game as one of seven different vampire clans, who have different vampiric powers, and you can play *Bloodlines* like a shooter, a stealth game, a hack'n'slash or for a good part even as an adventure game, solving many situations without force, but by lock-picking, hacking, persuading, intimidating or seducing people. Besides these various options, the game world itself manages to bridge two other extremes: you get large playable hubs that open up

in the progression of the storyline and offer dozens of unique side and main quests, but the quests themselves are more linear in style and convey plot and atmosphere better than any sandbox game could do.

Still, there are often multiple approaches possible in a quest depending on your character, and other characters will react accordingly to your behavior, coming alive due to the great facial animations of the *Source* engine, some of the best voice-overs in gaming history and the witty writing of Brian Mitsoda. He created many very memorable characters and funny dialogs for *Bloodlines*, especially for the mad Malkavian clan, that has entirely different dialog options. Imagine talking to a TV set or to a STOP sign! Imagine a thin blood making references to the whole story that you can only understand once you finished it!

There are other great moments in the game where a character revelation may surprise you with a deepness unusual for a computer game and some of the different endings may make you laugh out loud, showing at the same time that everything in the plot made sense right from the start, but probably not exactly as you suspected.

The beautiful handcrafted levels push the alpha version of the *Source* engine to its limits and enable you to visit the greater area of Los Angeles; the windy beaches of Santa Monica, the busy skyscrapers downtown, the fancy streets in Hollywood and even the far-eastern charm of Chinatown, with excursions to several external locations like strange mansions or dark caverns thrown into the mix as well. Your adventures will vary from straightforward fights against humans, vampires or other supernatural creatures to solving the mystery of a haunted hotel without any combat, a level that is regarded as one of the spookiest locations in gaming ever!

Bloodlines is quite faithful to the tabletop version, including the obligation to respect the Masquerade.



"I like the characters to come off like people actually do – they don't say "hi" when strangers come knocking, they say "who the hell are you?" or they're expecting you and know more than they let on, or they don't care. I don't like my NPCs to be standing around as if their lives begin when the character starts talking to them and end when the player leaves. Characters are the protagonists of their own game, from their perspective.

- Brian Mitsoda,
VtM:Bloodlines' writer



Not only there are various dialog skills such as Intimidate and Seduction, but all dialogs are completely different and twisted when playing as a Malkavian.

Combine this with the powerful music of Rik Schaffer and the mature handling of adult themes and you get an atmospheric dark RPG that fits the *World of Darkness* setting perfectly!

Also impressive are the lengths the game goes to honor the source material. Besides the aforementioned Malkavians and their unique dialogs there's the Nosferatu, hideous vampires that must avoid being seen at all costs and cannot dialog with NPCs normally, forcing you to make clever use of stealth.

Although Troika closed its doors after releasing only two official patches, the community stepped in and an Unofficial Patch appeared that fixed most of the open issues and restored a lot of unfinished or cut content most of which was still hidden in the game files. The patch is still being updated ten years after the rushed release of the game and with it *Bloodlines* finally becomes the last masterpiece of Troika it deserves to be! **WS**

Mods & Patches:

Unofficial Patch: The basic patch fixes countless bugs, and the optional plus patch restore a lot of cut content, including dialogs, quests and even maps. Mandatory for anyone trying to play the game.

VtM: The Final Nights: A fan-made expansion pack that adds 7 new clans, new disciplines, NPCs, items, quests, a haggle system and other surprises.

Clan Quest Mod: Adds a series of quests to the game, including one quest specific to each clan.

VTMB: Camarilla Edition: Overhauls how Disciplines work and other interesting changes such as making you constantly need to drink blood to avoid starving.

Arsenal mod: Adds 30 new weapons to the game, including swords, grenades and several rifles.

Companion Mod: Allows you recruit NPCs and even embrace select human companions later in the game.

Project Vaulderie is an attempt to port *Bloodlines* over to the *Unity Engine*, allowing for Mac & Linux versions, facilitate the creation of mods and add various new features and graphical improvements. Follow them at www.projectvaulderie.com



Melee combat is done in third-person mode, but the game switches to first-person when you equip guns.



The game offers various amusing side quests, most of them with various different approaches and solutions.

Dungeon Crawl: Stone Soup



A huge part of the roguelike games' appeal is their mystery: random generation means that no two games will be the same and makes memorization infeasible while the permanent death of player characters discourages careless trial and error.

As a result, the player is expected to learn the game's rules and adapt to different situations by both in-game preparation (leveling up, collecting items) and the knowledge of different strategies for dealing with the inevitable appearance of something he can't face head-on. Failure to do so means their character is lost forever, with no option but to start again.

The trade off here is that the larger games in this genre take an unimaginably large amount of failed attempts to figure out. In fact, this can be such a big time investment that learning games like *Nethack* or *ADOM* by yourself is simply not expected and the number of people who were able to finish them without reading spoilers, watching other people play or just asking more experienced players for advice is very, very low.

One of the main design principles of *Dungeon Crawl: Stone Soup* is to avoid this while still keeping the game random, complex and difficult. To achieve this, the developers made *Crawl* almost completely free of instant deaths or difficult puzzles.

On the other hand, they're actively fighting against any sort of grinding and disproportionately powerful tactics – even going as far as to remove the ability of selling items in shops. In addition to trying to make their game fall into the 'hard but fair' category, *Crawl* developers are also making their game as user-friendly as possible by including graphical tiles and full mouse support (old-fashioned fans can still opt to play the game in ASCII mode. There's even an automatic exploration mode supposed to reduce the tedium of uncovering everything on the map).

Crawl is generally considered to fall into the 'hack-like' tradition of roguelike games (inspired by *NetHack*: persistent levels with special rooms, multiple dungeon branches, focus on preparation rather than leveling etc.) although it features large, scrolling levels reminiscent of *Moria* or *Angband* and its complexity is not in the interactions between items but in countless possible character builds: there's a large variety of races to choose from – 26 to be precise – and while the standard ones differ mostly in stats, the more outlandish ones play completely differently, such as Ghouls who must devour corpses to avoid rotting or Formicid, humanoid ants that can dig through walls. There's even a race of sentient housecats that can't use weapons and armor but get additional lives after leveling up.

There's also a choice of class, although that affects only starting skills and equipment – different skills can be learned by using them and what started out as a warrior might end up being a mage.

*The original *Crawl* was released in 1995, but the *Stone Soup* development branch began only in 2006.

How many games allow you to play as a stealthy octopus assassin? Far from a mere gimmick, each of the many exotic races offers an unique playstyle.



“My favourite gameplay mechanic is roguelike perma-death: a character who took hours to build up can be destroyed forever by a few poor decisions and a single turn of bad luck. When you can’t just reload a save from two minutes ago again and again until you get past any obstacle, decisions become meaningful and the game stops being a quasi-interactive movie and becomes a game again.”

- Linley Henzell,
Crawl's original developer



Crawl shines on its attention to details, such as how using cutting weapons on a hydra will spawn more heads, giving it more attacks per turn.

Religion plays a very important role in *Crawl* as your character can worship many different gods, each providing him different benefits while at the same time requiring to follow a specific code of conduct – those range from simple, like Elyvilon wanting you to destroy weapons and avoiding evil magic, to strange, like Ashenzari wanting you to wear cursed equipment. Some of the gifts given by those gods can be interesting too: followers of Dithmenos are surrounded by darkness, high level Jiyva worshippers receive random mutations and those crazy enough to become Xom's playthings will turn *Crawl* into unpredictable, unfair and extremely difficult game.

The game begun its life back in 1995 as *Linley's Dungeon Crawl* when it was still being developed by a single programmer, Linley Henzell. The 'stone soup' version was supposed to be a temporary fork when

the dev team went on a hiatus but after some time it was clear that the project was abandoned and *DCSS* became the official version of *Crawl*.

Like many roguelikes, *Crawl* is light on the plot – you search for Runes which will allow you to enter the realm of Zot to retrieve a mysterious Orb. It's not the most fascinating premise, although religion-related flavor text and some of the dungeon branches help to flesh out the world a little bit. Still, it's just a minor complaint about an otherwise excellent and well-designed game.

While *Dungeon Crawl: Stone Soup* might not be my favourite roguelike, it's a great introduction to the genre before trying to get into titles like *NetHack* and probably the best choice for those who find typical roguelikes antiquated or too cryptic. **MM**



Playing in ASCII mode is also possible. Here we abandoned Trog, the God of Violence, in favor of Nemelex Xobeh, the Trickster God. A terrible punishment for this betrayal awaits us.

Titan Quest



Iron Lore Entertainment, 2006
Windows

Iron Lore closed down after releasing *Titan Quest*. Some of the developers then went on to create Crate Entertainment, responsible for *Grim Dawn*.

Titan Quest is a *Diablo*-esque action-RPG with a mythological setting. The story is simple: Greece is being invaded by hordes of monsters and it's up to the player to find out why and stop it. The journey will lead players through ancient Greece, Egypt, across the Silk Road and finally China in original game, and deep into Hades in the *Immortal Throne* expansion. In each of the acts players will visit several historical cities and some famous mythological locations. Enemies are mostly inspired by Greek and Egyptian mythology, with Taoist and pre-historic mythos as minor spices.

The world in *Titan Quest* is very linear, but that is unsurprising considering its *Diablo* heritage. Still, there are more towns than in similar games, and its people aren't mute – they will often tell you about local events or myths. On the other hand, the dungeons consist of simple interconnected square rooms without bosses or guaranteed rare loot to make them interesting, and they also lack any atmosphere or back-story, with the exception of few dungeons in the main

quest line. Side quests are generic; there is little story behind them, and they all involve killing a boss and/or bring back a quest item.

Titan Quest has 9 classes (8 originally and 1 added with expansion). There is no character creation, instead the player gets to pick a class at level 2, and then chose a second class at level 8. The skill trees in particular are very well designed, allowing for great variety of builds and gameplay options with each class. To me, it was at the time the best class/skill system in any action-RPG. The game mechanics are also done really well; the character is very responsive and most attacks and skills can be dodged with fast reflexes and enough speed increase stat.

Unfortunately, since the game is easy, neither are really required, nor is a proper character build. Looting, alongside writing, is the weakest point of the game. Unique items drop too rarely, there isn't enough of item variety and some hybrid classes don't have items with fitting stats, making them non-viable for highest difficulty.



There are some rare essences you can use to enchant items. They can stack, and provide bonuses at thresholds.



When leveling up, you can spend points to improve skills, or to gain passive bonus and unlock more skills.

“Basically, my belief is that *Titan Quest* never had as much style and character as it could have because we were afraid to do anything even remotely controversial.

When I first designed the skill masteries, they were all based on Olympian gods, with skills modeled after the powers or attributes associated with different gods in mythology. This was rejected because it was potentially too religious and people might not want to feel like they were worshiping mythological gods to receive their powers.”

- Arthur Bruno,
Titan Quest's lead designer



Polyphemus is the cyclops fools in Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*. But here, he's just another monster in your way.

Playing through the campaign lasts between 25-30 hours, with additional 5-10 hours with *Immortal Throne* expansion pack. If that was it, *Titan Quest* would have been just a decent *Diablo* clone with lots

of unused potential, but the modding community took things into their own hands and managed to turn a decent game into a great one. **IM**

Dozens of mods for *Titan Quest* exist, but here are two of our favorites ones (note that they require the *Immortal Throne* expansion pack to run):

Diablo 2 Lilith

A combination of two mods: *Diablo 2 Immortal*, that seeks to mix the best of *Diablo 2* classes with *Titan Quest's* leveling mechanics, and the *Lilith and the World of Jalavia* mod, that offers an entire new world for you to explore, full of new enemies, quests, merchants, bosses and even a new soundtrack.



Playing *Titan Quest* as a necromancer is pure fun, and fits the game very well.

Soulvazier

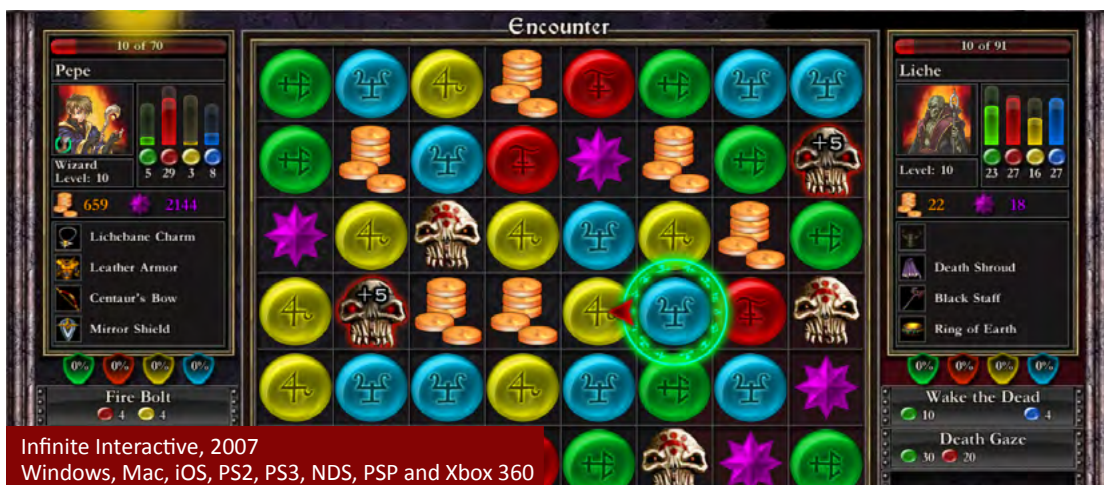
This mod expands on the popular *Underlord* mod, adding new classes and rebalancing old ones, featuring hundreds of new hero mobs, new class of items, souls, powerful ring slot items that are unique for every hero and boss monster, a new merchant type and many new great items, recipes, relics and charms. There's also new tier of skills for each class.

Soulvazier is a must-have if you are an action-RPG veteran, but it can be very hard for newcomers.



Soulvazier also uses the *Diablo II UI* mod, among many others, for a complete experience.

Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords



Puzzle Quest had an expansion called *Revenge of the Plague Lord*. It was released on consoles, but never reached the PC. Fans then made an unofficial port of the Xbox version.

Steve Fawcner was once known as the man behind the *Warlords* series. But for a new generation he's the creator of *Puzzle Quest*, the Puzzle/RPG in which you battle foes in a *Bejeweled*-style game.

Combat in *Puzzle Quest* takes place on an 8x8 board where the aim is to match three or more tiles of the same type. Each tile has a different function: coins give you money, purple stars give XP, skulls deal direct damage to the opponent and the colored globes serve as mana for spells. The satisfying aspect of the game comes from the simplicity of the core mechanic, combined with the skill required to chain multiple groups together, deny your opponent access to mana and earn extra turns.

There are four character classes available – Druid, Knight, Warrior and Wizard – each with his own set of spells and passive skills. Spells range from dealing direct damage to altering tiles on the board and even taking multiple turns at once. You unlock new spells by leveling up, but can only equip a maximum of six different spells. Choosing the right loadout of items and spells to counter your foe is of vital importance, and experimentation is encouraged.

Exploration is done through a 2D map with an appealing, painted art style. There you can visit towns, buy equipment, take quests and listen to rumors. The world is limited at first, but as you progress new areas are unlocked. Over time, enemies pop up and block routes, meaning you must either find an alternative way or fight them to progress.

The story itself is a little bit flat and your main motivation for the various missions is really just to gain XP and gold. There are four realms to visit, focusing on different factions, and these introduce new enemy types to fight or capture. Some quests offer you choices, and you can gain companions who provide handy support abilities, such as damaging an enemy as the battle begins.

The big appeal of *Puzzle Quest* is taking an already addictive puzzle game then adding depth and RPG elements to it. Later in the game you can capture monsters to use as mounts, learn spells from enemies, hunt treasures, craft your own magical equipment and even build siege weapons and conquer entire cities.

The formula became quite popular and led to a number of follow-up games, including *Puzzle Quest: Galactrix* (2009), which had a sci-fi setting and used hexagonal tiles – akin to *Hexic* – and *Puzzle Quest 2* (2010), a direct sequel with similar mechanics but focused on dungeon-crawling. **GE**

The world map expands as you progress, and there are usually many different quests to choose from.



Puzzle Quest 2 trades the 2D map for a beautiful isometric dungeon with various levels.



Recettear

An Item Shop's Tale



EasyGameStation, 2007*
Windows

One day Mr. Lemongrass left home, eager to become an adventurer. However, *Recettear* isn't about his heroic deeds, but rather his collateral damage. More to the point, it's about the huge debt he left after vanishing, that must now be paid by his daughter, Recette. She's a naive young girl that never worked a day in her life, and has inherited the task of opening an item shop and making enough money to repay the whole debt in one month.

With this very unique premise, *Recettear* places the player as owner of a small shop in a typical RPG town, full of adventurers and surrounded by dungeons. Your job is to run the shop, purchasing items and reselling them with a profit.

At its core it's a very simple system, but has many nuances that add to the experience. For example, if you feature only expensive items and decoration, your shop will be considered too fancy, attracting less customers. There are also special events, such as days when certain types of items are cheaper or sold out.

Over the course of the game you'll meet various adventurers. After gaining their friendship you can hire them to explore a dungeon for you. Once you do, the game changes into a isometric Action-RPG, where you explore randomly generated levels, defeat enemies and collect treasure. Many items can only be found inside dungeons, including ingredients to craft powerful weapons – that you can either give to your adventurers or sell at a high price. The dungeons have few enemies and can quickly get repetitive, but at least the boss fights every 5 levels are interesting.

Since there's limited time to pay the debt you'll have to manage your schedule, setting time to run the shop, buy supplies, explore dungeons and talk to the townsfolk. Sadly, the later is underused, rarely resulting in anything besides one-note stories and jokes.

Recettear also features post-game content, with extra dungeons and boss battles, two New Game+ modes and the hellish Survival Mode, where each week you must pay increasingly high debts, trying your best to keep the shop open as long as you can. Of course, not everyone will have the urge to master Capitalism, or the patience to explore dungeons with 100 floors, but the main story is short, lighthearted and a nice change of pace from other RPGs. **FE**

**Recettear* was first released at the 73rd Comiket in 2007, and then localized into English by Carpe Fulgur in 2010.

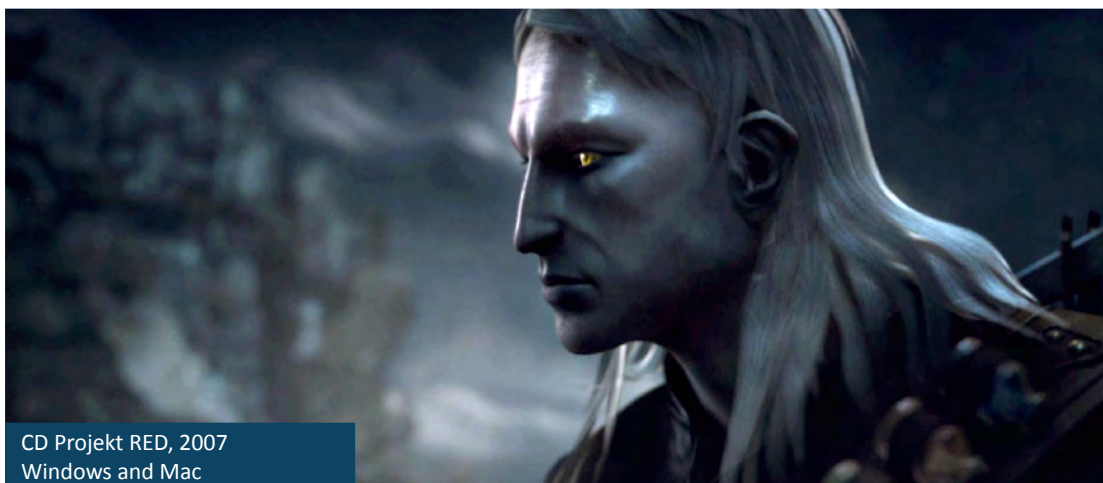


The combat is very simple but every adventurer plays differently, and some floors have special conditions.



A poor adventurer asks for an expensive item. Do you lower the price to equip him better, or do you prioritize your profit?

The Witcher



CD Projekt RED, 2007
Windows and Mac

In 2008 an *Enhanced Edition* was released, with countless improvements, new adventures, an improved editor and even optional fan-made mods. It was a free update for registered owners of *The Witcher*.

The *Witcher* is a single-character action-RPG based on Polish fantasy author Andrzej Sapkowski's series of novels, featuring Geralt of Rivia, the eponymous witcher, a magically-mutated monster hunter for hire. The plot follows Geralt trying to retrieve formulas and items required to create more of his kind, which were stolen during an attack on Kaer Morhen, ruined fortress serving as haven for the few remaining witchers. However, this turns out to be only one thread in a much more complex series of events, in which the protagonist gets involved.

The game was created by CD Projekt RED, development studio branch of Polish game publisher and distributor CD Projekt. It was the studio's first release and clearly a work of passion, as it shows that creators were the book series' fans. *The Witcher*'s faithfulness to the source material and attention to detail is remarkable, maybe even a bit too much, with some characters, ideas and dialogues clearly recycled from the books, sometimes with a different name.

The Witcher was created on highly modified version of *Neverwinter Nights*' Aurora Engine, but you probably would not notice that if it wasn't written in huge letters on the intro screens, as graphics are vastly improved even compared to *Neverwinter Nights 2*.



Geralt can be ruthless at times.

Sound design is very good, and the bleak music may not be very appealing to listen outside the game, unless you are trying to fuel your depression, but it complements the game's setting perfectly. However, CD Projekt RED have not avoided the trap of adult = sex, violence and profanity, as *The Witcher* has more than its share of each.

The world created by Andrzej Sapkowski is a place, where happy endings are very few and far between. Its inhabitants are usually savvy enough to understand this, and try to cope using (often dark) sense of humor and cynical attitude, only emphasized by the fact that almost nobody in the world cares about religion. This creates an interesting mix of classic fantasy and mature themes with a semi-serious approach. Monsters roam the countryside, with most people helpless against them. Human dominance has forced elves and dwarves exist to live in ghettos or take up arms as guerillas (or terrorists, depending who you ask). Mages reserve their miracle-working magic for elites, who can afford their services, while human and inhuman life is valued highly only by a selected few.

Geralt is one of those people, as much as he wishes he was not. He tries to be a cold professional, but more often than not he ends up helping people, because nobody else will or can. He repeatedly tries to remain neutral in the affairs of the world and just do his job. In the novels he usually fails, in the game the player decides which path is the right one, or rather the least wrong one.

While *The Witcher* is not an open-world game, each chapter puts Geralt, in a fairly large area, which he can explore, and interact with its various inhabitants. Character progression is hand-waved as Geralt regaining his skills and knowledge lost due to a near-death experience and subsequent amnesia.



The Witcher book series popularity in Poland is incomparable to any other fantasy franchise. One week after the long-awaited game's release in October of 2007

it was out of stock everywhere and almost impossible to buy. One of *The Witcher* short-stories collections 'The Last Wish' remains the only Polish fantasy book adapted into a film (and a TV series).

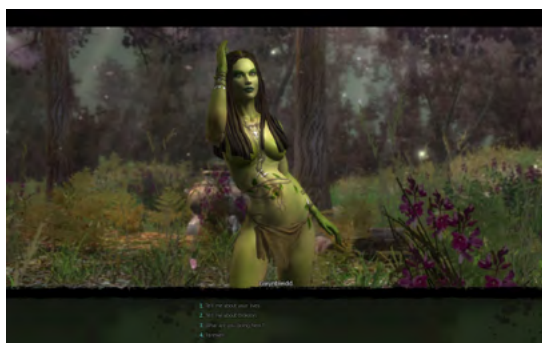


In battle you must choose the combat style better suited to your enemies and then carefully time your clicks to chain attacks.

On each level up, Geralt earns skill points (called talents) of three types: bronze, silver and gold. These talents can be spent to improve his abilities, with higher ability levels requiring the more rare silver and gold ones to unlock.

As witchers are superhuman monster hunters, Geralt is able to take on multiple enemies at once from the very start, using one of his two swords – steel against humans and their like, silver against monsters – and a fast, strong or group fighting style (which work well against agile, armoured and numerous opponents, respectively). Using other melee weapons is possible – but suboptimal, as Geralt's kill only work with his swords – but ranged combat is not possible.

The game offers two camera modes for you to play in. Clicking on the enemy when in top-down view will cause Geralt to automatically close the distance and attack, while clicking on the ground will move him away and/or evade attacks. Over-the-shoulder camera makes controls more action-like, with manual, keyboard-controlled movement. In both modes well-timed button presses will chain attacks into combos, with increasingly more elaborate animations and higher damage as the protagonist's abilities increase.



The Witcher features sex scenes and full frontal nudity, that were censored on the US version.

Geralt also knows five simple spells, called signs, which can help him in a pinch, and can be quite significantly upgraded. The toughest fights may also call for preparation in the form of alchemy, used to create potions temporarily enhancing Geralt's abilities.

Most of the time, however, is spent talking to people living in the city of Vyzima and its rural surroundings. Over the course of his adventure Geralt will meet villagers, merchants, minstrels, craftsmen, child prophets, guards, knights, bandits, medics, prostitutes, spies, princesses, freedom fighters (terrorists) and many more, including even a private investigator. Player will get immersed into the world mostly by interacting with this lot, solving their many problems, fist-fighting, playing dice and occasionally getting drunk in good company.

Because ultimately, this is what this game is all about – becoming the witcher and living his life for a little while. And it does it very well. **WM**

Mods:

CD Projekt released part of the tools they used to create the game, leading to some interesting fan-made adventures and mods. Your best source for those is the official *Witcher* forums. Here are some of them:

Medical Problems I & II: A fantastic two-part saga, where Geralt must uncover the mystery behind a strange illness. Features multiple endings and over 15 hours of gameplay, with great writing and design.

And a Curse, and Love, and Betrayal: One of the biggest fan-made *Witcher* adventures, you must cleanse a mine and solve a lover's curse. More than 12 hours long.

Full Combat Rebalance mod: This huge mod completely revamps the combat of the game, aiming to make it closer to the books. It can make the game very challenging. The mod was developed by Andrzej 'Flash' Kwiatkowski, who also did *Flash's Witcher Mod*, that adds higher difficulty settings to the game, bug fixes and other features. The mod' creator was later hired by CD Projekt Red.



The Witcher caused some controversy due the addition of collectible 'sex cards', which were awarded to the player for each womem Geralt bedded, depicting them in various states of undress.

7.62 High Caliber



In 2008 Apeiron released 7.62: Reloaded, a stand-alone expansion to High Calibre. Unfortunately, it's only available in Russia.

Although it was released back in 1999, *Jagged Alliance 2* still reins alone – a highly complex and detailed tactical game that to this day it's still played by fans, with many mods still being made to keep the game alive and going. Many *JA2* wannabe games exist, but the consensus is that none can compare to what was achieved in *JA2* with mods, not even the recently released *Jagged Alliance Flashback*.

It turns out *JA2* also had a cult following in other corners of the world, and in 2005 a *Jagged Alliance* wannabe called *Brigade E5: New Jagged Union* was developed in Russia. It didn't do well with professional critics but developed a loyal fan base. Two years later, a sequel was released called *Brigade E6* (known as *7.62 High Calibre* in the US), featuring a more non-linear gameplay and other various changes.

By far the most interesting part of the game is its combat system. Instead of using turn-based combat like *JA2*, *High Calibre* features an unique real-time with pause system. The easiest way to explain it is that every single action takes time. For example, want to turn around? It will take you 0.20 seconds. Want to grab a med kit stored in your pockets? 0.89 seconds are used for that!

Every action in the game takes time, including the most basic ones like changing stance, picking up objects and, of course, firing your weapon. While this may sound clunky and messy, it actually makes the combat really deep. The player must make intelligent choices and calculate its time to play effectively.

The amount of depth underneath the system is staggering – there are four shot types, six movement types, customizable firing modes, a locational damage system and multiple variables that alter the speed of each action. Even adrenaline plays a big role, making characters act faster, but less accurately.

Apart from the combat, another great feature is the number of weapons available. From pistols to light machine guns and sniper rifles, *High Calibre* features over a hundred weapons, a number which can be further raised by installing mods.

Weapons have stats such as accuracy, magazine size and damage, but also other stats like the time it takes to aim them and their reliability. Unreliable weapons like the Colt M16 must be kept well repaired and clean, or they might jam at the worst possible moment – meaning some players might prefer the legendary reliability of an AK-47 instead.



You can start as one of eight different mercenaries, each with a set of attributes, but with customizable skills.



It's vital to carefully maintain your guns, consider your loadout and optimize your pockets for quick access.

“Each command performed by your soldier takes some time, real time. This time depends on soldier skills, his condition, and so on. All your soldiers perform their actions simultaneously with each other and enemy soldiers. This brings realism in the combat. Interruptions in turn-based system are but an attempt to simulate this. Unsuccessful attempt, I should say.”

- Dmitry Ivashkin,
High Calibre's Lead Programmer



Your stats, skills, injuries, adrenaline levels and even in which pocket you placed an item will all affect the speed of your actions.

Stats also vary between the classes of weapons. Pistols are weak and inaccurate but are much faster to aim and fire, making them very good close range weapons, when accuracy is not a problem. Some weapons can even have their stock folded to make them faster to aim at the cost of reduced accuracy.

There are also many weapon accessories, such as flashlights, suppressors, foregrips, bipods, bayonets, under barrel grenade launchers, laser sights and multiple types of scopes. Some attachments also have weaknesses – laser sights and flashlights can make you easier to spot by enemies, and using long range scopes will reduce your field of view, making easier for enemies to flank you.

With so many options, combat feels rewarding and fresh. This is fortunate because the rest of the game is not so well designed. Sadly, *High Calibre* suffers from various bugs and a boring “FedEX quest” storyline, filled with uninteresting characters and saved only by its exciting battles.

You’ll start as lone mercenary, hired to find a Russian businessman that is currently hiding in the South-American nation of Algeria. *High Calibre* is an open, non-linear game, so you can move around the map to different cities, take multiple side-quests and side with either the rebels or the government forces.

Later on you’ll be able to hire mercenaries to help you in battle, partake in highly intense battles to capture and control cities and other valuable areas and also create militia to defend your locations from enemies. If they die you will have to capture the area again in more high intense battles – an activity most JA2 players should be used to.

Unfortunately, 7.62 *High Calibre* isn’t the JA2 successor we all have been waiting for. However, with the help of a few mods, those into tactical battles can definitely still have a great time. **SG**

The Blue Sun Mod is endorsed by the developers and can be directly downloaded by Steam. Just enable it in the “Betas” menu.

Mods:

Blue Sun Mod: The most well known mod for the game, it adds a new quest-line, more mercenaries to recruit, more maps, hundreds of new weapons and stat balancing and many essential bug fixes. It is recommended even for first time players.

Silver Girl's Armory: Adds more than two hundred new weapons and improves some weapon models. It also rebalances weapon stats and adds more diversity to enemy weapon usage. Recommended for first time players as well. Requires the Blue Sun Mod.

There's also the popular HardLife Addon and the ARMA Realista mod, both excellent standalone mods that unfortunately are only available in Russian.



There are various locations to travel to, and you can buy a vehicle to go faster and store items in the trunk.



Inside cities you can take quests, hire mercenaries, buy weapons and even conquer or defend the whole city.

Eschalon



Basilisk Games, 2007
Windows, Linux and Mac

Eschalon: Book I was supposed to have an expansion, but it was canceled due to technical issues. *Book II* however got a free expansion, called *The Secret of Fathamurk*.

When a lone developer started talking about this old-school fantasy RPG that he was working on back in 2005, most people didn't believe he could pull it off. Much to everyone's surprise he not only released *Eschalon: Book 1*, but also managed to release two more sequels.

"Old-school" describes *Eschalon* pretty well, it looks like it walked straight in out of 1992. SVGA graphics, a clunky turn-based interface and very little in obvious charm. But give the game a minute of your time and its true magic will show itself. *Eschalon* boasts an elaborate skill system that allows for several solutions to various problems. The character creation system follows the standard formulas and is easy to grasp, but for me *Eschalon* stands out as being one of the most thief-friendly RPGs I've ever seen. Light, sound and line of sight are all taken into account and locks and traps come in several qualities and designs.

The setting seems unimpressive and clichéd, with the player character an amnesiac that wakes up in a ruined house. A cryptic chain of letters guides him onto the main quest, but soon enough he's trav-

eling across the lands, invading goblin strongholds and stealing dwarven treasures in order to prevent a world-shattering cataclysm from taking place.

Probably the greatest feature of *Eschalon* is the freedom of exploration, there are very few artificial barriers in place to "guide" a player along a pre-determined path. Instead the game opts for the more organic approach to give the player travel advice via NPC conversations and readables. Only rarely are gates used to block further progress, and walking off the beaten path is often rewarding.

Another part of the exploration aspect is the map. *Eschalon* has a detailed auto-mapping system, but asks that the player invests points in the Cartography skill for it to be of any use. Sadly there are no recruitable characters to help the player, and while character dialogues aren't badly written I still couldn't shake the feel that NPCs were nothing more than quest dispensers or shopkeepers. At least some quests allow for multiple solutions.

But the bread and butter of *Eschalon* is the combat, the turn-based system allows for a tactical approach, but in general it comes down to ranged or melee combat. The environment can give an advantage, like slamming gates down on monster's heads and laying traps of your own in tight passages.

But sadly *Eschalon's* versatile system is unbalanced to the point of being broken. Most of the spells in *Eschalon* outright replace various skills and equipment, rather than being sidegrades or buffs. Mage characters become nigh-unstoppable powerhouses as a result. Speaking of skills, some of them are only used in a handful of circumstances, or maybe even a single map.

Another oddity in *Eschalon* is fighting in the dark. With a little skill training and using the correct



Pitch black nights and dark dungeons make torches essential equipment.

"What inspired me to start this project was actually the sheer disappointment that I have felt with the design of most modern RPGs. They are created with the idea of targeting as wide a demographic as possible, and in doing so, they've shut out the niche market that gave birth to this genre in the first place. Today's hardcore RPG fans have an extremely limited number of true RPGs from which to choose. With the *Eschalon* series, we hope to alleviate this lack of choice by offering an RPG that is inspired by the greatest ones of all time rather than trying to reinvent the genre all over again."

- Thomas Riegsecker,
Eschalon's creator



Character creation features all the standards, plus options like choosing a home region and a religion.

spells/potions it's easy to make the darkness work for you and become the proverbial ninja; raining deadly blows upon the monsters from the shadows. It's fun, but it feels like cheating the system.

The series evolves somewhat through the two sequels; the second game does many things right like bringing more of the same, along with new additions and also overhauling the UI (so now it looks like a 1993 game). Among the new additions are weather conditions and a customizable difficulty level, including choosing whether you want weapons to break down with usage or if the character needs to consume food and water.

By contrast the third game feels like it was rushed and is only half-finished, the ending comes abruptly and the writing takes a nosedive in quality, to the point of making the whole story anti-climactic and disappointing. The ending goes so far as to make the

other two games in the series feel irrelevant, which frankly is unforgivable. There's also the question of the graphics, as the *Eschalon* games only support a handful of non-widescreen resolutions at best, even though the last game was released in 2014.

Sadly the poor performance of the third game has all but killed further support for *Eschalon*, leaving the trilogy hanging by a thread when it needs a lifeline. **AV**

Fan-made Editor:

In 2008 an unofficial character and map editor was created by *Eschalon's* community member xolotl. Since then the editor has been officially endorsed by Basilisk Games, and modders have already created a dozen of small mods for *Eschalon: Book III*. These mods and the editor can be found here: <http://basiliskgames.com>



Combat is turn-based and somewhat simplistic, but it's agile and helps with keeping the pace of the game fun.



The sequels add small but welcome upgrades, such as difficulty customization, item wear and a better UI.

Fortune Summoners: Secret of the Elemental Stone



Lizsoft, 2008
Windows

FS had a Deluxe version released in 2009 in Japan, with additional content and voice acting. But only the original version reached the west, localized into English by Carpe Fulgur in 2012.

Fortune Summoners is a hardcore sidescroller ARPG in the vein of “Metroidvania” games, featuring three classes (combat roles) and a strong emphasis on character stats and skills.

The main character, Arche, is a physical fighter who controls in the manner similar to fighting games. Sana and Stella, on the other hand, are magic users lacking Arche’s combo acrobatics. Sana’s water magic is slow but diverse, ranging from healing to status effects to offensive, while Stella is an aggressive spellcaster capable of freely moving around the battlefield, relying on fast homing spells and conjuring up walls of fire.

In addition to HP and MP, characters have four base attributes - Attack, Defense, Spirit, and Resist - increased on leveling-up or through consumables. Each character eventually learns many spells and abilities, and using them correctly without sticking to just one or two is crucial.

Generally, combat is what the game does best. Enemies react to your moves, acting ahead if your actions get too simplistic, dodging your attacks,

taking advantage of the pauses in your movement, and inflicting status ailments. They also block, flank, stunlock you, fly, jump, do leap and ranged attacks, cast powerful spells, heal themselves, float out of your attack or spell range, and move faster than you do. Much of the game’s difficulty comes from managing your timing and momentum (which may prove frustrating to some). The companion AI is competent enough that the player might find herself worse at controlling the girls (in particular Arche) than the AI, but also highly customizable.

Fortune Summoners never holds your hand. Dungeons get labyrinthine and span many screens, featuring puzzles that involve jumping, switch-pulling, crate-pushing, and discovering hidden passages. Similarly, the game’s quests tell you what you need to do, but not how you should go about doing it. Unfortunately, exploration can get fetch quest-y and linear, with a back-and-forth design that often expects you to find the one NPC amidst a hundred of others to advance the plot.

Starting off with Arche the transfer student on the way to her new school, the game’s story and dialogue are nothing if not cliché-laden – luckily treated playfully, not seriously. The pervading spirit of light-heartedness and camaraderie, perfectly captured by Carpe Fulgur’s translation, eases you into the whole nonsense pretty well, too.

Fortune Summoners takes pride in its old school design, with good reason and to good effect. The combat is engaging and challenging, the writing is upbeat and charming, and the dungeon crawling, while at times artificially prolonged by backtracking, is enjoyable with many secrets to find. As a result, it remains one of my favorite action RPGs. Give it a try if the anime presentation does not turn you off. **CB**



You can switch control between the three main characters on the fly, as well as customize their behavior when being controlled by the AI.

Barkley

Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden



B-Ball. B-Ball never changes. The year is 2053 - Basketball is dead. Ravaged by the mighty power of the Chaos Dunk, the lives of countless innocents were inadvertently taken by Charles Barkley. Basketball became forbidden in the Cyberpocalypse, putting the sport into disarray. In the same year, the storm of dunking had come again. A mysterious player had reduced Manhattan (and millions of lives) to cinders. And from the ashes of slamming devastation, a veteran of basketball would struggle to arise. Life in the Cyberpocalypse is about to change.

Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden is difficult to describe. It's a comedic RPG, and yet the world and its characters take themselves very seriously. Inspired heavily by *Chrono Trigger* & *Earthbound*, the gameplay and mechanics should fit like a glove for those who grew up with them. The game is a dungeon crawler at heart, but what makes it special is what they build off of that formula. Globetrotting around Neo New York and its surrounding areas is a journey into the bizarre, with quests and characters that can go in outlandish directions.

You'll write poetry, discover long forgotten history of the spherical rubber wonder, and realize the full potential of the chicken dew. If a talking gas pump lectures you on the sublime nature of *Chrono Cross*, things have clearly taken a turn for the strange. The writing and dialogue is a strange amalgamation of Basketball references, allusions to JRPGs, and just about everything else in between. Suffice it to say, the amount of creativity jammed into this slam-athon is one of the games' major highlights.

The combat will feel very familiar to fans of *Final Fantasy* and other JRPGs. With up to 4 party members, you can choose between your normal attacks, items, and special abilities. The combat also embraces

the absurdity of the setting. Clashing against Basketball spiders, Zombie Referees, and Robotic Killer Gatorades is a slice of what Tales of Games has come up with. The special moves of your characters can vary wildly between one another in terms of gameplay, and it makes each scuffle feel unique instead of just another grind. Only in *Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden* could you breakdance with Uzis while curing a bad case of diabetes.

Graphically speaking, the laugh-out-loud designs of some of these enemies, bosses, characters, and locales are almost worth the trip itself. And the music. Cooked up by composer Chef Boyardee, it's an original soundtrack that appropriately takes a serious Cyberpocalyptic atmosphere and occasionally heads into silly territory.

Any gamer with a sense of humor, or someone looking for RPG nostalgia could find nirvana here. *Barkley, Shut Up And Jam: Gaiden* is a treasure trove for RPG fans both old and new, serving as a reminder that some of the best things in life are free (like this game). **GT**



Mix & match your abilities with the varied combat system. Slam them from downtown, or have yourself some chicken fry - the choice is yours.

Mount & Blade



TaleWorlds Entertainment, 2008
Windows



Mount & Blade: Warband is a stand-alone expansion pack released in 2010, that adds a new faction, the ability to manage your own kingdom and a multiplayer mode.

If you take visceral hack-and-slash combat akin to that found in *Chivalry: Medieval Warfare*, add in a smaller scale, more intimate taste of battle management a la *Medieval: Total War*, and wrap it all in the trappings of a simplified medieval sandbox world simulator with RPG elements, your end result is the multifaceted and engaging game by Paradox Interactive named *Mount & Blade*.

The soul of *Mount & Blade* is the battles. Whether it be two forces clashing on snow-covered hills at dawn or the spot where siege tower meets fortress wall in the dead of night, the battles are where the 3D rendered landscapes, character, weapon and armour models, sound of hooves, clash of blades, and cries of battle all come to life.

As the leader of forces you hire and train, you may hastily issue one or two initial instructions, but when you close with the enemy you find yourself acting and reacting as the battle erupts around you, clashing with targets of opportunity and making snap decisions as the unpredictableness of battle unfolds. There's something deeply gratifying about carving your way through a group of crossbowmen who'd mere moments ago been picking off your companions in the throng of the battle proper...and something gut-tightening about the scrape of a dozen short swords

unsheathing as your recently headshotted warhorse crumples beneath you, spewing you face first onto the ground amongst them. Such hectic, in-the-moment experiences in battle are what keep you coming back for more throughout the game.

While there's no respite for careful thought in the heat of battle, while roaming the lands of Calradia either as an avatar on the game map or while exploring one of the towns or castles that dot its surface you are able to stop, rest your troops, and plan your next move amongst all the chaos of a land contested by five factions. This is when the sense of all of your battles being small cogs in a larger wheel sets in; as you interact with NPCs either through dialogue or at the tip of a sword, other NPC units are likewise pursuing their own objectives all around you. Faction relations and interactions are evershifting, and their leaders will have their armies constantly on the move. Fortunately, significant events you don't encounter yourself while roaming the land are flashed to you in text and logged into the game's bank of reference material, providing general glimpses on the state of the land when needed.

The lands of Calradia are alive with more than just the faction forces: army deserters, the manhunters tracking them down, sea raiders, villagers, trade caravans and more all move about and interact, making the otherwise sparse land come alive with the simulated life of the population. Conflicts, either small skirmishes or all out battles with hundreds of troops, are occurring throughout the land, and your role in it all is up to you. At night sight lines are reduced, and it may come as a shock to find just how close an enemy force is when dawn strikes. Fortunately, everything on the land freezes when your force is stopped, giving you time to plan your next move.



You should not only purchase better horses and equipment, but also keep an eye out for trade goods.

Mods for Mount & Blade

Battle Size Changer: allows you to increase the maximum number of soldier in battle at once, from the default 100 to a max of 1000.

The Last Days of the Third Age: lets the player fight on either side of the War of the Ring, as one of Tolkien's various fantasy races.

Star Wars Conquest: A total conversion mod set in the Star Wars universe, allowing you to freely explore and conquer the galaxy.

Sword of Damocles adds a kingdom management system, 100+ new troop types and much more.

Mods for Mount & Blade: Warband

Anno Domini 1257: a massive total conversion mod set in 13th century Europe, during the Crusades and Mongol Invasions.

Brytenwalda: Huge and complex mod set in Britain after the fall of the Roman Empire. The focus is on being a warrior, rather than a war leader.

Floris Mod Pack: a compilation pack of mods created by the community. Extremely recommended.

Prophecy of Pendor: A challenging mod, offers an interesting and dangerous world, with tougher enemies and a hard combat.



The *Last Days of the Third Age* mod allows you to defend Minas Tirith.



Conquer the galaxy as a Sith with the *Star Wars Conquest* mod.

As a sandbox game there is no overarching narrative guiding progression in *M&B*, so 'winning' falls to a player's own particular interests. This could mean aiding your faction in achieving dominance, but could also involve more character-specific goals. Want your character to become a god among men? Advancement in *M&B* has several layers. XP gained from kills and completing missions increases stats, which in turn opens the door for higher skill levels. All skills are passive, freeing you to keep your mind on parrying that next mace or wooing that next lady. Weapon proficiency is tied to battlefield use with an emphasis on higher difficulty usage, making that long range throwing axe headshot you pulled-off all the more satisfying.

Perhaps aiding a pretender to wrest the throne from her rival and in turn be granted lordship of a castle is more your style. Both your Renown (earned in battle) and your Relationship rating with lords and townspeople will determine if they even acknowledge you, and are impacted by quests and the decisions you make.



The graphics on the world map are very simple, but the tight gameplay keeps it exciting.

The effort at realism and care for detail put in by TaleWorlds to create a faithful medieval experience rather than a fantastic one is an endearing facet of *Mount & Blade*: weapons and armour are more rugged than gaudy, castles, towns and villages are made of hewn wood or stone rather than being grandiose and decadent, and the people of Calradia look and act the part: the poor are unwashed and weary, while the nobility are somewhat clean and focused on self-interest. Even the (optional) blood effects on your hero's warhammer and tunic feel grimy and genuine. This lack of sparkle and shine, combined with the resemblance of the factions to real-world historical groups, create an overall feeling of authenticity to the game.

Ultimately the core of *Mount & Blade* is reflected in its name, giving a harrowing and entertaining taste of being a medieval battle commander. But it does so within a subtly immersive world of conflict and choice shaped by your victories or defeats by mount and by blade. **BW**



Sieges on fortifications can be extremely chaotic.



In 2011 a second stand-alone expansion was released, *Mount & Blade: With Fire & Sword*. Set in 1600's Poland, it adds pistols, rifles and grenades.

Divinity II: Ego Draconis



Larian Studios, 2009
Windows and Xbox 360

Larian would return for more dragon battles in *Divinity: Dragon Commander* (2013), an exotic mix of RTS battles, strategy maps, dragon combat and political simulator.

This is a game where you can (at will) turn into a dragon, attack a flying fortress and the army of demons protecting it, land in the courtyard, kill the guards with a mix of fierce sword fighting and spellcasting, subdue the fortress's commander and then read his mind to find out his deepest secrets. All this 100% gameplay, no cutscenes involved. It has to be one of the best RPGs ever made by man, right?

Unfortunately, no. Larian's ambitious vision for *Divinity II* included a multi-player campaign and even RTS elements. However, development issues, lack of funding and the hardware limitations of the Xbox 360 forced them to make some deep cuts in their project. While the end result is still an entertaining third-person action-RPG, it's also a very uneven one.

As an apprentice Dragon Slayer you are sent on your first hunting expedition, but the tables turn as you suddenly find yourself bound to a dragon – able to transform into a mighty flying beast, but on the run from your previous companions.

Larian always set themselves apart by their clever writing, and *Divinity II* is no exception. Some of the dialogs are exceptional, the quests are highly creative and the game overflows with interesting ideas, such as the aforementioned mind-reading skill, the mighty dragon form, an undead “pet” you can customize by collecting body parts and even a personal battle tower, complete with servants you must recruit.

The problem is that the game often doesn't play to its strengths, tiring players with dungeons full of mindless enemies or repetitive battles against flying fortress, when the real treat lies in its dialogs and quests. The combat isn't bad per se, featuring a nice range of spells and abilities, but it's poorly balanced, and occasionally it feel like you're fighting enemies placed there just to extend the game's length.

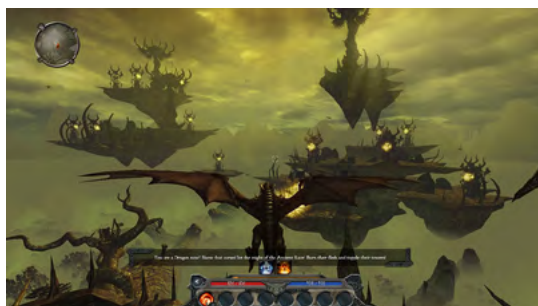
The original release was plagued by bugs, but the 2011 *Dragon Knight Saga* re-release fixed most issues, enhanced the graphics, redesigned some areas and added the *Flames of Vengeance* expansion pack, with about 20 hours of new content. In 2012 Larian would release the *Developer's Cut* version, adding a optional “cheat mode”, design documents, concept art and a fascinating documentary about the development of the game and the various obstacles they faced.

It's hard to shake the feel that *Divinity II* could have been much more than it was – especially after watching the development documentary – but it's still a solid Action-RPG, spiced by a few novel ideas. And if you have any sense of humor, the writing alone will guarantee you a good time. **FE**

The third-person action-combat is simple, but gets the job done. Trigger warning: Cooldowns.



While amazing the first few times, battles in Dragon form can get repetitive. Larian would later make better use of them on *Divinity: Dragon Commander*.



Venetica



DECK13 Interactive, 2009
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3

Venetica begins with a rather unique premise: You are Scarlet, a young girl from the small town of San Pasquale. Suddenly, the town is attacked by assassins, your fiancée is killed and you meet with Death itself... Who reveals that he is your father, and that you must help him save the world.

The game is a light action-RPG in the veins of *Fable*, filled with side-quests to take and moral choices to make, but more focused on story and exploration. Most of the game is spent in a fantasy version of 16th-century Venice, divided into five large districts. *Venetica* is no *Assassin's Creed II*, but the team made a great job, filling the city with stunning sights and a few hidden side-paths, while using a colorful art style to compensate for the small budget.

The combat is simple to a fault. There are four weapon types – swords, spears, hammers and the undead-slaying Moonblade. Each one comes with different damage types, combat skills and combos you create by timing your attacks right. Or at least that's the theory, as it's too easy to get behind enemies and stun-lock them by quickly mashing the attack button.

As the daughter of Death, Scarlet also has access to some handy powers. First of those is the ability to come back from the dead. As long as she has enough Twilight Energy, she'll always revive when slain. As the game advances, you'll unlock new powers, such as the ability to speak with the deceased, see through the eyes of ravens and briefly warp between the land of the living and the realm of the dead.

It's fascinating in concept and occasionally the game allows you to make great use of these powers – like casually letting a robber cut your throat, then reviving and killing him. Sadly, those are very rare; *Venetica* fails to explore its immortal character and some powers are used only once during the story.

Scarlet is the main attraction of *Venetica*, being a strong and charismatic character while still allowing room for players to role-play her. You'll be able to choose Good, Neutral or Evil paths, as well as join one of the three guilds in Venice: Warriors, Messengers and Necromancers, each with a unique set of quests.

Unfortunately, while the game works as whole, its parts feel constrained and rushed. Elements such as the combat, the interface, Scarlet's powers and the consequences for her choices all could use a few more months of polish, and I can't shake the feeling that features were cut mid-way through development.

Despite these limitations and the poor combat, *Venetica* is still a charming casual action-RPG and definitely worth a play for fans of games like *Fable*. **FE**



Venetica has a morality and a reputation system, and even tracks how many people you killed, but rarely use those in interesting ways.



Combat is simple and exploitable, but the game doesn't overstay its welcome or tire players with endless filler fights.

Yumina: The Ethereal



Yumina the Ethereal is a perfect example of modern PC-exclusive RPGs made in Japan. They are a different breed from the popular console JRPGs that reach our shores, such as *Final Fantasy*. These are focused on a niche market, usually mixing Visual Novel story-telling with challenging battles and complex mechanics – plus erotic scenes.

Erotic scenes which are the reason you won't see *Yumina* on Steam or being talked about in big gaming websites. While it doesn't feature rape or other similar dark fetish, it still shows explicit (and very awkward) sex with clearly under-aged girls. Luckily, those are very rare and mostly optional, to the point where you ask yourself why are they even there.

But don't let prejudice fool you, *Yumina* isn't a cheap hentai game masquerading as RPG. This is a high-profile release from veteran developers. It's a well designed game with complex systems, full voice acting (in Japanese), and some great use of 3D backgrounds with 2D sprites. It's a beautiful and polished title, and I'm glad that we finally got an official release, localized into English by JAST USA in 2013.



The entire interface looks confusing at first, but it's very efficient once you understand it.

The plot starts (but doesn't stay) simple: to avoid failing in school, Yumina tries to become the next Student Council President, so she can change the school rules. But for that, she must win the Election War. All that is told through a typical Visual Novel presentation, with anime-style art and humorous but over-written dialogs. Expect at least 2 hours of exposition before you even reach the tutorial. Thankfully, you can simply skip all that if you only care for the battles.

Yes, battles. The Election War is quite literal. You'll have to win "debates" against other candidates, that are in fact turn-based fights, with characters shouting "arguments" – such as "We must respect effort!" – each time they attack. You control four characters, their available skills defined by their position: the front "debater" usually attacks directly, while the three others act as support, using skills as "counter-arguments" to the actions of your front character and his foes.

In a very interesting mechanic, the mana pool is shared between all characters in combat, including enemies. It's locked at 100, but divided into four colors. Each of your party members uses a different color to cast his skills, and that reduces its relative amount. Using red abilities, for example, reduces the % of red mana on the pool and increases other colors. Managing that through careful use of skills, formation changes and special items is the key to battles, as characters can't use their skills if there isn't enough of their corresponding mana.

The extra tactical layer of the mana pool adds a lot to an already complex game. JRPGs went in the opposite way of western RPGs, proudly displaying as much stats, menus, skills and overall complexity as possible. Of course, that isn't always a good thing, and often translates into overly complicated games,



When inside dungeons, your party's behavior serves as hints to what lies around. Very confusing hints.

hiding their shallowness behind a facade of numbers. But *Yumina* manages to hit a sweet spot, featuring a system that is intimidating at first glance, but proves itself logical and robust once you're familiar with it.

The difficulty settings play a great part in that. The game has various routes, leading to vastly different endings and final battles. The trick is that each time you finish the game, you're offered the chance to to play again in a New Game+ mode, keeping your stats and items, but also increasing the difficulty. Beat all three routes and you'll unlock the fourth route, a final challenge leading to the "True Ending".

Another great reason to recommend *Yumina* is how it avoids common pitfalls of other JRPGs. Everything from dialogs to battle animations can be skipped or hasted, and you won't have to fight countless random battles with repetitive enemies unless you want to. In fact, the game even stops you from grinding, kicking you off the optional areas with random battles after you reach a certain level.



Yumina doesn't shy from being complex, it embraces it. It can scare newcomers off, but it's a joy to munchkins.



During "debates", your support characters can use their skills in response to enemy actions.

Speaking of enemies, you'll start by facing school students, but as your quest to become Student Council President advances, the plot grows more and more crazy. You'll soon find yourself exploring random dungeons, fighting goblins, demons, aliens, giant robots and even gods. Obviously.

It should be clear by now, *Yumina the Ethereal* is not for everyone. Very few will stand the anime-style graphics, insane plot, complex system and the presence of hentai scenes. Even fewer will have the endurance to beat the game four times to enjoy all it has to offer.

However, if you are a curious and tolerant soul, at least try the demo. *Yumina* is a great game, and provides a unique experience, completely different from anything you'll find in western RPGs – and it's always good to expand your horizons. **FE**

An expansion and a sequel to *Yumina* have been released in Japan, but there's no word on any of them being localized to English.



Yes, it is. Prepare to spend a lot of time reading dialogs, but at least you can skip them all if you wish.

Cthulhu Saves the World



Zeboyd Games, 2010
Windows and Xbox 360

Cthulhu Saves the World was first released for the Xbox Live. Zeboyd Games then ran a Kickstarter to fund an enhanced version and a PC port, which was released in 2011.

Cthulhu Saves the World is a small and linear but content-rich RPG, put out by the prolific Robert Boyd & Bill Stiernberg duo at Zeboyd. The game is mostly notable for its retro aesthetics and hilarious take on the Cthulhu-mythos.

In terms of structure and gameplay, *Cthulhu Saves the World* is a straight-forward JRPG. Where the game shines – the reason it is worthwhile to talk about at all – is its plot, its characters and the obvious love that the developers had for both. You begin the game as Cthulhu, the Old One, being deprived of your powers by an unknown force. In order to regain them, you must first become a true hero – only then you may resume your plans to destroy the world. It's a well-constructed and humorous story, that most fans of Lovecraft should be able to appreciate.

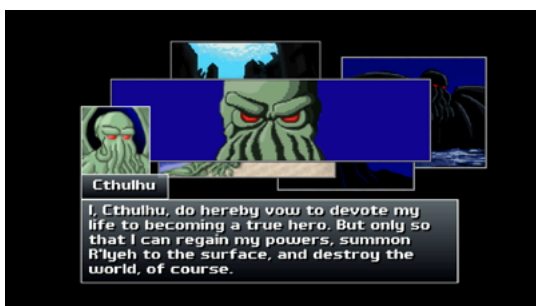
Ironically however, the game's characters are also the game's biggest weakness. While you never get tired of Cthulhu cast in the role of “grumpy and unwilling savior”, or some of his tag-along friends and the sharp developer-wit their personalities exhibit, other characters are downright obnoxious and unnecessary. Your first companion, Umi, is a tiresome groupie whose shtick gets old real fast. Other characters like the necromancer (October), the sword (Sharpe), or the cat alien (Paws) are much more interesting and switch between parodying tropes of the genre and being cool characters in their own right.

As a game, *Cthulhu Saves the World* is a sufficient but forgettable experience. You walk across a fairly linear overworld or map with your band of rag-tag saviors, collecting items and fighting battles, both random and hand-placed. The battle screen takes you to the standard JRPG line-up, where enemies and player characters stare each other down face to face, taking turns to inflict damage upon each other.

You might think the game is bad or bogged down from my choice of words. This however, is not the case. *Cthulhu's* characters and enemies are varied and you have plenty of different tactical options at your disposal, thanks in part to a clever progression system that offers a choice between different skills and stats bonuses at each level up.

Ultimately, *Cthulhu Saves the World* is more than enough fun to justify the measly 2 dollars being asked for the game on Steam these days. It is one of those rare games, like the original *Doom*, where playing it gives you a sense of who its developers were. What they enjoyed, which time they were raised in, and what culture produced them. For this reason alone, the game is worth a glance from any would-be RPG connoisseurs. **GR**

The game takes elements from various classic JRPGs, such as the multi-panel cutscenes from the *Phantasy Star* series.



Combat is the usual JRPG fare, but with a few twists. For example, each round the enemies get 10% stronger, forcing you to kill them quickly.



Marauder



Apeiron, 2009
Windows

Apeiron's previous game, *7.62 High Calibre*, was a real-time open world tactical RPG, heavily inspired by the *Jagged Alliance* series. While rather buggy and with a boring storyline, its complex simulationist combat and highly detailed "gun porn" conquered quite a few devout fans.

Marauder, also known as *Men of Prey* in Europe, is instead a linear, story-driven game, based on a book series by the same name from Russian author Berkem Al Atomi. The game places you in the boots of Akhmetzyanov, a common man trying to survive an alternate-history Russia where the government collapsed, anarchy reigns and the US is invading.

Don't expect a pleasant story. Ahkmet himself is neither a virtuous paragon nor a noble-hearted anti-hero, but a man willing to do anything to keep him and his wife safe. You will fight militias, raiders and cannibals, but also desperate, starved neighbors trying to take some of your precious food.

Marauder's combat perfectly reinforces its harsh atmosphere. The unique real-time with pause system from *High Calibre* is still here, if slightly streamlined. Every action takes a set time to be performed, and each has its pros and cons. The shotgun is a sure kill at close range, but it takes 0.42 seconds to ready it, while a pistol-wielding enemy can fire in just 0.08 seconds. You must take that into account in order to survive.

While I usually prefer turn-based tactical games, *Marauder's* intense and nerve-wrecking battles make great use of the game's elaborate real-time system. To add to the challenge, Ahkmet can only see what's in front of him and must otherwise rely on hearing to guess the enemy's position. This is further accentuated by the game's overwhelming odds, pitting you alone against dozens of looters or a full elite military squad with nothing but a rifle, some mines and your wits.

The game keeps the extensive and highly detailed armory found in *High Calibre*, with almost a hundred weapons, and adds a few more RPG mechanics to the formula, such as character creation, a skill tree and lockpicking. You'll also get up to three companions as the plot advances, allowing for more complex tactics.

Sadly, *Marauder* is extremely linear. Besides the main story, you'll only be able to visit a bazaar, do a couple of side-quests and have one-line conversations with a handful of NPCs. And the dialogs are all in Russian, with poorly translated English subtitles.

Rough, challenging and intense, *Marauder* is an unique low budget tactical RPG. Its bleak story, harsh setting, high difficulty and complex combat are a sure treat to cold-blooded tactical enthusiasts. **FE**

It's strongly recommended to manually edit the game's config files. That way you can unlock higher resolutions and better camera controls.



Firing from the hip is faster, but aiming allows you to target specific body parts and cripple enemies, or go for a lethal headshot.



Weapons can be upgraded, equipped with accessories, fire different bullets types and even have their stocks folded. But they also decay, break and overheat.

Alpha Protocol: The Espionage RPG



Obsidian Entertainment, 2010
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

Alpha Protocol was ready for a 2009 release, but its publisher, SEGA, imposed a delay to build up hype. The plan backfire, as *AP* was released right after *Mass Effect 2* and *Splinter Cell: Conviction*, leading to harsh comparisons and slow sales.

I should clarify right at the beginning that, in my opinion, Obsidian Entertainment's *Alpha Protocol* is one of the most under-appreciated action-RPGs of all time. Sure, the game has numerous faults, so it is not entirely Game of the Year material, but it also has several important and well-developed elements in which it surpasses the competition.

As one can see from the subtitle, *Alpha Protocol* invites you into the world of espionage, where you encounter top secret organizations, terrorists, rogue spies, gadgets right out from a James Bond movie and, of course, a secret agent who will save the day. The hero I'm talking about is Michael Thorton, who was just recruited into Alpha Protocol, a super secret organization in the United States.

After a brief introduction, you will start your career with an easy tutorial, followed by your first real assignment: traveling to Saudi Arabia to find and deal with an international terrorist. Of course, this is just the beginning, and soon you will figure out things are not as they look. After a few missions, you will run for your life, with half of the American government breathing down on your neck, not mentioning the Russian mafia, and some bad guys from China.

If you like the political thrillers of Tom Clancy, or the hit TV show *24*, you will feel right at home in the world of *Alpha Protocol*, and you won't be disappointed by the events depicted in the game.

Obviously a good story cannot exist without good characters, and Obsidian pulls this off quite well. Michael Thorton is not a pre-defined character, it's up to players to decide what kind of person he is. An important tool for this is the dialog system, which at first sight is very similar to the dialog wheels used in other RPGs. However, you won't choose what you want to say, but in what manner you want to reply. This way, Thorton can be aggressive, professional, or suave – the three agent archetypes, Jack Bauer, Jason Bourne and James Bond – plus a few other choices, depending on the context. There is a short time limit for choosing, which gives dialogs a nice, natural flow.

Your decisions, your replies, the intel gathered, all have consequences (some bigger, some smaller) to a degree that few other games ever could match, which in itself warrants several playthroughs. You can even choose how to approach missions, such as trying to infiltrate an airbase right at the start or going after a local weapon dealer for intel first.



As you level up you'll gain points that can be spent to gain passive buffs or learn new skills and abilities.



Weapons and gear are customizable in a variety of ways, thanks to upgrades that can be found or purchased.

“The story is gameplay – the alliances/enemies you make in the game effect missions, respect, endgame choices, reactivity, and also special perks for your character as well. Interaction with a character in the game is a game system and gameplay in itself, which was our goal. We didn’t want the story or dialog to be divorced from the missions or gameplay.”

- Chris Avellone,
Alpha Protocol's lead designer



You have a time limit to choose between the various dialog options, and they will all have long-term consequences.

There are several memorable NPCs in the game, although because the story grounded in reality, they are not as far-fetched as in games like *Planescape: Torment*. I have to point out Steven Heck, who must be applauded as one of the most memorable characters in gaming. Every minute the player spends with this psychopath rogue agent is comedic gold. Just don’t be surprised if the guy ties up the hostages, pours some bleach on them and finally sets them on fire.

However, not everything is nice and good, thanks to problems found in the game mechanics. By default, the game is a third-person shooter, mixed up with *Deus Ex* influences and fairly hectic cover mechanics. You can sneak around, evade cameras and knock out unalerted guards, or just draw your weapons and gun everyone down. Being a RPG, *Alpha Protocol* also has a nice (although shallow) character progression system, which lets the player upgrade Thorton’s skills (weapons, martial arts, technical affinity, etc), as well as offering unique passive perks that are unlocked based on your choices, actions and play-style.

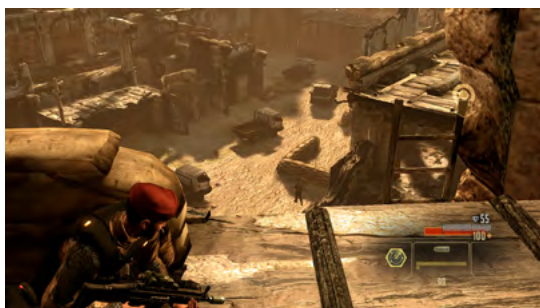
The problem is that some of these abilities are useless, while others are overpowered. For example, using a Stealth skill which briefly turns you invisible together with the Chain Shot skill allows players to easily finish off anybody, even bosses.

Sadly, the game has some shortcoming on the technical department as well. Controls were clearly designed with controllers in mind, which makes the camera movement with a mouse pretty frustrating sometimes. It also has some texture streaming and AI problems, and lacks some overall polish, with players complaining about several minor bugs.

The mini-games are a controversial point, since people are divided whether or not they are designed well. I personally feel that they are among the best of their kind, because they require actual concentration, hand-eye coordination, and they are not focused on quick time events or trivial puzzles. During hacking, you have to find matching lines of codes in a running matrix. To disable an electric circuit, you must solve a visual maze. And to pick a lock, you have to manually move the pins of the lock. It is true that because of the jerky mouse controls, these can become somewhat difficult, but once you get used to how they work, they are quite manageable. And if you get stuck, they can be bypassed with a few EMP grenades.

With all that said, who is this game for? Well, if you value good stories, like to experience the consequences of your choices and love conspiracies, then give *Alpha Protocol* a shot. You might find a rough diamond under the technical difficulties. **JC**

Chris Avellone revealed in a 2013 interview that his plans for a sequel involved a wackier tone, similar to *Kill Bill* and the *Saints Row* games, while also featuring an asynchronous multiplayer element, inspired by *Dark Souls*. However, due to poor sales, SEGA has no interest in a sequel.



The cover mechanics are serviceable, but will occasionally give players a hard time, likely forcing a reload.



The longer you keep your aim reticle over the target, the higher your accuracy and the critical hit chance.

Fallout: New Vegas



Obsidian Entertainment, 2010
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

Four story DLCs were released for *New Vegas*. They tell standalone stories, but tie together to the main plot. The game also got two other DLCs that add new weapons and armors.

People will never stop bickering over whether *Fallout 3* is better than *New Vegas*, and I love that. It's a sign of prosperous times, really. After all they're both excellent games that came out within two years of each other, they both spin the same idea and same franchise to cater to specific tastes, and they both provide some of the most satisfying long-term gameplay in the genre. Plus, that debate always reminds me that *New Vegas* actually exists, which makes me far too giddy to get bitter about anything. Because while I think *Fallout 3* is one of the better RPGs of this generation, I think *Fallout: New Vegas* is the very best game of its generation!

I don't even have to question myself. Out of an entire console generation of RPGs, I thoroughly believe that *Fallout: New Vegas* had the highest standards in choices and consequences, world building that was most relevant to gameplay, the funniest and most thoughtful writing, the most impactful leveling and character progression, the most pleasant tone and atmosphere. The list goes on.

It's a dream team collaboration between Bethesda's tech (a massively detailed open-ended world with a meticulous level of player interaction) and Obsidian's writing (a complicated interactive political

drama) that combined the best qualities of the best modern RPGs. And it certainly helped that the Mojave Wasteland of *New Vegas* was more contemporary, mature and bold. It evoked more *Game of Thrones* than *Road Warrior*.

The Mojave Wasteland wasn't really a wasteland. The people around *New Vegas* have schools, jobs, clean water, food, clinics and a few functioning governments whose conflicts drive the action of the story. *New Vegas* itself is a vacation spot for wealthy retired folks coming in out of state, and that doesn't feel like post-apocalypse. Your character isn't a lone scavenger grasping for survival, he's a gainfully employed courier trying to make a delivery. This desert wasteland was covered in power lines and plumbing pipelines, farms and busy trade routes. The nonsensical fantasy of *Fallout 3* was turned into a fully detailed economy for *New Vegas*, and the productivity of its economy gave actual stakes to the factions vying over it.

Faction play is the star of the show, really. There are an overwhelming number of possibilities for each faction to intersect in and out of each other's storylines in different ways. Faction quests criss-cross into other faction quests, the order in which you take them can affect your possibility of taking others, and the motivations and narrative wrappers surrounding those quests always related to the complexities of the world's economy. The three biggest factions at play all fight with a reasonable and realistic amount of self-interest. You can see where they're coming from. Even Caesar's Legion, who had to have been the villains.

And what great villains they were! Caesar's Legion had an ever-expanding medieval empire that reveled in slavery, torture, sadism and warfare. And what made them truly terrifying is that they weren't moustache-twirlers. *Fallout: New Vegas* is a game about

A vast amount of content and a vast amount of usable items create a satisfying, complicated RPG.



"I guess the thing is, I don't really view RPG and FPS as separate genres. FPS is the style of combat that the game has outside of VATS. But the RPG always influences how you use that combat system, whether it's in VATS or in first-person real-time."

- Josh Sawyer,
New Vegas' Lead Designer



With VATS, the player can cripple specific body parts, damage enemy weapons or shoot unexploded grenades.

economics, after all, so Caesar's Legion weren't evil simply because they enjoyed being evil but rather because they had created a fairly successful war economy that required them to be evil. It required them to systemize a banality of evil. They rationalize the horrible things they do with economics, victim-blaming and their sneering superiority complex. If you lost track of your moral compass, you could easily get talked into seeing things their way. They were terrifying video game villains because they didn't resemble video game villains. They resembled villains from real life. And that was horrifying.

Outside of their torch lit war camps was a vast American desert full of singing cowboys, lounge lizards, mutated Hulks and leatherclad anarchists who had a vast number of stories to tell. The Mojave Wasteland is built as a narrative framing device for its short stories, little *Twilight Zone* side-quests that tell strange and wonderful episodes before the three-part series finale of the main quest.

That's how I was able to squeeze a gratifying 250 hours (that were rarely boring!) out of the game, there's simply an insane amount of enjoyably self-contained stories to be found in the side quests. You can see this same episodic storytelling happening in the

DLCs as well. As one of the few games of its generation to do DLC right, *New Vegas* sold four story additions that were each like mini expansion packs, adding in a good chunk of extra content while also exploring a new story in this universe that had something interesting to tell. And screw the haters, *Dead Money* was the best one!

Fascinating stories, meaningful choices and a thoughtful awareness of its world are baked into nearly every element of this game, and for those reasons it is my favorite game of its generation. These are the reasons why *Fallout: New Vegas* is one of the best FPS-RPGs of all time, and deserves to be as highly regarded as *Deus Ex* and *System Shock 2*. **GW**

Part of the team that worked on *New Vegas* had worked on *Van Burren*, Interplay's canceled third *Fallout*. Many ideas from that game were salvaged, including Caesar's Legion, the Hoover Dam battle and the Burned Man.



Certain companions may tear apart your faction allegiances, if you chose to travel with them.

Mods:

Fallout: New Vegas Mod Manager: Handy tool that makes mod installation, update and removal easier.

JSawyer: Created by the game's own Lead Designer, this mod makes the game harder with various tweaks, such as harsher survival conditions, less HP, lower level cap and adding weight to stimpacks.

Project Nevada: The most popular of all *New Vegas* mods, made by the team that did *Fallout 3: Wanderer's Edition*. It's a huge mod that adds new features, changes to the balancing, new weapons and even implants.

Mission Mohave - Ultimate Edition Plus: This pack not only contains over 27,000 fixes, but also a compilation of over 35 mods to improve your gaming experience.

Fallout - Project Brazil: This mod is an entire new campaign, where a civil war erupts inside your vault.

New Vegas Bounties: Allows you to work as bounty hunter, with a new questline and challenging fights.

No Auto Aim: This mod removes the dice rolls from combat, so that gunplay is more similar to that of FPS.

Mass Effect 2



BioWare, 2010
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3

Mass Effect 2 had over 20 DLC packs. Two of those introduced new companions and came with new copies of the game. Since 2013 those characters can be freely downloaded.

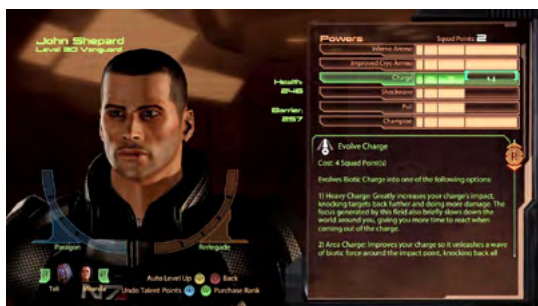
Refined. Dark. Action-Packed. Emotional. *Mass Effect 2* is this and much more, for those willing to brave what lies unknown in the veiled depths of space. The Sci-Fi worlds were strange and mysterious, and the writing was right on par with BioWare's library of titles. Gameplay that was practically untouched with third-person shooters of the time (pause-and-play tactics, conversation mechanics) made it a breath of fresh air for those who enjoyed action RPGs with a touch of strategy. It was that delicious combination of innovative combat, cinematic storytelling, and the well-made universe itself that grabbed me. By the end of the game, I asked myself one simple question: "how will they top this?" In 2010, I got my answer.

After successfully stomping out one of the biggest threats in the milky way, your role as Commander Shepard is put in an atypical position where who you're fighting for may not be so cut-and-dry. Your goal, above all else, is to find the best of the best among the galaxy. Recruiting them to your side, you'll need to survive a journey nothing short of a suicide mission. BioWare is known for their character-driven writing, and that combined with the roster in *Mass*

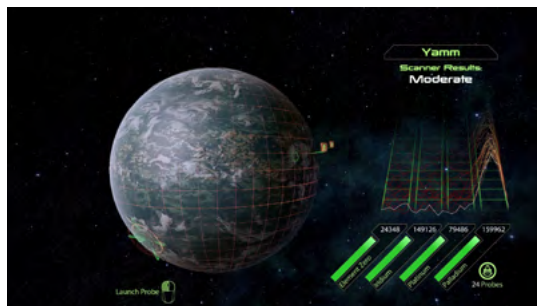
Effect 2 makes the group of squadmates easily the best from the trilogy. Previously unseen races make unexpected debuts, personalities vary drastically from each other (and collide, on occasion), with a volume of characters spanning far beyond the original.

The combat was the biggest leap the developers had made with *Mass Effect 2*. Similar to the original, Shepard used a combination of cover, shooting skill, and cool down-based powers to succeed against the enemy. Undaunted, BioWare had taken a great deal from the original and tossed it straight out of the airlock. Gunplay had greater balance, the leveling system was skimmed down from its somewhat overwhelming version via the original, and the shooting accuracy was no longer bogged down by your firing rate. Your leveled abilities could evolve into unique permutations that fit your playstyle.

While the original had a greater emphasis on traditional story arcs combined with side quests, *Mass Effect 2* decided to divide them up with a wide variety of character-driven stories. Some of these were coupled into the storyline, and some were focused purely on the squadmate; often a search deeply tied into their past. And it was glorious.



The game provides a wealth of upgrades. Some can be bought, others must be discovered.



You can no longer land on random planets and must instead mine them, in a way reminiscent of *Star Control II*.

“We’re really highlighting the shooter aspect of it. We haven’t actually taken away any of the RPG systems, but we want to package it so that everything is a little bit more intuitive, more streamlined, and overall the experience is like, ‘Ah, I played through this incredible story.’ A typical BioWare story. But how we played through it felt much smoother.”

- Adrien Cho,
Mass Effect 2 lead producer



Mass Effect 2 comes with an explosive visual take on Biotic/Tech abilities, both old and new.

The atmosphere of *Mass Effect 2* is a quite a bit darker than its predecessor. A spot like Omega is nothing short of pandemonium; a veritable grab bag of debauchery, treacherous fiends, and organized guns-for-hire, looking for an excuse to gain some easy money. The barren wastelands of Tuchanka were a fitting example of the history of the species that roams it, serving as a reminder of the past and something for your character to reflect on for the future. This atmosphere is helped in due part to the graphical upgrades of the game. Biotic powers explode on the screen like the force on steroids. Larger Set pieces add an extra layer of “wow” moments to the already lush and varied worlds. That combined with some of the new species makes for plenty of incentive to check the nooks and crannies of *Mass Effect 2*.

While the wheel of choosing dialogue options remains the same at its core, the newly-added interrupt system delivers a clever set of options taking place in real-time. Cinematics were no longer a passive event, which could in turn make the difference between the life and death of another.

In an uncommon turn of events, the choices you’d made in the original game could have significant effects to those in the sequel. While the changes

weren’t as extensive as those from *ME2* to *ME3*’s, it re-popularized the idea of having your story be affected from the very beginning to the very end, and not just from game to game. This hit a peak during the later part of the game, where loyalty to your comrades and knowing your team was more important than ever.

Wildly different from its ancestor, *Mass Effect 2* is a greatly refined formula of action-based role-playing game that bursts through guns blazing in entertainment value, while building a level of squad mate interaction that feels far deeper than people were expecting. Balanced, emotional, and all-around satisfying, it’s easily one of my top RPGs of all time. *Mass Effect 2* is a shining example of how to make a stellar sequel, and has earned its place in gaming history for good reason. **GT**

Mods:

Coalesced.ini Mod Manager: Makes modding easier, by handling changes made to the configuration file.

Better ME2: Adds some gameplay and usability tweaks, a bit of rebalancing, cleaner HUD and gamepad support.

Hybrid Combat: Aims to make the combat more similar to that of *Mass Effect 1*, changing how reloading works and other tweaks, such as weapon damage.

Vetron’s Loadout Mod: Changes weapons and armors to be more similar to *Mass Effect 3*, rebalancing them so that every weapon & armor has something to offer.

Flash’s Mass Effect 2 Mod: This mod aims to balance a few aspects of the game and to make the gameplay closer to the game’s lore. Perhaps most important, it makes that enemy’s shield regenerate, just like yours.

High Resolution Texture Mod: Replace character’s textures for high-resolution ones. A very impressive mod.

Casual Outfit Beyond Normandy: A big pack of casual clothes, that you can now wear even outside the ship.



Your companions are the core of *Mass Effect 2*. Uncovering their past can come with surprising results.

Dungeons of Dredmor



Gaslamp Games, 2011
Windows, Mac and Linux

Dungeons of Dredmor has three DLC that add numerous new items, monsters and classes. The first DLC was released for free, as a gift to the community.

Dungeons of Dredmor is an interesting take on the modern roguelike. While many other games try to take elements of the genre and mesh them into other models, *Dredmor* takes the core roguelike formula and plays around with it to make it accessible and customizable, but hard to master.

The game offers three difficulty levels, plus the option to toggle permadeath and increase or decrease the size of the dungeons. This allows people to play *Dredmor* at their own pace and get a feel for the game before going for the true roguelike experience. The “No time to Grind” mode is especially nice since it speeds up the game, allowing for quick sessions. This ease of access helps to attract those curious about the genre, yet still offer a challenging experience.

Dungeons of Dredmor’s main objective is to reach the bottom of the dungeon and slay the evil Lord Dredmor. While it sounds run-of-the-mill, everything else is goofy and light-hearted in nature. The game has no qualms about taking common game tropes and putting a ridiculous spin on things, such as item vending machines, enemies shouting witty remarks, countless pop culture references and some humorous item and skill descriptions.

Another unique thing about the game is its progression system. Unlike standard roguelikes where there’s a focus on stats and gear, *Dungeons of Dredmor* relies on skill-trees for character growth. Players pick seven out of the 20 skills (32 with the expansions and countless more through mods on Steam Workshop) available to them and are dumped into the game. The skill trees range from traditional ones, such as “swords” and “smithing”, to humorous ones like “emomancy”, “communist” and “tourist”. Each skill influences things such as starting gear, passive traits and active skills; however players only get one skill point per level, so its important to choose wisely.

Depending on what skills players have picked, they can also craft various forms of gear from random materials found in the dungeon. Crafted items can range from the standard weapons and armor to more exotic things such as potions, traps, wands and – why not – a clockwork power-limb. This gives the player an element of control they can establish among all the random variables, allowing them to build towards optimal victory or silly gimmick builds.

Dungeons of Dredmor’s skill system offered so much flexibility that I personally kept coming back, clocking more than 300 hours of game time. Its a great alternative take on the roguelike model, and generally has something for anyone who’s willing to play it. **JR**

An unexpected mini-boss can suddenly end an adventure. Or not, if you disabled permadeath.



Dredmor offers the somewhat rare chance to play as a dual-wielding vegan geologist pirate with mathematical powers and communist leanings.



Frayed Knights: The Skull of S'makh-Daon



Frayed Knights: The Skull of S'makh-Daon is full of mirthful personality from the title of the game to its jovial conclusion. It is a turn-based first-person dungeon crawler with no character creation, as you are forced to play the straight-laced elven warrior Arianna, an arrogant thief called Dirk, a healer/hipster who goes by Benjamin, and the ditzy blonde sorceress with a streak of pyromania named Chloe. Their personalities are all well portrayed, with key dialogues occurring at set times throughout the main quest. These four heroes are considered outcasts by the rest of the adventuring community; the proverbial bottom rings of the social ladder.

Things are so bad for them, that even the first monsters battled are designed as part of a grotesque in-game joke. Yet despite how laughable the enemy is, the party will have to use many of their supplies to survive the initial dungeon. Later, when you are able to stay at a local inn, the group will have to return to rest often as they exhaust their hit points and endurance. Managing your endurance is almost as important as your health, as an exhausted party will be limited in their available actions during combat.

This game is quite tough, but more so due to the incompetence of your party than how intimidating your first opponents are. Your sorceress will often miss with her critical spells, and your rogue and priest don't seem to do much damage in the rare instances they can land a strike with their own weapons. Frayed Knights admirably simulates trying to survive a basic dungeon crawl via a party of losers.

But if you are careful on how you improve your characters' feats as they level, and if you try to keep them focused on a party role as you progress, you suddenly find yourself almost able to call your misfits competent by mid-game.

The game introduces a "Drama Star" system as an aid to the player, but also as an incentive not to save scum. Drama Star points are earned for overcoming challenges, and can be used later to instantly aid the party by restoring health, bringing back a fallen character, etc. Loading a saved game wipes the saved drama stars out. The system unfortunately works against those that have a busier personal life, since those that can only find the time to play the game for an hour at a time will be unable to fully enjoy the advantages of the drama stars.

Towards the end of the game everything begins to come together in a satisfying way. If you took time to develop your party right and completed the side quests, your adventurers have an easier time slicing through the final enemy masses trying to impede your way. I enjoyed a satisfying conclusion where Arianna, Dirk, Benjamin and Chloe earned the respect of their peers and are finally considered heroes. As a player, you will also earn a sense of accomplishment for building up a bunch of ragtag losers into a successful fighting force. **DT**



You'll fight some laughable creatures, but they will prove a challenge to your also laughable party.

E.Y.E. Divine Cybermancy



Stream On Studio, 2011
Windows

Huan

Before *E.Y.E.*, the developers created a *Half-Life* mod called *Syndicate Black Ops*. It was released in 2004 and set in the same universe as *E.Y.E.*

Released in 2011, *E.Y.E.: Divine Cybermancy* is the debut of French Stream On Studio. It is an ambitious and unique shooter/RPG hybrid, which is interesting, considering how shamelessly it “borrows influences” from various sources, especially from pulp fiction like *Warhammer 40k*, *Shadowrun*, Lovecraftian horror and other video games.

The game takes place in an amalgam of various settings that you might recognize immediately – a dystopian future where humanity is ruled by feuding megacorps, where contact has been made with hostile aliens, and where the world is threatened by the coming of the “metastreumonic force”, a mysterious throng of beasts spawned from psionics and nightmares. The player is a member of the titular E.Y.E – an organization of psionic cybercommando warrior-monks. But E.Y.E is no exception to the rest of the world – its once brotherly factions of Jian Shang Di and Culter Dei are now at their throats.

E.Y.E is a game about many things, but it is primarily about confusion, chaos and betrayal. Make no mistake, the paragraph above shows just about the only things you can be certain of (or can you?) when it comes to the game’s narrative.

Events that will make you question the entire game start happening very soon, and accompany you all the way to the “end”. The atmosphere crafted in this game is superb, and it takes you on a true roller-coaster of emotions and sensations. This is achieved thanks to the mix of the mundane and the mystical.

On one hand, you have typical spec ops missions that require you to infiltrate various places, perform false flag operations, etc. But on the other, everything is coated with a layer of esotericism – unexplainable events take place, your character suffers repeated bouts of amnesia, delusion and insanity. As you keep playing, you realize you simply have no one to trust, not even yourself, and the game laughs in your face every time you think you finally understood it.

All these aspects also contribute a lot to another of *E.Y.E*’s highlights – the non-linearity. There are a few moments where you need to take sides and make decisions that influence the rest of the campaign. This adds tons of replayability, but also further enforces your paranoia – Do I betray the guy that is probably betraying me as we speak for the other faction that is shady as hell? Or maybe I should choose the third dude who’s been acting suspiciously since the start!



The visuals vary between cyberpunk dystopias, cryptic dreamscapes and windswept wastelands.



The character building options are vast, including skills, implants, PSI powers and even a research system.

“We believe the role from the developers is not necessarily to please the player, nor to simplify the games. Doing that might drive to what is more and more frequent: a standardization of the market. And in *E.Y.E* it is essential for the dramatic tension to let the player assume his own choices.”

- Streum-on-Studio



No kidding.

As for mechanics, *E.Y.E* manages to be both a solid shooter and an RPG, which is an impressive feat. It gives you plenty of guns that really feel like proper guns, have various ups and downs, traits, recoil, hit-box-varied damage, etc, including a 4-bullet hand-cannon and a miniature nuke launcher.

You can also use melee weapons and grenades, set up turrets and grab a gundrone to follow you around. The enemies obviously respond in kind, bum-rushing you en masse, sniping from afar or using some seriously heavy ordnance like plasma cannons and gunships.

The neat thing is that you can also toggle the difficulty to your liking with sliders for the AI's accuracy, reflexes, etc. From the RPG side, you have a lot of customization available to you. Apart from guns, you can also get a whole lot of psionic powers, cyber augmentations and stat boosts, which are bought or acquired from research and XP. You can also hack everything you encounter in different ways – destroy, leech stamina or take control. Just be careful you don't get counter-hacked.

The differences between playing a melee beast, a sharpshooter or a psyker are also fairly big and support different playstyles well.

The technical side is also an important contributor to the overall atmosphere. *E.Y.E* is running on the dated Source Engine, but the developers still managed to squeeze a lot of juice out of it, mostly thanks to the art direction. The environments are fairly varied, including futuristic cyberpunk cities, red dunes of Mars, mysterious ruins and Asian-inspired temples.

Finally, and this is a funny point, *E.Y.E* has been infamous since its release because of its downright terrible translation. Indeed, the dialogs and flavor texts have some seriously broken grammar and bizarre choice of vocabulary, and are generally confusing, although not to the point to make the game unplayable. Interestingly enough, this botched translation actually contributes a lot to the overall feeling of estrangement, as the oneiric atmosphere is only further strengthened when every character sounds either like a mystical sensei or a raving lunatic.

E.Y.E is a very cool game, and one that I can recommend wholeheartedly. It takes a while to get used to, sometimes can be crushingly difficult, and you'll wonder what the hell is going on all the time, but the ride is definitely worth it, and it can also be played in co-op if you want to get confused with some buddies. Just make sure you patch it properly. **DR**



The hacking mini-game has you selecting actions to invade an AI, that can and will hack you back.



Some of *EYE*'s inspirations are a little less subtle than the others.

Dark Souls



From Software, 2011
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

Initially there were no plans for a PC port, but fans created an online petition and gathered more than 93,000 signatures, surprising the developers.

To talk about *Dark Souls*, one has to first talk about *Demon's Souls*. An ARPG released on PlayStation 3 to little initial fanfare (to the point of being passed over by Sony for localization, a decision they later came to regret) it gradually acquired a cult following. There are many reasons for its appeal, but the most often cited ones are its unforgiving but fair difficulty, methodical and balanced battle system, smart level design, well-realized starkly gothic setting, and unique, entirely novel asynchronous and synchronous multiplayer features.

Dark Souls builds upon this foundation, adding a seamlessly traversable, interconnected world with even more content and multiplayer opportunities into the mix, making *Demon's Souls* feels like a beta test for what would become *Dark Souls*.

In terms of plot, *Dark Souls* is minimalistic, and it depends upon players piecing together background information presented in item descriptions and environmental clues to fully understand its lore. It takes place in a universe where many humans are cursed with the "Darksign", forcing them to wander the earth for eternity, reviving after each death, slowly losing their humanity. Players are cast into the role of the "Chosen Undead", and must end this curse.

Almost every equipment piece in *Dark Souls* is a viable choice, allowing players to customize their characters anyway they want.



Over the course of this endeavor, they'll interact with eclectic – and often eccentric – NPCs, many of which are involved in their own quests. Like the main story of the game, most of these side-quests and their outcomes are not immediately obvious, and need to be discovered. In fact it could well be the case that anyone playing the game for the first time and without accessing third-party information will not even realize that they are happening, and that their actions might have changed some outcome.

Analyzing the game's mechanics compared to other RPGs, it falls into the category of class-less ARPGs with an open story and world structure. While players choose a starting class when first creating their character, it only serves to determine their initial stat distribution, as well as starting equipment and spells. Afterwards, every character can freely distribute points into various stats at level up, and use any given equipment or spell as long as they meet its requirements.

The mechanics of saving and death are quite unique, and linked intrinsically with the game's story. As in *Planescape: Torment*, you play a character who is essentially immortal. However, unlike that game there is a strict penalty for death, and saving is constant and automatic, meaning you must endure every choice you make. Upon death, the game returns you to the last bonfire (serving as checkpoints) you rested at, and all your Souls (the game's currency, used both to purchase items and to level up) are lost. You may retrieve them where you died, but dying again while trying to do so will result in them disappearing forever. This rather unforgiving system has earned the game its reputation for difficulty, together with the requirement for careful exploration and concentration in every battle, which we will discuss next.

"I would like players to conquer the difficulty and enjoy taking on formidable enemies and going back and forth in dungeons. The process of overcoming the challenge and the feeling of accomplishment brought by breaking through each difficulty is the value we would like to offer to them."

- Hidetaka Miyazaki
Dark Souls' Director



Dark Souls many challenges seem impossible at first, but they are all fair and surpassable by a focused player.

Battles in *Dark Souls* are quite a different affair compared to most other ARPGs. They don't at all fit with the *Diablo*-clones and their hordes of enemies, generally opting for a smaller number of more dangerous foes. Neither are they trying to emulate pure action games with their complex systems of combos and counters. Instead, they are comparatively slow and thoughtful affairs, where careful positioning and choosing your weapons as well as the field of battle wisely for each encounter is at least as important as having fast reflexes.

A central component to the system is stamina, a replenishing resource used up when attacking, blocking with a shield, evading and casting spells. Managing stamina is essential to being successful in battles. Many of the game's systems are carefully designed in order to enhance the situational nature of battles. As one example, *Dark Souls* is one of the very few games where using a polearm or long sword in confined tunnel is inadvisable, as collisions between your weapon and level geometry are actually detected. This focus on rewarding careful approaches is evident in another major strength of the game, its exploration.

The world and its levels are deeply interwoven, filled with secrets, deadly traps, and shortcuts which make deeper forays from each bonfire easier. In this context, *Dark Souls'* asynchronous multiplayer features need to be mentioned. The game allows every player to place in-game messages, in the form of glowing runes on the ground. These can point out hidden paths, treasure, traps, enemies, or they can be entirely untruthful and designed to lead trusting player to their deaths. However, the latter instance is usually kept in check by a rating system for messages. As a more passive but no less useful feature in exploration, player deaths result in bloodstains in other player's worlds, and can be touched in order to see the dying player's last moments as a phantom.

On the topic of phantoms, while *Dark Souls* is a fantastic single-player RPG, it also features a multitude of popular multiplayer options, which remain popular months and years after its release. All of them are based on the concept of phantom s visiting – or invading – the world of a host player, neatly circumventing the plethora of continuity or design issues which might occur when trying to fit more traditional multiplayer into a single-player RPG.

It is the combination of its challenging battles, exquisitely designed levels and bosses deadly for the unwary, constant danger of invasion, and punishing death mechanics which makes the moment-to-moment gameplay of *Dark Souls* so exhilarating. What makes it rewarding though is that all of these dangers are almost invariably fair and can be mastered – by learning the game's mechanics, carefully studying each environment and always proceeding with caution. **DU**

Mods:

DSFix: The PC version of *Dark Souls* is a lousy port, featuring locked framerate and capped resolution. Released the exact same day as the game, this mod allows you to play at any resolution and/or framerate you wish, among other improvements. A must-have.

Mouse Fix: *Dark Souls* plays better with a controller, but if you wish to play with keyboard and mouse, this mod will make your life a lot easier.

Self Gravelording: Black Phantoms are additional, stronger enemies that can be summoned into your world by an invader to destroy you. This mod turns them on by default, making the game a lot harder.

Hyper-Aggressive Enemies: Makes enemies able to see you from far away and chase you anywhere. Use it with *Self Gravelording* for the ultimate challenge.

The Witcher 2: Assassin of Kings



CD Projekt RED, 2011
Windows, Mac, Linux and Xbox 360

In 2012 CD Projekt released *The Witcher 2: Enhanced Edition*. It added over 10GB of new content, and was a free update for those who already owned the game.

The *Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* is CDProjekt RED's single-character action-RPG sequel to 2007's *The Witcher* by the same company. This time fate puts Geralt on trail of eponymous assassins, who have recently made a habit of collecting crowned heads all over the world. One of their victims is King Foltest of Temeria, for whom the protagonist has been working as a bodyguard after the events of the first game. Accused of regicide, Geralt needs to seek out the real murderers to prove his innocence and, with his usual luck, gets entangled in more than one political and military conflict along the way, and forced to kill a lot of people.

The game's differences from its predecessor are visible at a first glance. It runs on an entirely new engine (called REDengine), developed from scratch by CDProjekt RED and was at the time of its release one of the best-looking games on the market (and is still is visually impressive now, three years later). Sound and music follow suite, although the soundtrack by Adam Skorupa and Krzysztof Wierzyński is more of a traditional orchestra than the folk-inspired bagpipe music of the first game. The top-down view and point-and-click movement are gone and the cam-

era is now fixed squarely behind Geralt's back, with his moves controlled by keyboard only, which brings the player much closer to the action. There are also significantly more cutscenes.

Most of the systems from *The Witcher* are still present, although simplified or streamlined. Alchemy does not require an alcohol base any more, and can be performed anywhere, due to meditation not needing a bonfire any more. Inventory has been switched from grid-based to list-based, allowing for the use of a controller. New additions include a rudimentary stealth mode, and quick-time events, both appearing a few times in the game. Quick-time events are also the new system for fist-fighting, which is back along with dice poker. The third and new mini-game is arm-wrestling.

Character system has been reworked from scratch and consists of three separate skill trees, one each for sword-fighting, magic (witcher signs), and alchemy, with the most powerful skills unlocking after certain pre-requisites are met. In addition, Geralt will find rare items called mutagens, which randomly drop from monsters and/or are created as by-products of alchemy. These mutagens can then be inserted into slots attached to some skills (13 in total, the most in alchemy tree), granting a permanent bonus.

The game is comparable in size to its predecessor, with similar ratio of dialogue to combat to exploration. The number of people that Geralt can talk to is somewhat reduced, but they are a comparably diverse and colorful bunch and usually have more to say on average. It is perhaps worth noting that the number of casual sex encounters has been reduced, as Geralt is now in a more-or-less stable relationship with sorceress Triss Merigold.

The inventory was entirely redone to better fit controllers, but feels awkward when using mouse & keyboard.



“We really created an ambitious game and we didn’t want to limit our artistic expression. Nudity is considered normal in the best TV shows nowadays, especially when it serves the story – so why should gamers be treated like children? The sex themes in *The Witcher 2* are deeply rooted in the story, and they are not there just to show off.”

– Maciej Szczesnik,
Lead Combat Designer



Combat became more action-oriented, with Geralt mixing strong and fast attacks with the occasional (or rather frequent) dodge roll.

Wilderness areas are not as open as in the first game and usually resemble a collection of intertwining wide corridors. This makes the world seem smaller, although Geralt will spend a similar amount of time running around it, including some dungeon delving into caves, mines and crypts.

Combat has been switched from hack-and-slash of the original game to more typical third-person-perspective action. Movement is keyboard-controlled and three separate fighting stances are gone, with fast and strong attacks instead just mapped to different buttons. Geralt still uses two swords, steel against normal and silver against supernatural opponents, and can now also throw knives for a rudimentary ranged attack. Other melee weapons, such as axes, hammers, clubs and halberds are available, but as in the first game, much less effective than swords because of witcher training focus. Defensive moves include rolling and blocking, the latter consuming vigor, which is also the resource used for casting signs, witcher magic. Signs work more or less as before, except for Quen, using which now creates magical armour, absorbing damage.

One of strongest points of the game, and in my opinion is significantly better than the first game’s, is the plot. What makes it truly unique is the ability to

experience chapter #2 of the game from one of two distinct perspectives. Depending on a choice made in the previous chapter, Geralt will end up either in a besieged dwarven fortress town or in a military camp of the army laying said siege, with both options providing unique quests, storylines and point of view for the unfolding events. This binary choice gives an incentive to replay the game and allows for an additional insight into the story and motivations of certain characters, if the player plays through both of the paths.

In all honesty, if you expect a straight follow-up to *The Witcher*, you might not like *Assassins of Kings*. The differences are numerous and affect the game on many levels, and there is no question that the sequel is mechanically more shallow. On the other hand, *The Witcher 2* is still a great-looking (and sounding), enjoyable action-RPG with great characters and deep, complex plot, just like its predecessor. It is just cut from a different mold. **WM**



In May 2011, the Polish version of Playboy featured one of the game’s character, Triss Merigold, on the cover.



The game’s graphics made a huge lead from the first game, and the voice acting also improved significantly.

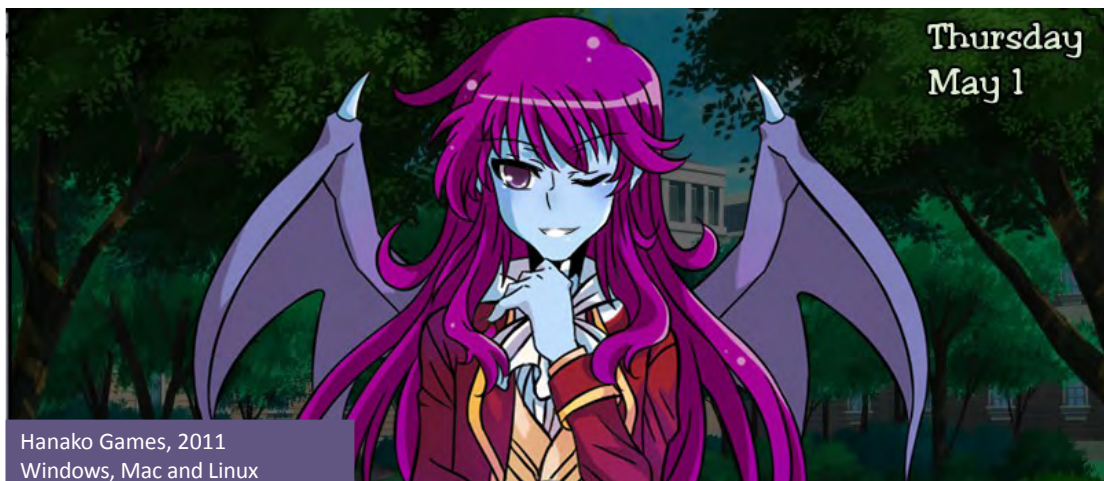
In May 2013 CD Projekt released the beta version of REDkit, a toolkit to create mods and adventures for *The Witcher 2*. They have offered ample support and various tutorials, but not many mods have been released yet. Here are the most noteworthy:

Full Combat Rebalance 2: Mod created by Andrzej Kwiatkowski, now a gameplay designer at CD Projekt. The mod is huge, over 8 GB in size, and includes various changes to the game’s balance, including tweaks to the combat system and new animations.

Enhanced Mod Compilation: A compilation of minor changes that aim to remove the most banal aspects of the game without altering balance. Changes include reducing some item’s weight and adding auto-loot.

Lykaon: Still under development, this ambitious adventure was chosen best mod of REDkit’s closed beta and tells the tale of Geralt first meeting Triss Merigold.

Magical Diary



Hanako Games, 2011
Windows, Mac and Linux

What the hell? - asks the reader, looking at this page. *Magical Diary*, a visual novel/RPG hybrid - I tell him - a game with one of the most interesting magic systems ever.

You're a girl sent to a magical Hogwarts-like school, where you must attend classes, make friends and overall survive college life. The writing is quite good, and even the romances are interesting, going beyond the usual one-sided pandering relationships.

Each week you must decide your schedule, choosing what magic classes to attend - and eventually learn spells. The game features five magic schools, each with 12 spells, plus 16 combination spells, that require a set number of points in two schools. So you're looking at over 70 spells to play with, such as Find Spirits, Anti-Magic Field and Stoneshape.

These can occasionally be used to solve (or cause) daily issues, but to me the dungeons are the real highlight here. Once in a while you'll have to take tests, that teleport you to a maze and require you to reach the exit. The challenges range from a monster hunting you to a rival wizard, or just a big chasm to cross. And the solutions are all up to you. For example, to escape the monster you can kill it with damage spells, teleport it elsewhere, teleport yourself to the exit, distract it, scare it away, blind it, put it to sleep, turn invisible or even simply dig a tunnel across the maze. It's an extremely rich system that really offers you the proper range of choices a spellcaster should have, instead of simply being a range damage-dealer, shooting fireballs everywhere, like in many "real" RPGs.

The big downside of *Magical Diary* is how short it is. Even slowly reading everything for the first time will take you only about 5 hours, and there's simply not enough room to explore its magical system. Many spells only have one use in-game, so you're likely to end without even casting half of your spellbook. And sadly, there are only seven dungeons in the game.

Still, the game is quite replayable. It's fun to learn different spells to try new solutions on the dungeons, and the story can go interesting and unexpected places depending on how you choose to act.

Don't let prejudice put you off; *Magical Diary* is a solid experience, that brings a much needed breath of fresh air into the genre. **FE**

Your character has 4 attributes: Smart, Strong, Cute and Weird. The last one is the funniest to focus.



Using clever solutions, like teleporting a monster away instead of fighting it, awards you school merits.



Defender's Quest: Valley of the Forgotten



Defender's Quest is simply a great game. This is definitely not the type of game I would normally play. In fact, I had never played a tower defense game before or since. What really appealed to me about the game were the RPG elements, and it didn't fail to deliver. The story combines with the combat and character development to make a surprisingly inspired game.

There is an actual story to this game that drives everything forward. The main character, Azra, is infected by a plague and thrown into a pit from where she must escape. As the story unfolds you'll discover the driving force behind the plague and seek to put an end to it. I really enjoyed the writing, and, while the humor was a bit offbeat, there were several occasions where I literally laughed out loud. There's the clichéd, somewhat dumb warrior (who has some priceless lines), a sarcastic archer, a noble knight, and a greedy egotistical dragon. It's a great mixture that allows for all kinds of comedic interactions.

The game is fairly straightforward: you have to protect your main character and defeat all the waves of attacking enemy forces. This is achieved through carefully positioning your characters at choke points on the map. Adding some tactical depth to the gameplay are the class system and magic spells. There are six different classes, which all have unique skills with varying areas of effect, so careful positioning is the key to victory. As characters level up, you spend points in their skill trees to unlock new abilities or improve existing ones. Azra is immobile during battles, but can spend mana to summon allies, upgrade them or on various spells to assist in eliminating the hostile hordes. Coming up with strategies to leverage your army's abilities towards victories, preferably flawless ones, is the real beauty of the combat system.

All the maps have four levels of difficulty to choose from (with the harder tiers obviously netting better rewards), and there's a NG+ mode that adds a new type of currency for the best items. The game is also surprisingly long, clocking around 20 hours.

Believe me, even if this isn't something you'd normally play, it is very capable of engulfing you with its charm. I loved it so much I didn't even hesitate to pre-order *Defender's Quest II*. **RR**

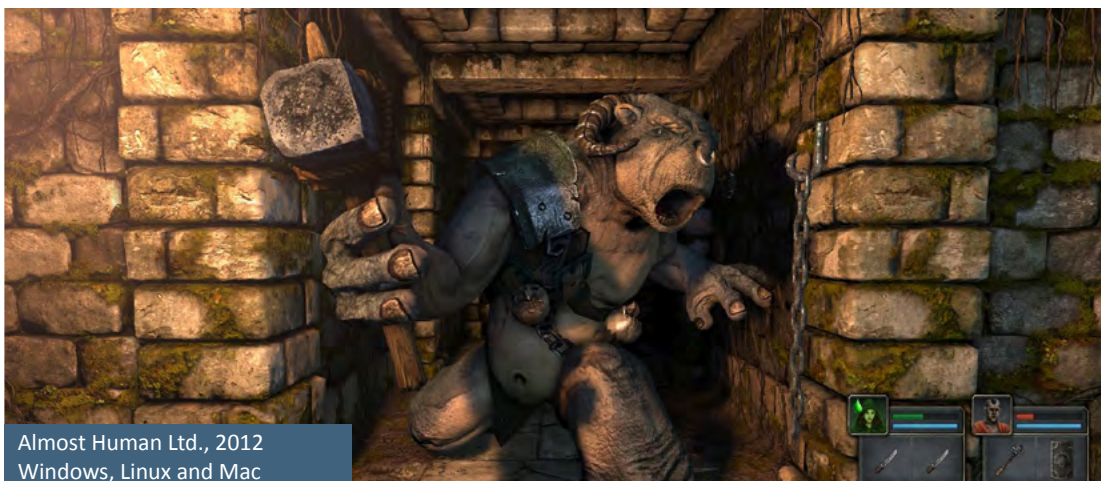


While the initial challenges are easy to complete, some later stages that may require you to come back stronger.



Besides the skill trees, there's also a large number of items for you to equip your characters, including unique weapons and armor.

Legend of Grimrock



Almost Human Ltd., 2012
Windows, Linux and Mac

In January 2014 a live-action-webseries based on *Legend of Grimrock* was funded on Kickstarter, made by the same team responsible for *Nuka Break*. It also includes Chris Avellone as writer.

When the Indie game scene took off in 2008 I was hoping that some of the abandoned game genres from yesteryear might make a comeback. To my surprise a group of Finns were thinking the exact same thing and made *Legend of Grimrock*, a game that honors the real-time grid-based dungeon crawlers from back in the day.

In terms of game design and what to expect, *Grimrock* picks up exactly where those games left off in the mid-90s, and then adds some new tricks of its own. The de facto-standards of a full-screen view, a minimal UI, an in-built automap and easy inventory management are all present, but then today's standards of graphics and sound are added. Realistic lights and shadows, full animations for the monsters and even a freelook view. For someone who grew up playing many of the predecessors to *Grimrock*, this feels somewhat like riding in a horsecart with wheel suspension and an in-built air conditioner...not that I'm complaining.

The plot is basic and non-intrusive: Your party is comprised of convicts that are thrown into the eponymous mountain-prison with the promise that your escape will grant you amnesty for your crimes.

A voice that speaks in your dreams urges you to come find it at the bottom of the mountain, and you'll soon find journal pages of an adventurer that came before you. For once the world doesn't need saving, it's just a personal quest for freedom.

Grimrock goes for the classical "4 party members" approach, but its minimal character creation system is somewhat disappointing. You have 4 races and 3 classes, with 3 of the races being custom-tailored towards one of the classes and then humans are thrown in as all-rounders. Further customization is attained through the skill system, where there are plenty of skills to learn but not enough skill points to go round. As a result Fighters have to choose a preferred weapon and Mages have to pick a preferred school of magic. I can't shake the feeling that they could have done better with both the character system and the skill system.

Another valid point of criticism is the UI. A minimal UI can be a good thing, but when it's too small it becomes a problem. Misclicks become far too common and the spell interface only makes things worse. 9 runes are arranged like a keypad with certain combos needing to be selected to cast a spell. Sounds



The monsters of *Grimrock* all make sense from an ecological perspective... except for the giant crabs.



There's a secret mode where you can enter the dungeon alone as Toorun, an unique all-around character.

“We feel that puzzles and also party-based gameplay to some extent are lacking in modern RPGs, and this is one of the factors that led into development of *Grimrock*. But more importantly we are huge fans of the genre and can’t bear that these types of awesome games are not made anymore. So clearly somebody had to step in and do something.”

- Petri Häkkinen,
Almost Human co-founder



Mages not only have to spend skill points to master the various schools of magic, but also need to find the scrolls that contain the actual spells.

Sounds nice on paper, but it’s horrible in practice.

One problem that has plagued games of this ilk from the beginning has been how easy it is to render combat almost meaningless with the “combat mambo”. Attack a monster, side-step, turn to face where the monster will move to and repeat until the monster is dead. While several solutions exist for this, *Grimrock* takes the subtle approach of building each level to minimize the amount of room available, preferring serpentine corridors rather than open spaces. Sometimes the dungeon contains small arenas, rooms with no escapes and plenty of monsters.

The game feels a little lonely at times as there is no one around to talk to. This actually benefits the

atmosphere as the sense of isolation made me use my resources in a more sensible manner, especially the potion-crafting system that the game offers.

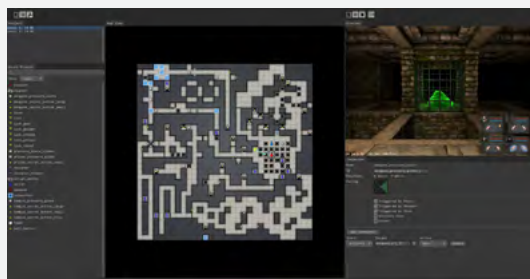
Legend of Grimrock is first and foremost an homage to a school of game design that is considered outdated, but clearly not unwanted, as it has spawned a sequel and a few similar games are being worked on as this is written. It’s not often that one game can revive a gaming subgenre, but that’s exactly what *Legend of Grimrock* did. **AV**

Fan-made dungeons:

One of *Grimrock*’s high points is the dungeon editor. As grid-based dungeons are much easier to plan and build, there’s been plenty of fan-made dungeons made. Here are some of the highlights::

The Master Quest: It’s the original campaign with extra content. Works very well and is highly enjoyable.

Mines of Malan Vael: A short dungeon with a new mine tileset. Find out why all the workers in a mine have disappeared.



The level editor is easy to understand, and provides a great deal of freedom when in able hands.

The Master Key: A dungeon that’s heavily inspired by *Dungeon Master*, a nice mixture of puzzles and combat. The author also did a dungeon based on *Chaos Strikes Back*, but it is not as enjoyable as this one.

The Forbidden Halls: One of the earliest dungeons made for Grimrock is also one of the better ones. Your party discovers some abandoned halls and decides to explore them. It features some odd and annoying additions, but overall it’s quite enjoyable.



The *Mines of Malan Vael* campaign features various new fan-made assets, including a new tileset.

Paper Sorcerer



Paper Sorcerer is a throwback to the glorious 1980s, paying homage to great blobbers of old and to the point-and-click adventures from the MacVenture series, such as *Shadowgate*.

The most evil of sorcerers has been up to some usual naughty shenanigans, terrorizing innocents and wreaking havoc, so a group of heroes of the land has been forced to imprison this danger to society inside a magical book. You play as that evil sorcerer (or sorceress) who must now find a way to break free and exact revenge, an obvious connection to the plot of *Wizardry IV: The Return of Werdna*.

The monochrome visual style is original and beautifully minimalist, with the sleek ink design illustrating the central theme of a world within a book. Those familiar with *Uninvited* or *Shadowgate* will note the artistic similarities, and I can't help but think the creator must love that series very much. As for the 80s synth pop music, while not as enchanted by it as with the visuals, I appreciate its simplicity and how it ties in nicely with the overall sensibility to that decade. The story is also thematically minimalistic, complementing other artistic and gameplay elements in portraying a sense of urgency.

The core gameplay of *Paper Sorcerer* consist of 3D first-person exploration and puzzle solving with 2D turn-based combat. The game's dungeon is made of different levels within the magical book prison, each having three floors followed by a boss area. You'll encounter enemies as floating black clouds, and combat begins once you approach them.

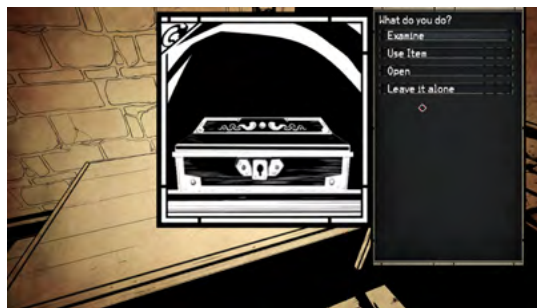
Being yourself a powerful spellcaster, you won't have to fight alone. Similarly to *Wizardry IV*, you can summon minions to help you, creating a party of up to four characters. You may choose from creatures such as skeletons, minotaurs, ghosts, vampires, imps, goblins, witches, cultists, werewolves, trolls and other nasty monsters; each one possessing a wide variety of skills and magic, giving you a wide range of different party compositions and battle strategies.

In combat both enemies and party members have Defense Points, which block physical damage but get reduced which each blow. Health can only be recovered by casting spells, resting or using potions, but you always begin battle with full defense points. This leads into a interesting dynamic, where you'll have to weight in which stat to invest and what sort of restoration spell to use during the heat of battle.

Paper Sorcerer was made by a single man, Jesse Gallagher, funded by a Kickstarter campaign in July 2012. Jesse recieved 13,151 dollars, from an initial \$5,000 goal.



The various boss fights are mighty challenges, that will force players to carefully manage their skills & resources.



There are numerous locked doors, interactive objects, hidden switches and other puzzles in *Paper Sorcerer*.

“I think there’s good stuff to take away from retro RPGs, but I really think that developers need to move forward and innovate more while retaining the turn-based feel. I think the reason consumers think turn-based is getting stagnant is that a lot of developers aren’t trying to do anything new with it, just mimicking classics directly.”

- Jesse Gallagher,
Paper Sorcerer creator



The Killer Puppet is a unique companion that can be customized by changing its body parts.

Characters also have an energy pool, necessary for casting most skills. It slowly regenerates each turn, and must be managed carefully in order to quickly defeat enemies without running out of energy.

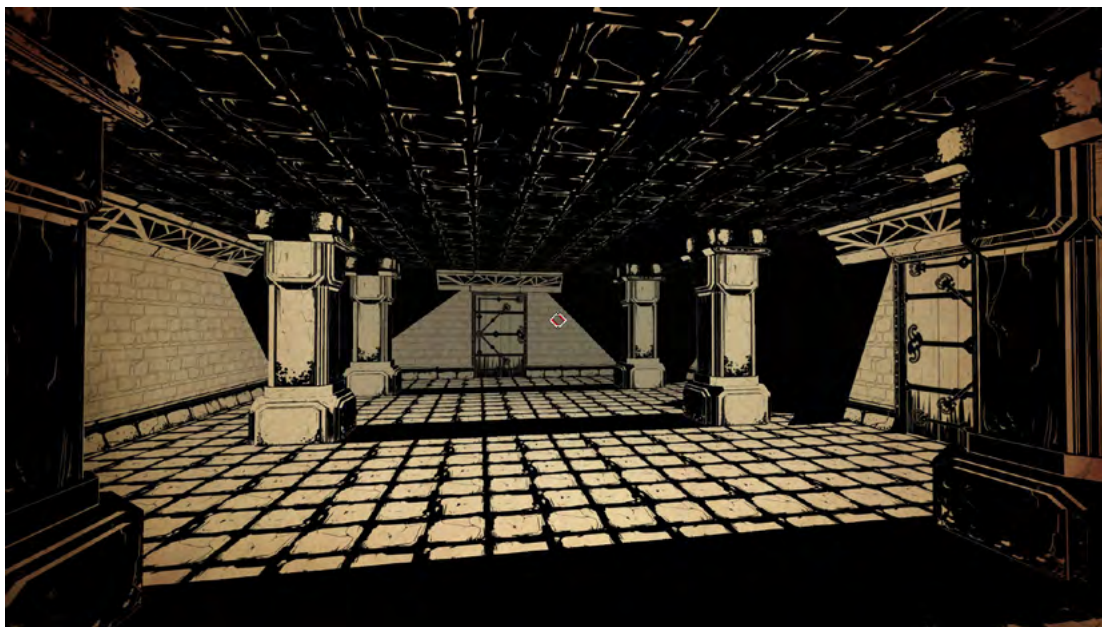
Outside combat exploration is very rewarding, with puzzle elements that must be solved to move ahead, find secrets or collect loot. I loved that some secrets were very difficult to find and required paying close attention to the environment, and how each level of the prison had its own unifying architectural style, atmosphere and enemy types.

Beside the main dungeon there’s also a safe zone called the Sanctuary, presented as a 2D background with a menu for accessing different areas: a room to rest, a trainer to learn skills, a creepy house that leads into an optional dungeon and a zombie-run store to buy armor, weapons, and potions.

There isn’t a lot of text in *Paper Sorcerer*; the game relies heavily on brief dialogs and cryptic hints. The overall effect is a sense of underlying mystery that you can never quite uncover. While exploring you can find letters and notes that provide tidbits about the world and even subtle hints of a love story.

Paper Sorcerer comes with four difficulty settings available: Easy, Normal, Hard, and the super brutal “1980’s mode”, which will challenge any RPG veteran. The downside is that the random loot drops can be rather unfair, punishing otherwise successful players and promoting save-scumming.

All in all, *Paper Sorcerer* is a lovely crafted game with superb artistic presentation and thematic coherence. Furthermore, it is a very admirable effort from Jesse Gallagher who, by himself on Unity, created this parchment world for us to discover. **CV**



The gorgeous artstyle is also well used to hide switches, secret passages and other goodies.

The Banner Saga



Stoic, 2014
Windows and Mac

Banner Saga was funded by a Kickstarter campaign in March 2012. Stoic managed to raise 723,886 dollars, from an initial \$100,000 goal.

The *Banner Saga* is the first game in a planned trilogy, a heavily story-driven tactical RPG with a nice smattering of choice & consequence and beautiful hand-drawn artwork.

The story is told from the perspective of two different groups and their respective caravans, and the point of view jumps between these two groups. Although the story is fairly linear, which characters remain alive at the game's conclusion depends greatly on player choices throughout.

Banner Saga is built around the concept of an ongoing apocalypse, and the developers had no problems presenting the harsh choices that such an event would entail. The game gives a good framework of events and then allows the player to tailor how their individual journey plays out. Major plot points will be the same, but the pieces that will fill in the blanks will be customized and often memorable.

Since the world is ending, supplies are limited and required to prevent your caravans from starving, NPCs from leaving, morale plummeting, and battles becoming more difficult as a result. You can buy supplies with renown, gained from battles, but it is also needed to upgrade troops or buy items.

The combat is turn-based, and there's a variety of classes with specialized skills, offering a wide range of tactics. You can also move your characters' stat points around between 6 different attributes, allowing for greater customization of roles and play-style. For example, you can spend points making a unit into a specialized armor breaker or boost the number of times they can perform a special ability. One of the attributes units have is called Will Power, which dictates a unit's ability to go above and beyond their typical limits. These points can be spent on moving further than normal, or to boost an attack, and do not naturally refill.

As you kill units, you begin to fill up your war horn. These charges can be expended to refill a unit's Will Power and can provide the boost needed to push through a tough encounter. Exertion determines how much Will Power a unit can use in one turn preventing a large one time boost unless a unit is specifically built to fulfill that role.

The unique mechanic that separates *The Banner Saga*'s combat from other games is the shared health/strength pool on units: damaging an enemy reduces the damage they can do to you.



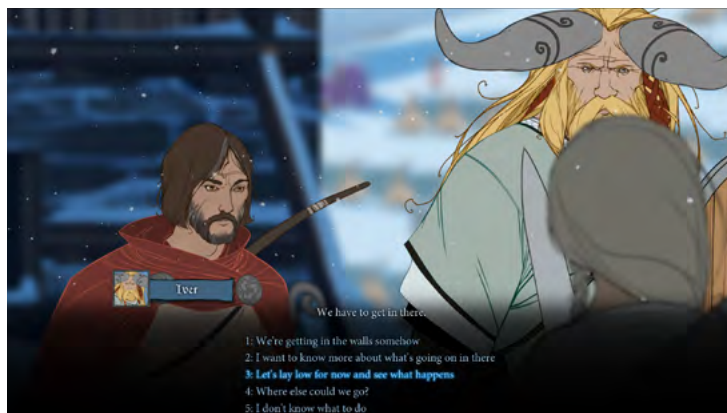
Upon achieving enough kills, all basic classes can level up and later upgrade into one of 3 specialized classes.



You'll have to manage the supplies, morale and troops of your caravan, as well as solve events along the way.

“We wanted something that would separate us. There’s lots of very ‘*World of Warcraft*’-looking, cartoony games, and we thought this art style matched more with the mature theme we wanted to go for.”

- Alex Thomas,
Stoic Co-Founder



The journey will not be an easy one, and your choices will decide the fate of many characters.

However, outright killing a unit might not be in your best interest since the game uses an “I go, you go system”, allowing for full strength units to act more often. Therefore, it can be valuable to leave heavily damaged units, who do little damage, alive to prevent full strength units from getting more turns and quickly turning the tables against your army.

All units also have an armor value which reduces incoming damage, as well as chance to be hit, so sometimes it's better to knock this down before attempting to damage a unit. Additionally, during your travels you'll encounter several magic items, that member of your party can equip to boost their stats.

The size difference between the jarls (horned giants) and humans is made evident in combat, with the giants taking up sections of 2x2, making them useful for blocking enemies, especially larger ones.

The only drawback of the combat system is the limited number of enemy types, many of which lack special abilities, which does erode the tactical depth of the AI a bit.

Despite some minor complaints about the linear nature of the main story and missed opportunities with the AI's combat options, I thoroughly enjoyed the story and the mechanics. *Banner Saga's* artwork also deserves a lot of praise, providing a unique look to the game, with elegant hand-drawn animation and gorgeous Eyvind Earle-styled landscapes.

If the rest of the trilogy continue the dark, but engrossing, story and Stoic builds on the foundations of the combat system, then this series could easily turn into an epic masterpiece fans of story driven games won't want to miss. **RR**

A year before the release of the game, Stoic put out *Banner Saga: Factions*, a free-to-play multiplayer game featuring only combat.



Scouting the enemies' abilities is vital to identify priority targets and position your characters.

NEO Scavenger



From a quick glance, *NEO Scavenger* is just a Flash-based roguelike developed by a one-man team. However, like an expert scavenger, it has very few resources, but knows how to make the most out of them and create something truly valuable.

You start by choosing your character's traits. The game uses an advantage & disadvantage system that should be familiar to *GURPS* fans, allowing you to gain points by picking negative traits (Insomniac, Feeble, Myopia, etc) and spend point on positive traits (Tough, Hacking, Tracking, Botany, etc). While not as complex as other character systems, these will heavily alter each character's choices and playstyle.

Once that's done, you wake up from cryogenic sleep only to find out that the world went to hell. Now you're in the middle of a post-apocalyptic Michigan, wearing only a medical gown, a weird amulet and a wrist strap labeled "Philip Kindred". It's up to you to figure out what happened, why you were frozen and find some clothing and food – but not in that order.

NEO Scavenger's defining feature is being a rather experimental game, mixing a survival roguelike gameplay with Choose-Your-Own-Adventure segments, plus as an unique approach to presentation.

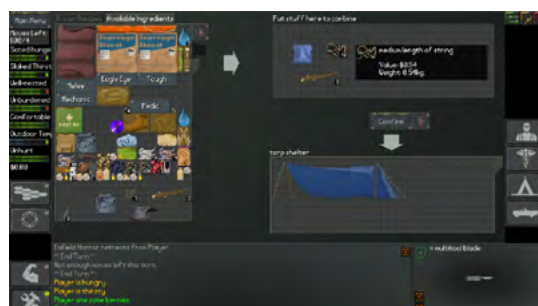
Combat, for example, is turn-based and doesn't feature a single frame of animation. Instead, you select commands, such as "shoot", "kick" or "sneak towards", and the combat log will describe what happened. While this may seem crude, it allow for actions that even triple-A games find too complex to animate, such as head-butting, leg tripping and even grappling (with mods) – all while pushing a shopping cart.

Still, the most interesting aspect of the game is how it obfuscates its stats. *NEO Scavenger* never tells you how many hit points you or your enemy have, how much damage a weapon does or to what extend a concussion or a fever affects you. Everything is up to your own judgment. You don't replace your baseball bat for that machete you just found because the game says it does +10% fire damage, but rather because you – the player – feel safer with it.

These are some very bold design decisions, especially in this graphic- and DPS-driven era. More importantly, they succeed in transmitting an unique sense of tension, as you mentally visualize yourself rolling in the mud, tired and wounded, attacking another desperate survivor with a tree branch and wondering who will drop dead first.



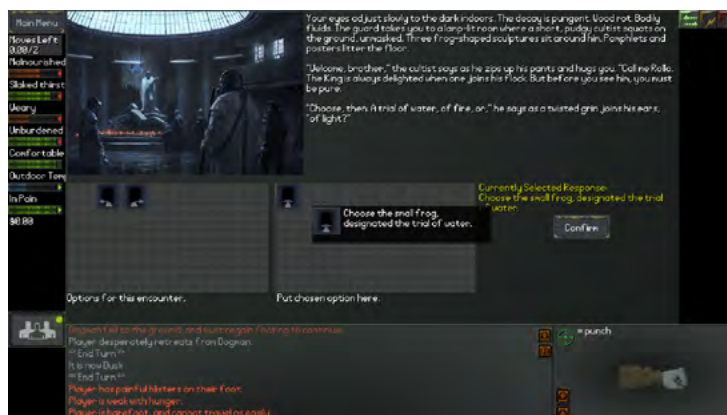
Items degrade, plastic bags rip open and there's never enough room to carry everything you want – or need.



The crafting system is very elaborate and intuitive, which is good, because using it is vital for your survival.

"I think some folks prefer stats, and stats definitely have their place. But I wanted to see how it felt hiding that stuff to make it more about judgement calls and play experience. That, and the absence of information makes us fill in the gaps with our own interpretations. Usually those are cooler than anything I could come up with!"

- Daniel Fedor,
NEO Scavenger's creator



The game's CYOA segments have great writing and atmosphere, but can kill you without warning, forcing a restart.

Every aspect of *NEO Scavenger* follows this logic. The game features a robust survival system that requires you to regularly eat, drink, sleep, threat your wounds, protect yourself from the cold and medicate against diseases. Of course, not every water you find is safe for drinking, and eating meat without cooking it might be a bad idea. Even something like wearing two right-foot boots can result in blisters and affect you negatively. Is it worse than walking around barefoot? It's up to you to figure it out.

Along the way, you'll die – a lot. But it's okay, the fun in *NEO Scavenger* lies precisely in learning how to survive this harsh post-apocalyptic world. The many characters you create will never gain experience nor level up, but after a while you – the player – will learn how to scavenge, craft items, assess risks and survive for a few days without dying of hypothermia.

At that point, you might then be ready to begin searching for answers, to discover out what happened to the world, to explore its borders, interact with its inhabitants and follow whispered rumors towards the game's cryptic main quest. Or become a cannibal. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there. **FE**

Mods:

Extended NeoScav: Expands the game in every way, adding new traits, crafting recipes, combat moves, factions, items, quests, locations and even a rideable bicycle, plus a few well-thought balance changes.

Mighty (mini)Mod of Doom: Despite the name, it also adds a huge amount of content and re-balancing.

Science & Sorcery: This WIP mod aims to give a *Shadowrun*-ish feel, adding magic into the game.



The abstract combat screen allows for unusual and elaborate scenes to take place, such as kicking a religious fanatic while pulling a plastic sled.

Fan-Translations

This section will cover games that never were officially translated into English, but had translation patches made by dedicated fans. Most titles are Japanese, such as *Sword of Moonlight: King's Field Making Tool*, *Snatcher SD* and *Sengoku Rance*, but we'll also games from other countries, such as *Legend of the Sword and Fairy* (China), *The Fall: Last Days of Gaia* (Germany) and *Brány Skeldalu* (Czech Republic).

The Legend of the Sword and Fairy (仙劍奇俠傳)

Softstar Entertainment Inc., 1995
DOS, Windows, Sega Saturn, NES

The Chinese setting provide a refreshing change from the usual scenery of RPGs.



During battle, powerful attacks can leave permanent marks on the ground.



From Taiwan with love. The defining turn-based RPG that has captured the hearts and imagination of Chinese gamers, spawning 1 remake, 8 sequels and even a popular TV drama.

In the world of martial arts, the journey of a swordsman-wannabe unfolds. A forgotten love, an arranged marriage. The usual tropes, how forgettable it seems. It will silently draw you in by its focused story to invoke many shades of emotions.

Questions are pondered, but seldom answered. Like a nether fairy tale with non-epic proportions, you are reminded once again that evil does triumph and wonder what all the senseless struggle amounts to.

Savor at the delectable musical score coupled with Chinese lore-inspired themes and monsters galore. Get lost in well-designed mazes with avoidable enemy encounters. Loot, cast effects and item summons to turn the battle tide.

General controls and animations are simple-yet-efficient; to top it off, the auto-battle option and save-anywhere feature makes the game very accessible. It's served like a 99% fat-free jRPG.

However, its strongest hand is let down by translation constraints with dialogs and poetry losing their finesse and charm. Nonetheless, this is a "gameway" to their culture and literature.

To run the game, use Whistler's SDLPAL95 for better font and multi-platform capabilities. Chinese readers, do opt for the DOS version for its intended difficulty and use SDLPAL for the vital infobox. **NJ**

Generation Xth: Code Hazard

Team Muramasa, 2008
Windows

It's been more than a decade since the last *Wizardry* game in the West, but the series is still popular in Japan. After making the two *Wizardry Xth* games for Playstation 2, Team Muramasa released their own series, the *Generaton Xth* trilogy.

There are 10 classes to play with, 3 schools of magic and a decent crafting system. Battles can be very challenging, especially against large groups of enemies, but the dungeons are the main attraction here. There are only a few of them, but they are huge, well designed and full of traps such as rotating walls, shock tiles, infinite corridors, elite monsters, one-way doors, dark areas and pits you must fly or levitate over.

The plot is silly, and the modern day setting has you playing with 16-years-old Japanese school kids, but beneath that is one of the best *Wizardry*-clones to reach (even if by a fan-translation) the western PCs in the last decade. The game has 2 more sequels where you can import your party and continue your adventures, but those sadly remain untranslated. **FE**



Despite the anime art style, *Generation Xth* is a *Wizardry* game at heart.

Labyrinth of Touhou (東方の迷宮)

偽英国紳士団, 2009
Windows

Labyrinth of Touhou is a hardcore (as in, brutal) indie Japanese turn-based RPG/dungeon crawler. It's quite challenging but not grind-ey if you play it in a smart way, and loads of fun. It's also extremely abstract, being all about numbers and party customization, the only downside being the typical Japanese anime art style.

If you can get past that, however, the game has a lot to offer. You navigate a massive 30-floor dungeon, represented as simply a network of corridors with special symbols for "events", and fight in random and scripted encounters, during which the game switches to first person combat.

There are 40 player characters in the game, but you're supposed to build a team of 12 characters chosen from among those, with 4 of them active and 8 in reserve. For each character, you must (as in, bye-bye if you don't) find out a role he or she will best fulfill in the party, depending on the overall composition of your party as well as your play style. There's no saving and no resurrection inside the dungeon, there're no healing items, and healing spells are extremely rare. You can actually switch characters in-battle, but that won't help you if you approach a tough encounter carelessly, and you're probably going to lose some progress, too. So, in any case, prepare to die. A lot. **CB**



Dying horribly in a cute game like this can't be good for self-esteem.



If you find this map exciting, then *Labyrinth of Touhou* is the game for you.





Forgotten Ruins

Not only we'll talk about the games, but also about the companies that made them. This section focuses on the great companies of the past, such as SSI, Sir-Tech and Interplay, who created many of the titles in this book but, unfortunately, closed down, were bought or simply faded away.

The stories told here serve as a tribute to those companies and all the talented people that worked there, but also as an overall look at the gaming industry and the various changes it went through.

The articles are all written by Reggie Carolipio, originally posted at GamesBeat, and have been reproduced and edited for length by the author.

The Vault Dweller
is exiled and
roams through
the wasteland in
Fallout.

Strategic Simulations, Inc.

1979 – 2001



The very first impression that I had of Strategic Simulations, Inc. was that they made games for old people. At the time, I had no idea why I should care about the Fulda Gap or superpowers colliding, only that it didn't seem all that exciting. That is until I saw their CRPGs, which seemed a lot more interesting, along with the story of how the company came to be..

Joel Billings founded the company in 1979 at a crossroads in his life – go to business school after college or make his love of wargames a reality with his own company? In college, Joel discovered computers and the potential they had to be compelling – and even easier to find – opponents. Two wargaming programmers joined his cause, John Lyon and Ed Willeger, and focused on the Apple over the TSR-80. That was thanks to a chance meeting with a marketing manager from Apple by the name of Trip Hawkins, who went on to found Electronic Arts.

Computer Bismarck in 1980 was their first game, and the company eventually took off to do everything from the American Civil War to the Cold War, with some football and baseball thrown in. From fighting along the Eastern Front on the Apple to the beaches of the Commodore 64, they eventually became one of the most prolific developers and publishers in PC gaming history with a catalog of well over a hundred and fifty titles. If you think the WW2 genre is saturated with shooters, you should have seen their catalog during the eighties when it came to turn-based strategy.

But they also had a turn on the CRPG circuit with the *Phantasie* and *Questron* series — along with many others such as *Demon's Winter*, the action-adventures *Gemstone Warrior* and *Gemstone Healer*, and the post-apocalyptic titles *Roadwar 2000* and *Roadwar Europa*. Stat heavy, tile-based, and packaged with manuals as thick as car instructions, these games immersed the player in each experience with plenty of details to chew over. While they lacked in looks, that only left our imaginations and what their writers

packed into the manuals to fill in the blanks.

Their biggest coup was in scoring the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* license from pen-and-paper RPG publisher TSR in 1987. So named because of the gold-colored paper used to label the boxes, the “Gold Box” series would prove to be one of AD&D's biggest splashes on PCs until the arrival of Bioware's *Baldur's Gate* under the Interplay label almost a decade later.

SSI opened up TSR's worlds to PC players with fancy graphics, turn-based tactical planning, and all of the nitty gritty details stuffed into every statistic. For players that had never touched the tabletop version but had a PC, it was a great way to get a taste of TSR's worlds without having to find a group, deal with temperamental dungeon masters, or buy all of the rulebooks. In my case, it was a little of each. The releases had even come with a manual that explained how the gameplay systems work and described the mysteries of THAC0 (to hit armor class zero). But they would often include an illustrated “Adventurer's Journal” detailing the monsters, AD&D concepts, and the journal entries that would be referenced within the game as a form of copy protection.

TSR's worlds sprawled across novels, gazettes, and countless sourcebooks providing plenty of adventures for SSI's developers to craft around. *Pool of Radiance* kicked things off within the medieval, high-fantasy lands of the Forgotten Realms. *Dragonlance's Champions of Krynn* introduced players to a war-torn world shattered by draconic armies of evil and dark magic. Later, new titles would reach into the horrific lands of the Demiplane of Dread's *Ravenloft* with the gothic stylings of *Strahd's Possession*. Even space, as seen through the lens of high fantasy, launched players on ships fueled by magic with *Spelljammer's Pirates of Realmspace*. And if you wanted to do away with magic entirely, SSI had also taken TSR's revamped look at Buck Rogers under its fold with turn-based battles using ray guns, *Wasteland*-like skill development, travel between the planets, and plenty of adventure with *Countdown to Doomsday* and *Matrix Cubed*.

Sir-Tech

1979 - 2003



The road to the first *Wizardry* didn't start with a role-playing game or in someone's basement. It started with a mailing list. It was the late seventies, and would-be dungeon master Robert Woodhead was busy developing a mailing program to help his mother's novelty business. With the help of partner Fred Sirotek, Jr., who had also bankrolled a \$7,000 Apple computer, Woodhead created *Infotree*. Always the entrepreneur like his father, Sirotek saw the dollar signs that *Infotree* could bring in.

Taking the project and the expensive Apple to the Trenton Computer Show, Fred's brother, Norm, drove Woodhead on the road trip from Canada. After seeing the enthusiastic response that a mailing list had created with the crowds, they came back with a new idea.

Norm knew an opportunity when he saw it. If people were that excited over a piece of business software, how would they react to a game?

A space-based wargame, *Galactic Attack*, was the next project, said to have been dreamt up during the drive back home from the show (though a vague Wikipedia entry doubts this story by saying that it was adapted from another early PC game: 1973's *Empire*). After convincing Fred Sirotek, Sr. to part with the capital to get the project started, *Infotree* was completed and *Galactic Attack* sold enough to fund a new game and the company that would bring it to the world: Sir-tech.

Heavily influenced by the PLATO games he played at Cornell University, Woodhead joined forces

with with fellow student Andrew Greenberg in 1980 to create their own RPG: *Dungeons of Despair*. The game was later renamed *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord*, after the *Dungeons and Dragons* creator Gary Gygax had apparently threatened to litigate on account of the "double D" initials.

Wizardry took a decidedly different direction than *Ultima* did with its exclusively first-person view of wireframe corridors, colorful monster graphics, and in allowing the player to customize a party of characters.

Being able to choose from several classes and races to create a party with them spoke to the D&D roots that more than a few CRPGs at the time aspired to emulate. It was like walking into a dungeon with multiple personalities, each one armed with sharp objects. Although *Ultima 3* would bridge the gap in '83 with non-player characters who could join the player's party, *Wizardry* was already there. Others were also inspired to follow their example such as in Japan where both *Wizardry* and *Ultima* proved to be influential references.

The first three games were also notoriously tough and offered an import feature for characters as they went from title to title. Jumping into the third game without playing any of the previous ones would almost guarantee hours of frustration and when the entire party wiped in *Wizardry*, it was time to start all over again with a fresh batch. But thanks to another innovative twist, this new party could also find the bodies of the slain party and bring them back.

As revolutionary as its features were, the difficulty and frustration of the series had also attained a sort of mythic status that is still well regarded today by its longtime fans. The designers of the fourth *Wizardry* even solicited save disks from players of the previous entries in order to turn their characters into enemies. Yes, your party could have been the bad guys in *Wizardry 4* and these do-gooders were your worst nightmare as you fought your way solo to one of the game's multiple endings.

Andrew and Robert in 1982, or as they would be known in-game, Werdna and Trebor.



Two promising alumni of Cornell University, Andrew Greenberg (left) and Robert Woodhead.

As a first for CRPGs, or gaming in general, the boxes were stamped with warnings advising recommended skill levels. Imagine a game like *Final Fantasy 13* stamped with the warning “Experts Level: Previous *Final Fantasy* experience required!” But that didn’t stop the series from receiving accolades from all walks of life: even from a psychologist who wrote in to tell the developers that he had used the first game as a tool in helping to reach a troubled child contemplating suicide.

In 1988 Robert Woodhead left Sir-tech, leaving David W. Bradley to take over the *Wizardry* series. *Wizardry 5* would bring some fresh air to the already dated *Wizardry* engine by having larger dungeons, filled with the additional wrinkle of interacting with NPCs via a text parser. After it’s release, Andrew Greenberg would also leave the company.

Wizardrys 6 through *8* would prove to be among the series’s finest dungeon crawling, with updated graphics and hundreds of hours packed into a continuous storyline blending sci-fi hints, high fantasy, and tongue-in-cheek humor. An advanced parser system, deeper character builds and a developing skill system provided players with even more directions in which to experience the series’s evolving gameplay.

Sir-tech was also a publisher renowned for titles such as the tactical *Jagged Alliance* series and imports such as the *Realms of Arkania*. While not as prolific as Interplay or Origin, its low-key profile and consistent attention to quality gave them a great reputation among their fans. Unfortunately, the market was quickly changing with the release of the PlayStation and Nintendo 64, and Sir-tech failed to follow, betting on mediocre titles such as *Druid: Daemons of the Mind* and *Nemesis: The Wizardry Adventure*, a forgettable RPG/adventure game hybrid.

Sir-tech eventually shuttered its doors in ‘98 under unclear circumstances, though money and a changing retail model were hinted at as factors. Sir-tech Canada, a separate entity from the publishing side of the company, continued on to finish *Jagged Alliance 2* (released in 2000) and *Wizardry 8* (released in 2001) before folding in 2003.

But that’s not the end of the *Wizardry* story. When it first came to Japan in the eighties, *Wizardry* made a huge impression on its RPG audience, inspiring early pioneers such as *Dragon Warrior*’s Yuji Horii. The devotion to the series was such that it spawned a massive list of spin-offs and original productions, including light novels, manga series, a couple of pen-and-paper RPG adaptations and an animated movie.

The first *Wizardrys* would be remade years later



A sample of Japan’s passion for *Wizardry*. In 2009 the “*Wizardry Renaissance*” project was launched, seeking to revitalize the series with the release of several new products.

for the Famicom, the PC Engine and later the original Playstation, complete with improved visuals. While only eight *Wizardry* games were ever produced in the West, in Japan over 30 titles have been released for various platforms, including spin-offs and even an MMORPG, though only one or two of these would ever find their way over to the West (thanks to Atlus), such as *Wizardry: Tales of the Forsaken Land* in ‘01. After Sir-tech had closed its doors, *Wizardry* lives on. Or at least the rights do, now owned by an obscure company called IPM, Inc. in Japan.

As for the original programmers that started this whole craze in the first place, Robert Woodhead is currently running Animeigo, a company that licenses and distributes japanese movies and animation. His partner in crime, Andrew Greenberg, has put aside his evil wizard alter-ego Werdna to practice law instead. Their successor, David W. Bradley, went on to work for Origin, later starting his own company, Heuristic Park, which released *Wizards & Warriors* and *Dungeon Lords*. And one of *Wizardry 8*’s designer, Brenda Romero, is still around today, teaching a new generation of designers and would-be game developers the ropes. **RC**

Origin Systems

1983 - 2004



From his tentative steps with *Akalebeth* and then on to the first *Ultima* and its sequel, Richard Garriott clearly saw just how successful his computer role-playing game was going to be when the cash began rolling in and the phone calls never stopped.

Garriott (aka Lord British to his fans) founded Origin Systems in '83 partly as a result of the series runaway popularity. The *Ultima* games would become the standard bearer alongside other pioneers such as *Wizardry* in defining the early years of the CRPG. Even in Japan, *Ultima* and Richard Garriott had received the kind of accolades — and merchandising — that had been reserved only for properties like Hello Kitty.

Ultima's amazing success on both sides of the world owed itself as much to Garriott's hard work as it later did in testing players later with social questions and deep narratives expanding the fictional world of Britannia such as when *Ultima 4* revolutionized the genre again in '85 challenging players to become the Avatar by learning virtues such as honesty, compassion, and valor breaking the stereotypical end game mold of the combat-heavy CRPG. There were still plenty of monsters, but leading a one man war against them was considered secondary to *Ultima 4's* goal of truly becoming a virtuous "hero."

Origin branched out and dabbled in other genres living up to its moniker "we create worlds." From Gar-

riott's days as a lone programmer, the company grew up over the years to encompass multiple teams working across multiple genres as well as act as a publisher. One of those published titles was *Ultima Underworld* by the studio later responsible for the *System Shock* and *Thief* series — Looking Glass.

Along with *Ultima's* many incarnations over nearly two decades of gaming, there stood the sci-fi epic series *Wing Commander* and *Privateer*. There was also the ultraviolent *Crusader* series with its isometric action. When I wanted to scratch my fantasy and space-sim itch, one just had to look at what Origin was doing next.

Along with a detailed and illustrated manual, Origin included a cloth or paper map with every *Ultima* game at no extra cost. The same went for several of their other games, like the Claw Marks booklet for *Wing Commander*. All of this was considered the relative norm in an industry that didn't yet compromise on extras with "collector's editions".

Looking at Origin Systems prior to *Ultima Online*, it was as if they were firmly in charge of leading themselves into the next generation. Magazine ads were splashed with computer graphics, bullet points, and teasing stories on new, cutting-edge adventures. Even when Garriot had sold Origin to Electronic Arts in '92, the partnership appeared to be an ideal one on the surface: EA's deep pockets and distribution empire coupled with Origin's creative energies couldn't fail. Looking at EA's catalog from the eighties into the early nineties, it seemed that they were also as interested in trying out new things and pushing the boundaries of gaming with creative titles such as Free Fall Associates' *Archon: The Light and the Dark*, Ozark Softscape's *Seven Cities of Gold*, and Binary Systems' *Starflight*.

EA had already made early inroads into the lucrative console market as well, but their connections and war chests had also provided funding and star power for projects such as *Wing Commander 3* which was regarded as the most expensive game ever made



Richard Garriott checking some of Origin's 1992 releases.

at the time in '94. With its use of virtual sets and live actors (including Mark Hamill and Tim Curry), having Biff Tannen on your wing seemed to be reward enough for the kind of financial moxie and corporate discipline that EA jazzed acquisitions with.

But not everything was perfect. *Ultima 8*'s action was a radical departure from the successful formula of *Ultima 7*. Fans criticized it for its lack of polish, the missing detail and storied focus of its predecessor, and the *Super Mario*-esque platforming. The reason was EA's aggressive scheduling borne out of their sports-game mentality pushing Garriott and his team to cut corners to make *Ultima 8*'s release date. What I and many other fans saw on their monitors was the result. "When it's done" wasn't something that stockholders wanted to hear.

Ultima Online was introduced in '97. After an extremely popular beta session, EA pushed for further development cannibalizing team members who were then working on *Ultima 9*. After *Ultima 8*, fans like myself were looking forward to the next installment returning to what we loved about the series. But again, EA wanted it out in time for Christmas in '99, and the results spoke for themselves.

Ultima IX remains a controversial title today with several citing it as the sole reason for Origin's demise while others laud its revolutionary concepts for being ahead of its time. The new Britannia rode the rising wave of new graphics accelerators, first-person shooters, and the 3D craze of the late nineties. With Bethesda already demonstrating its own panache for vast, open worlds with *Arena* and *Daggerfall*, bringing the legendary series to life in the same way seemed only natural for Origin. When *Ultima 9* turned out the way it did, it becomes easier to understand why many (including myself) regarded its lost potential with almost as much disappointment. It was, as Richard Garriott had put it, "the bastard child of Electronic Arts."

With *Ultima Online*'s growing — and paying — audience and *Ultima 9*'s tepid splash, EA would essentially turn what was left of Origin to focus exclusively on *Ultima Online*, a process that would come to define EA's Borg-like impression that gamers had about what the publisher routinely seemed to do with its acquired developers.

By then, many of its designers had already left and now more would be joining them. Richard Garriott, like Interplay's Brian Fargo, left the house he had built shortly after the release of *Ultima 9* to pursue new interests that lay outside of the series that made him a household name among the CRPG community.



Son of an astronaut, in 2008 Richard Garriott paid \$30 million USD to be one of the first space tourists. He spent 12 days on the International Space Station.

Although his departure and contractually obligated silence shortly after the troubled state of *Ultima 9* had raised eyebrows, his interviews afterward reveal a designer eager to do more outside of *Ultima* in the online space, a point that EA had apparently disagreed with.

By 2004, *Origin* simply ceased to be. By then, it was a battered and broken shell of the multi-genre titan that it had been now reduced to the equivalent of a janitor assigned to provide the upkeep needed for *Ultima Online* to exist. Its famous titles would exist only in memory or meet the arcade fate of *Wing Commander* on Xbox Live Arcade.

But that's not the end of the *Ultima* story, at least in spirit. A successful Kickstarter by Richard Garriott and a new studio for *Shroud of the Avatar* promises to combine both the single-player focus of the original *Ultimas* coupled with MMO elements from *Ultima Online*. Even though it's not *Ultima* in name, it's already promising to carry on the same virtues that that had shaped the *Stranger* into the *Avatar* years ago and possibly write the first chapter of a new legend. **RC**

New World Computing

1983 - 2003



Out of his Los Angeles apartment in '83, Jon Van Caneghem's New World Computing — inspired by *Wizardry*, *Ultima*, and their *Dungeons & Dragons* roots — would spend three years programming and designing his brainchild with all of the features that he wanted to play with. The result was *Might and Magic: Secret of the Inner Sanctum*, and — like the games that inspired him — it would become one of the defining titles to toss alongside tile-based landscapes with first person, open-world exploration both above and below ground when it arrived in '86 on the Apple II.

Might and Magic came in a huge box filled with 5.25" floppies, a thick manual, fold-out map, and even a pad of paper with *Might and Magic* letterhead for notes and mapmaking. When I didn't have an app to duplicate the floppies for play (which was a requirement I wasn't aware of) and wrote the address on the back of the box looking for help, I received written letter from Caneghem with sincere apologies along with a batch of fresh copies that I can only guess he labeled himself. That also says a lot about the passion of someone whose living room provided the line for customer service. Caneghem was a one-man marketing and distribution dungeon master.

The success of *Might and Magic* paved the way for what would become one of the longest running computer role-playing game series alongside *Ulti-*

ma and *Wizardry*. And they were tough. Although they didn't penalize the player in the same way as *Wizardry*, the game crafted its challenge with mobs of monsters, riddles, towns, and a deadly wilderness which all provided more than enough ways to die in first-person bliss.

Simply living long enough in the starting town of Sorpigal to earn coin for food, experience points, and retain an ample amount of hit points to make it to the inn to save the game provided a preview for what was to come. And leveling wasn't automatic: you had to pay for each character's training to upgrade them.

The *Might and Magic* games were also consummate dungeon crawlers loaded with plenty of random encounters to keep feeding experience to your party. Many monsters could actually be bribed to leave your party alone or the player could opt to surrender (and be stripped of gold and food while being moved to a more dangerous area) and hope for better odds later.

The series also had a hidden sci-fi arc. Although each early title stood alone in the most basic sense, the endings referenced a connected story of revenge later expanding to hint at a great civilization that had once ruled the stars. In later titles, this tie-in would be more explicit as adventurers armed themselves with ray guns and skulked through the ruins of forgotten technology.

Might and Magic 4 and 5 (later released together as *Might and Magic: World of Xeen*) overhauled the graphics and gameplay of the previous titles and NWC flexed their creative muscles with the unprecedented feature of allowing both games to be combined into one world. This "World of Xeen" opened up a short quest and a new ending that left no doubt as to its sci-fi premise. *Might and Magic* 5 was like the ultimate add-on.

Might and Magic 6 overhauled the graphics engine yet again when it arrived in '98 and tossed out the grid-based movement of the previous games for free-roaming. The series would also find itself in competition with BioWare's *Baldur's Gate* as well as the



Back in the day, there were no "collector's edition" boxes. Every copy of *Might and Magic* 5 came with a colored map.

growing popularity of new genres, such as first-person shooters and the encroaching console market. Increased production costs had also begun to eat away at NWC's coffers.

NWC attempted to port a few of its games over to consoles, such as the first three *M&M* games, and like many of its peers, would also diversify into publishing and developing new titles. One of these was the turn-based strategy title *King's Bounty*, released in 1990. *King's Bounty* would also set the stage for the other series that NWC would be known for: *Heroes of Might and Magic*. The first game would arrive in '95, and the series would go on to entertain tactical arm-chair lords and ladies through five installments with add-ons released for most of them.

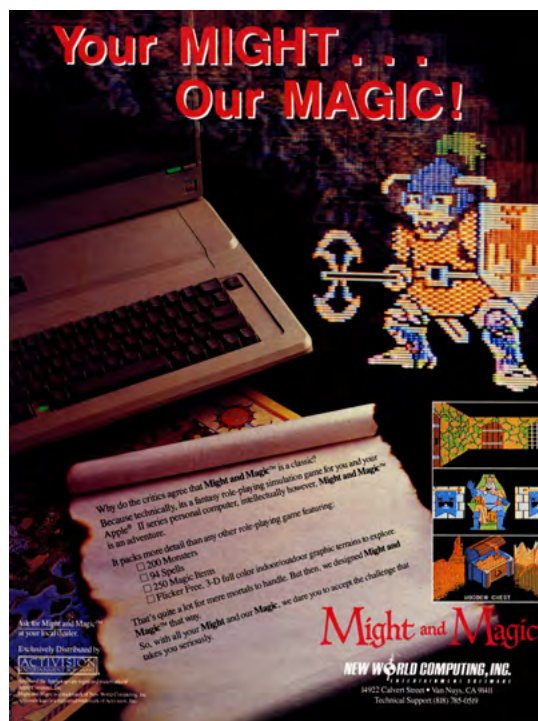
It was also in '96 that The 3DO Company under Trip Hawkins bought NWC, injected cash into the company, and opened doors on what Caneghem had hoped would be *Might and Magic Online*. 3DO already had *Meridian 59* - an early 3D MMORPG - so it did make sense to go with an established series for a new MMO, much like what Blizzard would later do with *Warcraft*. But the partnership was a rocky one. With a new owner came new demands, one of which was to make NWC produce a new *M&M* and *Heroes* game every year.

From 1998 to 2000, *Might and Magic 6* through *8* hit store shelves, one after another. Although *M&M 6* was a lot of fun, *M&M 8* began to show its age through an engine that had remained relatively unchanged since '98. The days of getting away with recycling the same engine across titles as the Gold Box series did in the late eighties and early nineties under SSI were over as far as the mainstream market — spoiled on the 3D craze for better visuals — was concerned.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to reach new audiences, many action-oriented spin-offs of the series were made, such as *Warriors of Might and Magic*, *Crusaders of M&M* and even an online multiplayer FPS game called *Legends of M&M*. The results however, were all mediocre at best.

Other troubles had also plagued NWC's legendary series. Almost paralleling what had happened with Origin's *Ultima 9*, an unrealistic schedule and a rush to release doomed *Might and Magic 9*. The game received a critical drubbing both in the press and by fans who tried to play this practically broken game.

In an interview with *M&M* fansite Celestial Heavens, Lead Designer Tim Lang gave a no-holds-barred view on what went wrong. Part of the blame seems to have fallen on Caneghem's shoulders, though how much 3DO's own meandering direction



A 1987 magazine ad for the first *Might and Magic* game.

had a hand in the product's final quality is still up for debate. Regardless, it would be the final game in the series under NWC's — and Caneghem's — name.

NWC quietly faded along with The 3DO Company in 2003. 3DO declared Chapter 11 that year and then moved into liquidation. The series that had celebrated classic dungeon crawling and loot collecting with its vast worlds and endless mobs had ended on a bug-filled note. But it wasn't over.

Ubisoft snagged the *Might and Magic* name and resurrected it with the action-oriented *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic* in '06 (developed by the Arkane Studios, the makers of *Arx Fatalis*). Featuring class-based and leveled multiplayer along with a decent single-player experience, it was a solid game, though a far cry from the turn-based CRPGs of its namesake. *Might and Magic: Clash of Heroes* then came out in '09 for the DS, PS3, and the Xbox 360 as a surprisingly decent mix of puzzles and RPG gameplay.

But it would be Limbic Entertainment that would re-introduce the series in 2014 with *Might and Magic X*, a CRPG hearkening back to the grid-based movement and 90° turns the classic series grew up on from the 80s and early 90s, much like how Almost Human's *Legend of Grimrock* had also celebrated in 2012.

Could it herald a new awakening for the series? At the time of this article, it's probably too early to say, but even so, one thing's continues to be certain — *Might and Magic* lives. **RC**

Interplay

1983 - Present



BY GAMERS. FOR GAMERS.™

Interplay once dominated computer role-playing games in the late eighties alongside its peers. Although they would later be known as a publishing powerhouse responsible for Black Isle's *Fallout* series and *Planescape: Torment* in the late nineties (along with the revolutionary *Descent* franchise), it started with an idea, a game, and a programmer who wanted to kill lots of monsters.

Brian Fargo wasn't the stereotypical coder living in his parent's garage or a student at a place like Caltech. He was a sprinter on a track scholarship when he walked out of school to work on his first game: *Demon's Forge*. Like Richard Garriott (Origin) and Jon Van Caneghem (New World Computing), his house was literally his office as he managed marketing and sales from his bedroom.

The company was sold in '82 which pocketed for the then-19-year-old Fargo a cool \$5,000. Interplay

wasn't around yet, but a company called the Boone Corporation had folded some time afterward and left quite a few gifted programmers without jobs. Several of its laid-off employees — including Rebecca Heineman — then banded together with Fargo to help found Interplay, with a little boost from a generous \$60,000 windfall from a new client, but not to make games.

Interplay's first contract was from World Book Encyclopedia to do a series of small titles. That didn't stop a young Activision from stepping in later and handing Interplay a contract for three adventure games to the tune of \$100,000. Despite creating *Mind Shadow* under contract, Interplay's indie position left the door open for Electronic Arts to publish one of the genre's most memorable CRPGs with *The Bard's Tale* in '85.

Although the series wasn't known for having interactive NPCs and consisted of combat-heavy dungeon crawlers, each game relied more on a player's imagination to fill in the blanks when it came to story and was far more forgiving than *Wizardry* or *Might and Magic* were. Its vast dungeons were still filled with devious traps, darkness shrouded halls, spinning floors, and mobs of monsters proved enough reasons to religiously back-up character disks.

In '88, Interplay kicked elves, dwarves, and orcs to the radioactive curb in *Wasteland*, a post-apocalyptic CRPG that shied away from swords and sorcery and replaced them with automatic weapons and a vast, player-customized skillset. Its minimalist looks and top-down tiled approach went against *The Bard's Tale*'s first-person perspective and its gameplay systems more than made up for that, providing ideas that would later be passed down to titles such as *Fallout*. *Dragon Wars* went back to high fantasy in '89 with a hybrid of features seen in both *Wasteland* and *The Bard's Tale* while casting dragons as the equivalent of nuclear weapons.

Interplay had also adapted William Gibson's *Neuromancer* as a hybrid adventure/RPG bringing



Since the license to *The Bard's Tale* belonged to Electronic Arts, after finishing their contract Interplay tried to create their own series with *Dragon Wars*.

the cyberpunk classic to PCs. Software and cyber-decks replaced swords and armor and character interactions were handled as an adventure game in ‘the real world.’

Although the once-revolutionary *Stonekeep* had been released in ‘95 on PCs to some fanfare and critical acclaim complete with a hardcover novelette, its grid-based gameplay seemed outdated when compared to the free-roaming worlds of the *Ultima Underworld* series and Bethesda’s *The Elder Scrolls: Arena*. Game stopping bugs on release required players to dial into Interplay’s BBS (Bulletin Board System) if they wanted to finish the game. After four years of development and several million dollars, it wasn’t quite the blockbuster that everyone expected it to be.

Consoles were also busy making their own marks with Japanese RPGs such as *Earthbound* and *Chrono Trigger* on the SNES in ‘95, and those proved to be more popular than CRPG ports.

Strong titles such as *Descent* and their Star Trek-based adventure games had also shifted Interplay’s focus away from CRPGs, especially in the wake of flubs such as *Descent to Undermountain*, which attempted to adapt *Descent*’s engine into a CRPG setting with grim results. I remember killing a lich — an undead über sorcerer that no eighth- or ninth-level character should ever solo — simply because it was stuck behind an object and couldn’t get to me.

Even though Interplay had critical successes with several of its titles, the company continued to bleed. Since ‘95, Interplay reported a stream of losses and then in ‘98, Fargo decided to take the company public to drum up funding. Despite a strong showing in the early months of its (reduced) IPO following June, the company’s stock went into a tailspin in October that same year.

And then in ‘99 walked Titus Interactive with deep pockets buying enough of Interplay’s stock to appoint Titus founders Herve and Eric Caen as leading board members. But who were these guys? Answers vary on who you ask. Some simply regard them as investors while others look at them as the sole reasons for why Interplay ultimately imploded.

Titus Interactive was a powerhouse when they focused on PC games in Europe, but among the console crowd, I remember them for their largely awful library. Still, someone must have liked them. They had enough cash to gain a small (and then a controlling) interest in Interplay a few years later in 2001.

Yet even it couldn’t stanch the red ink as losses and debt continued to mount. Among the casualties were those at Black Isle Studios, whose work included



Planescape: Torment, the *Icwind Dale* series, *Fallout 2* as well as the canceled prototypes of *Fallout 3* (code-named Van Buren) and *Baldur’s Gate III: The Black Hound*. Their developers landed elsewhere at such places as Troika and Obsidian Entertainment.

In 2002, Brian Fargo would leave the company he had founded. But unlike a few that simply disappeared into history, Interplay’s “end” was riddled with financial mishaps following Fargo’s departure. That same year, their stock was delisted from NASDAQ and a number of embarrassing incidents including failing to pay its employees for several weeks and eventually being evicted from its own property in 2004 battered the company further.

Parent company Titus Interactive declared bankruptcy (and was later liquidated) in 2005 and Interplay limped back to the web with a new look in the same year. Yet the company that had ruled the late eighties into the late nineties as a shining CRPG paladin had long left the dungeon.

As for Fargo, he would eventually go on to found a new company, inXile Entertainment, where in 2004, they released a new *Bard’s Tale* as an action RPG. Today, he’s still building dungeons along with his crew at inXile, diving into one based on *Numenera* by tabletop guru Monty Cook, and another that longtime fans have been waiting nearly a quarter of century for as a proper sequel – *Wasteland 2* – thanks to wildly successful Kickstarters. From the *Demon’s Forge* in ‘81 to today, Fargo still has a lot of stories to share and with the way things are going, there are going to be a lot of dungeons to crawl through before anyone hears the last note. **RC**

The menu from Black Isle’s canceled *Van Buren* project. A leaked tech demo can still be found for download online.



Black Isle was a division of Interplay dedicated to CRPGs, founded in 1996 by Feargus Urquhart. They were closed in 2003, after Interplay’s financial issues.

Westwood Studios

1985 - 2003



In its eighteen year history, Westwood took us to Mars, swept us up into the skies on the backs of dragons, crept through sewers, caverns, then ancient cities in search of adventure, and later shaped the face of strategy. And it all started with a print request between two friends in 1985.

Brett Sperry was working as a programmer after studying architecture and psychology in college. He also did freelance work on the side and was about to cap a deal with gaming giant, Epyx, for a game he was writing called *Dragonfire*. The problem was that even though he finally had his own computer, he didn't have a printer so he headed over to Louis Castle's place to borrow his. The two knew each other from group get-togethers at Las Vegas' only Apple store at the time: Century 23.

At Castle's home, Sperry was shown a demo Castle created called *Bloodstonem*, based on 1983's arcade hit, *Dragon's Lair*, imagining a camera over Dirk the Daring's shoulder as he ran down a 3D corridor. That was when Sperry found a partner for the wild idea he had in building their own game company.

Louis Castle's parents' 400 square foot garage in 1985 became their first studio and they called themselves Brelous Software, a portmanteau of Brett and Louis before changing it (admittedly for the better) to Westwood Associates. "Westwood" was the name

of Westwood, California, that both appreciated as a great hang out. "Associates" came about from the belief that anyone working for them was more than an employee sharing their passion for games.

Their first commercial contract was from Epyx who paid them \$18,000 to put together *The Temple of Apshai Trilogy*, a bundle of all three chapters of the CRPG dungeon crawler. The trilogy also set the tone for Westwood Associates' work. Ports would be re-designed and enhanced in as many ways as possible. Sperry's imagination jumped at the possibilities and Castle's artistic skills would be put to the test becoming the "HD remakes" of their day and, eventually, making their games some of the best looking titles in the market.

With more contracts from Epyx came the cash for upgrades, equipment and new hires like Barry Green and Mike Legg (both from Century 23). Diversifying, they also began working with SSI in 1986.

In 1987, Castle, inspired by Game Designers' Workshop's tabletop space RPG, *Traveller*, created the turn-based CRPG, *Mars Saga*. It was Westwood's first original game produced and was released through Electronic Arts for the C64. It would later become another enhanced port, this time published by Infocom, renamed *Mines of Titan* for DOS and the Apple II in 1989.

Sperry continued to work on ports at the time and grew fascinated with CRPGs like *Ultima III* and *Wizardry III*, eventually leading to *Questron II* for Epyx in 1988. The same year, *BattleTech: The Crescent Hawk's Inception* based on FASA's BattleTech tabletop series arrived as a sci-fi RPG. Westwood also adapted George Alec Effinger's *When Gravity Fails* as a cyberpunk RPG titled *Circuit's Edge*, releasing it in 1990. But they hadn't lost their taste for swords and sorcery.

The year 1990 would continue to be a busy one for Westwood. SSI's licensing with TSR had opened a floodgate and Westwood Associates dipped their collective feet into the raging torrent with *Dragon-Strike*, a flight combat sim with dragons and based on

Dune II created the RTS genre in 1993, moving away from the turn-based strategy games of the time.





Westwood did everything: game ports, FPS, RPG, RTS, adventure, sports, movie tie-ins, educational Disney titles and even a dragon flying simulator.

In 1988, there was a text-based MUD called *Kyrandia* that Westwood eventually bought the rights to later using it as a basis for a point 'n click demo doing away with text parsers. They shopped it to Sierra, who then showed them *King's Quest V*, which also did the same thing and would come out in 1990. As Sperry recounted, "It was a huge letdown moment." But Sierra, and later, Virgin Interactive, had also shown an interest in buying the company.

As Louis Castle recalled, they were "betting our home mortgages on each and every title" putting more of their money into making their games than the publishers would. Being a part of Sierra or Virgin could change that. Sierra had a lot of money to throw around but they also wanted a lot of control in exchange. Virgin's bid, on the other hand, wasn't quite as large but they promised to be hands-off.

Eventually, Westwood opted to go with Virgin in 1992 becoming Westwood Studios and releasing the first game of *The Legend of Kyrandia* trilogy under the Virgin Games label. It would also be the year that they would release the iconic RTS, Westwood's *Dune II*.

In 1993, *Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos* expanded the lessons learned from their work with *Eye of the Beholder* for SSI kicking off a trilogy of CRPGs. Another pivotal year, 1995, shook the RTS landscape when Westwood's *Command & Conquer* made its debut. In 1997, Westwood released an adaptation of the iconic *Blade Runner* with a new storyline and raising the visual bar.

Command & Conquer became a runaway hit, attracting EA, who bought Westwood from Virgin for a cool \$122.5 million in 1998. They also absorbed a Virgin Interactive studio in Irvine, California, which became Westwood Pacific (and later, EA Pacific). On the following years Westwood focused on the *Command & Conquer* series while testing the waters with *Command & Conquer: Renegade* in 2002 taking the RTS into an FPS spinoff. They would even build their

own MMORPG, *Earth & Beyond*, which released in the same year and be the last game from the fabled studio.

To many, EA's involvement with Westwood's eventual closure in 2003 only reinforced its reputation as a coldly calculating corporate machine. As deserved as it is in several ways, the relative retail failures of both *C&C: Renegade* and the expensive *Earth & Beyond* were hard to overlook. But EA actually tried working with Westwood's Las Vegas HQ to keep them open, eying Summerlin in Las Vegas as a potential home. Unfortunately, things didn't pan out locally with the Nevada land authorities so EA focused on California instead. As Castle recalled, "We blew it, as a state."

Many employees, instead going west to EA's Los Angeles campus, decided to stay behind. As for Westwood Pacific, it would be absorbed into EA Los Angeles. Westwood veterans, such as Mike Legg, would later form Petroglyph Games in 2003. Brett Sperry later founded his own art gallery in Las Vegas and start up mobile-focused Jet Set Games. Louis Castle continued on with EA for a time, before moving on briefly to work at other companies – such as Zynga, where he was a VP – before settling in as CSO at SHFL Entertainment.

Westwood is gone, but the rich history and vast library it left behind spans many of PC gaming's greatest moments. While it's easy to overlook its CRPG roots because of the giant shadow cast by its decisive role as an RTS powerhouse, they were no less illuminated by the creative impetus of its team of associates. Its tale continue to inspire others today to embark on the same road that two friends had started in a garage over a printout, almost thirty years ago. **RC**

FTL Games

1982 - 1996



FTL Games doesn't have the kind of catalog that any of the other developers on this list do, but their first computer role-playing game would leave an undeniable mark. I didn't actually get to play this one until very recently (thanks only to the work of fans), but it's easy to see how it had predated efforts made by titles, such as Westwood's *Eye of the Beholder*, to bring a living, real-time dungeon to life. Interplay's *Stonekeep* – years later — may have had cutting-edge graphics and live video, but the basic gameplay was already seen in something as early as FTL's *Dungeon Master*.

Dungeon Master was released in '87 and quickly took the CRPG community by surprise. Not only did it boast strong visuals for the time, it was also a real-time dungeon crawler (although, whether it was truly the first is debatable when compared to the more obscure *Dungeons of Daggorath* in '82 or *Alternate Reality: The City from Datasoft* in '85). Being real-time meant that the game didn't wait for the player such as when they confronted a monster, which taught the lesson of click or be killed.

With most of the leading CRPGs of the time being turn-based affairs, *Dungeon Master*'s real-time experience was a bold and refreshing change of pace (literally). It also boasted a surprisingly realistic skill system. Instead of abilities improving on a level-by-level basis, there were no levels. Characters grew more experienced in the use of their abilities by simply using them — something that would be echoed years later by CRPGs such as the *Elder Scrolls* series.

It also boasted strong writing as a part of its storied backdrop (at least within its manual) thanks to novelist Nancy Holder (wife of Wayne Holder, FTL's producer). Even Dragonlance author and co-creator Tracy Hickman, who had also been a tester for the game, would go on to write the hint book.

In the same way that SSI had reused the technology developed for their Gold Box games, FTL had the same hope for *Dungeon Master*'s and the stream

of potential new titles that could be based on its engine. It would also be a model emulated later by the FPS market with licensed engines fueling their own excitement from *Doom* to *Unreal*. An expansion pack, *Chaos Strikes Back*, would improve on the gameplay in '89 with less linear levels within its dungeon with an editor for players interested in crafting their own character portraits.

And then — just as suddenly as *Dungeon Master*'s design triumphs and critical success — the industry passed FTL by. The worlds to be crafted atop the engine never materialized.

Although FTL would go on to create a new *Dungeon Master* for the PC-Engine (aka Turbografx-16) console in '92 and a real sequel (*Dungeon Master 2: Skullkeep*) in '93, they were never able to recapture the kind of magic that the first game had thrilled audiences with. *Skullkeep* had also come out in Japan first with the bizarre decision of Interplay publishing it in the West in '95. By then, it was clear that its time was well past.

FTL ceased operations as a company in '96, though, its name (and copyright) would live on with a licensed *Dungeon Master Nexus* for the Sega Saturn in Japan in '98. As for how much FTL or its former members contributed to the design of the final product, that's up for debate if the list of credits are anything to go by. Although they are credited with the design of the game, it's also clear that a few of those involved had also worked on porting the first *Dungeon Master* to the SNES in Japan under JVC and Victor Interactive Software.

With only one game, FTL had managed to inspire dungeon masters years later such as those working on *Ultima Underworld*. Although the company and the game it had created would not be as well remembered as those that would follow, a quiet nod to what its gameplay had inspired in a generation of developers can be found in nearly every real-time dungeon today. **RC**

Looking Glass Studios

1990 - 2000



To many, Looking Glass Studios is a legend, the house where thieves helped ground the stealth genre and where the limits of grid-based CRPGs had slipped free. Like others in the industry trying to stick their armored foot in the portcullis, Looking Glass started with a good idea.

Space Rogue for Origin had been released in 1989 and Paul Neurath, having worked on it, felt that it had just scratched the surface of what he was looking for in an RPG. He liked *Wizardry*, yet the abstract approach it had taken with its first-person dungeons weren't what he was looking for. Neurath wanted the experience to be far more immersive, something akin to FTL's *Dungeon Master* in '87, but with the freedom of a flight sim.

Things slowly came together in the next few years. In the spring of 1990, Neurath formed Blue Sky Productions and hired Doug Church, who was studying at MIT, and Doug Wike from Origin as the artist. To get the texture mapping done, he tapped Chris Green from Lerner Research, who shared a bit of code with Blue Sky while working on their own projects.

Neurath's idea was for a free-roaming dungeon sim and eventually sold the idea to Origin who decided to fit it into the *Ultima* series. After two years of development, crunching together their own technology and carving out a massive dungeon at the heart of a volcano, Blue Sky's *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* finally hit shelves in '92 becoming a critically acclaimed hit with retail success coming in a bit later as word of mouth spread on just how different it was from your typical first-person 3D game. Shortly afterward, both Blue Sky and Lerner Research merged into Looking Glass Studios.

Ultima Underworld would be a sign of things to come. A sequel arrived in '93, and in '94 *System Shock* traded dungeons and swords for sci-fi space stations, cyberspace, mutants, and lasers. Because id's *Doom* had come out a few months before in the previous year, some would dub it the "thinking man's *Doom*".

Looking Glass also proved it could do more. They released a flight sim in '95 called *Flight Unlimited*, which was followed by a sequel in '97. In '98, *Thief: The Dark Project*'s medieval world festooned with steampunk bits and bobs defied the FPS stereotype once again in becoming an iconic milestone for stealth. A sequel to *System Shock* followed in '99, again to critical acclaim, and expanding on the concepts from the first game. *Thief* would also get a sequel in 2000, a few months before the end came.

By then, Looking Glass' days were numbered. Along with its critically acclaimed and financially lucrative hits, a few others didn't pan out as well such as *Terra Nova* and *British Open Championship Golf* (the latter ended their brief self-publishing efforts) despite positive words from the press. Mounting losses from canceled projects and a general tightening of belts from potential suitors eventually sealed their fate. Looking Glass had no choice but to shutter its doors in the same year *Thief II* was released.

Looking Glass Studios shook up the industry with revolutionary ideas embracing cutting edge tech to deliver titles no one else had ever seen. The studio is gone and many of its key members have since moved on to other places within the industry or have left it entirely, but no one can deny that their work has also inspired players and designers since then to continue looking beyond the grid. **RC**



Six absolute classics from Looking Glass Studios, that still influence gaming today.

Ion Storm

1996 - 2001 (Dallas)

1997 - 2005 (Austin)



Masters of Doom, by David Kushner, is a great book for those seeking more information on Jon Romero and Ion Storm.

Founded in 1996 and dedicated to John Romero's credo of "Design is law," Ion Storm followed the footsteps of David Crane's Activision in the early 80's, putting its designers front-and-center. It was where Romero, the former co-founder of id Software, would start over with Tom Hall, Todd Porter, and Jerry O'Flaherty, setting up shop atop Dallas' Chase Tower. And like their new digs, they also wanted their games to be bigger and better than anyone else's.

Ion Storm Austin's origins were much different, having started out briefly as Looking Glass Austin – where Warren Spector and his team were based. Looking Glass, however, overstretched as it was, decided to close the Austin office roughly a year after it opened. But the team hung together long enough for Ion Storm's Romero and Wilson to come calling, convincing Spector not to sign a deal with EA for a *Command & Conquer* RPG and bringing Looking Glass' orphans onboard in 1997. As a new branch, they would also be left entirely alone to do what they did best – make games.

It was also a heady time in tech – the Internet was exploding, dot coms were hot commodities, and AOL CDs were virally spreading from mailbox to mailbox. Ion Storm rode 3D accelerated excitement on a wave of wild anticipation from those following the careers of its founders, especially a "rock star" like Romero – co-creator of the legendary *Doom*. Big things were expected. Hype was king. Living up to their own press, on the other hand, proved a lot harder.

Ion Storm's signed a publishing deal with Eidos, but their very first product, the RTS game *Dominion: Storm Over Gift 3*, had a troubled development history almost from the start. When it finally arrived in 1998, it was a title that brought little to a savagely competitive arena where *Age of Empires*, *Command & Conquer*, *Warcraft II* and *Starcraft* held court. Romero's oft delayed – and much hyped – *Daikatana* would finally arrive in 2000 to a brutal wave of criticism from both the press and the public.

Tom Hall's CRPG project, *Anachronox*, managed to eke past the turmoil relatively unscathed as a Western take on JRPGs, often lauded for its fantastic sci-fi world, more so than its mechanics holding up as a decent title overall. With as much left on the cutting room floor (such as a multiplayer mode) from Eidos' pressure to finish and release another chronically late title, *Anachronox* could have had a sequel. However, Eidos had other plans, closing the Ion Storm Dallas office a few months after *Anachronox* shipped in 2001.

Separated from the internal gyrations that had rocked Dallas, Ion Storm Austin's budget had finally allowed Warren Spector to create his long dreamed project: the dystopian future and conspiracy-laden world of *Deus Ex*, released in 2000 to universal acclaim. The sequel, 2003's *Deus Ex: Invisible War*, was less well-received, and Spector and his group would close out Ion Storm's history revisiting the classic world of *Thief*, with 2004's *Thief: Deadly Shadows*. Spector and many senior developers, such as Harvey Smith, eventually left to pursue new interests in the same year and Eidos quietly closed the doors later in 2005.

To many, Ion Storm Dallas' reckless development environment and excesses had already set what *Masters of Doom*'s David Kushner called "Romero's Willy Wonka factory" on its path to ruin. Yet to others, Ion Storm as a whole was a brave vision where two CRPGs would – however briefly – pull back the scandal colored curtains on Romero's dream for a developer's Camelot where design was not only law, but would remain king.

"You know, it sounds like such a good idea to let the inmates run the insane asylums, and it really isn't.[...]We all felt like we were talented, creative guys with big ideas, and if the big bad publishers would just get out of the way we can do amazing things. It just doesn't work out that way. Real creativity happens within constraints, not without constraints."

- Warren Spector



The infamous *Daikatana* magazine ad, perhaps the most remembered part of that game.

Troika Games

1998 - 2005



Many of the industry's biggest names, from Peter Molyneux to Richard Garriott, have gone back to being indies sharing a passion for the games they made as smaller, more intimate groups focused on building their dream titles. It's also one of the reasons on why Troika Games was founded in 1998.

That year, *Fallout 2* was still in production. Tim Cain, Leonard Boyarsky, and Jason Anderson, the triumvirate of designers instrumental in building *Wasteland*'s spiritual successor, *Fallout*, had been working on the sequel since 1997.

The decision for them to leave wasn't easy. As Tim Cain recounts in Morgan Ramsay's book, *Gamers at Work*, they had gotten a taste of how much bureaucracy they had to deal with in *Fallout*'s development citing interference with design and marketing from people that had little to no idea on what the game was. They survived the experience, though had misgivings about going through it again with the sequel.

They did their best to make things work on *Fallout 2* but ultimately chose to strike off on their own, forming Troika Games to get back to basics. According to the FAQ from Troika's archived homepage, the name came from their days on *Fallout* when they were referred to as "The Troika" by their boss, a Russian word that roughly translates to "a group of three".

Troika's first game was a yearned-for return to fantasy in 2001 with a steampunk twist on a Victorian-styled world. *Arcanum* was filled with complex crunch, packaged in a beautifully illustrated "big box" published by Sierra with a suitably thick manual written in-universe to describe much of the world, its races, and its characters. If it wanted to double as a PnP derivative, it was only few steps away from the table.

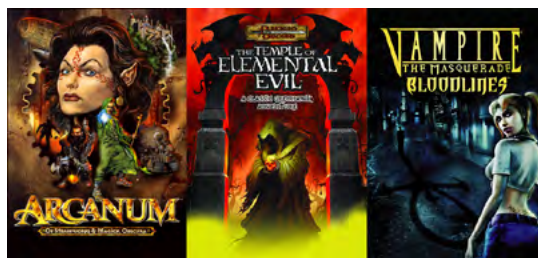
Their second game, released in 2003, was based on the classic *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop module, *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, and the 3.5 ruleset was added in almost literally at the last minute thanks to having been published during production. In 2004, *Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines* was released as

what many regard as the best integration of White Wolf's famous Vampire RPG into video game format with a storyline rife with choices and consequences, deep development system for the character (try playing as a Malkavian for a truly unique experience), and a slice of open-world exploration and questing.

As creative as the games were, things were much different on the technical level, giving the studio a reputation for buggy releases. Issues during development and the failure to find additional funding for future games eventually led to Troika's closure in 2005 eventually sending its veteran designers to places such as Blizzard (*Diablo III*), Obsidian Entertainment (*Pillars of Eternity*), and inXile (*Wasteland 2*).

But Troika's CRPGs live on and not simply as another name amidst so many others on services like Steam and Good Old Games. Long after official support ended, tech-savvy fans smoothed away most of the bugs with *Arcanum* and *Temple of Elemental Evil* with their own patches. As of this writing, *Bloodlines* continues to receive occasional community patches, doing things such as restoring unfinished content to converting the game into a wholly new campaign replete with revamped clans.

Troika went small to make some of the best CRPGs, that didn't shy away from the kind of crunch hardcore players reveled in. Judging from how they're regarded at places such as the RPG Codex, Good Old Games and forums elsewhere, the efforts of their biggest supporters continue speaking volumes on how important they still are today. And that's the kind of legacy any studio can be proud of having. **RC**



Troika's games are the perfect definition of flawed gems.

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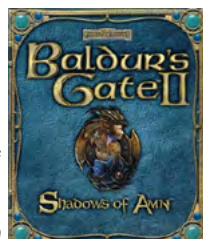
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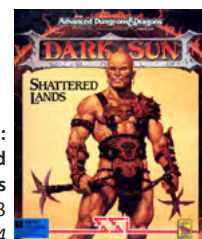
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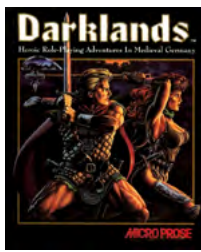
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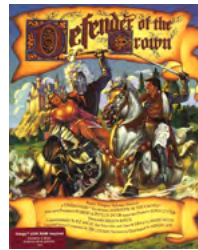
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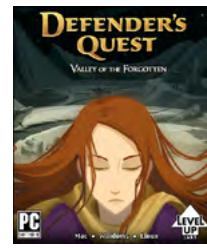
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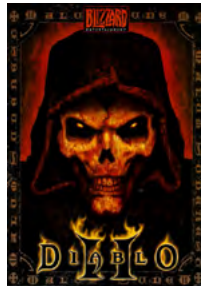
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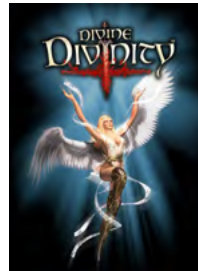
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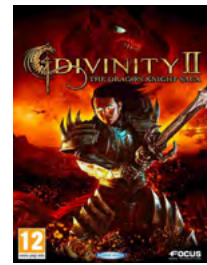
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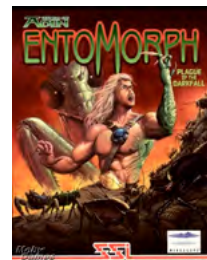
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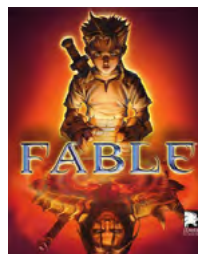
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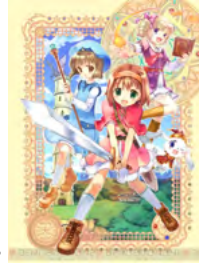
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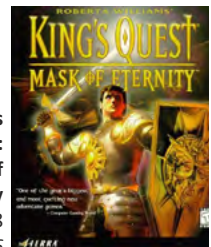
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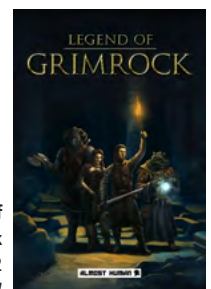
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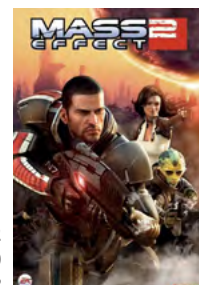
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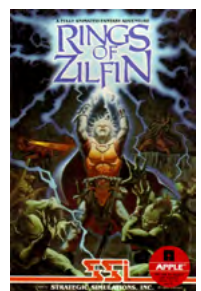
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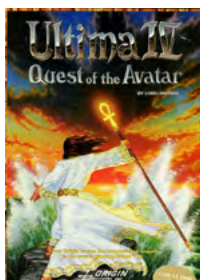
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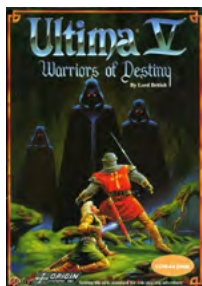
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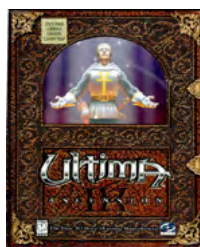
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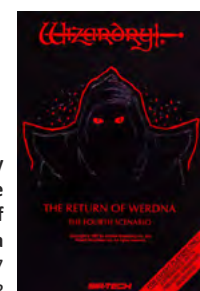
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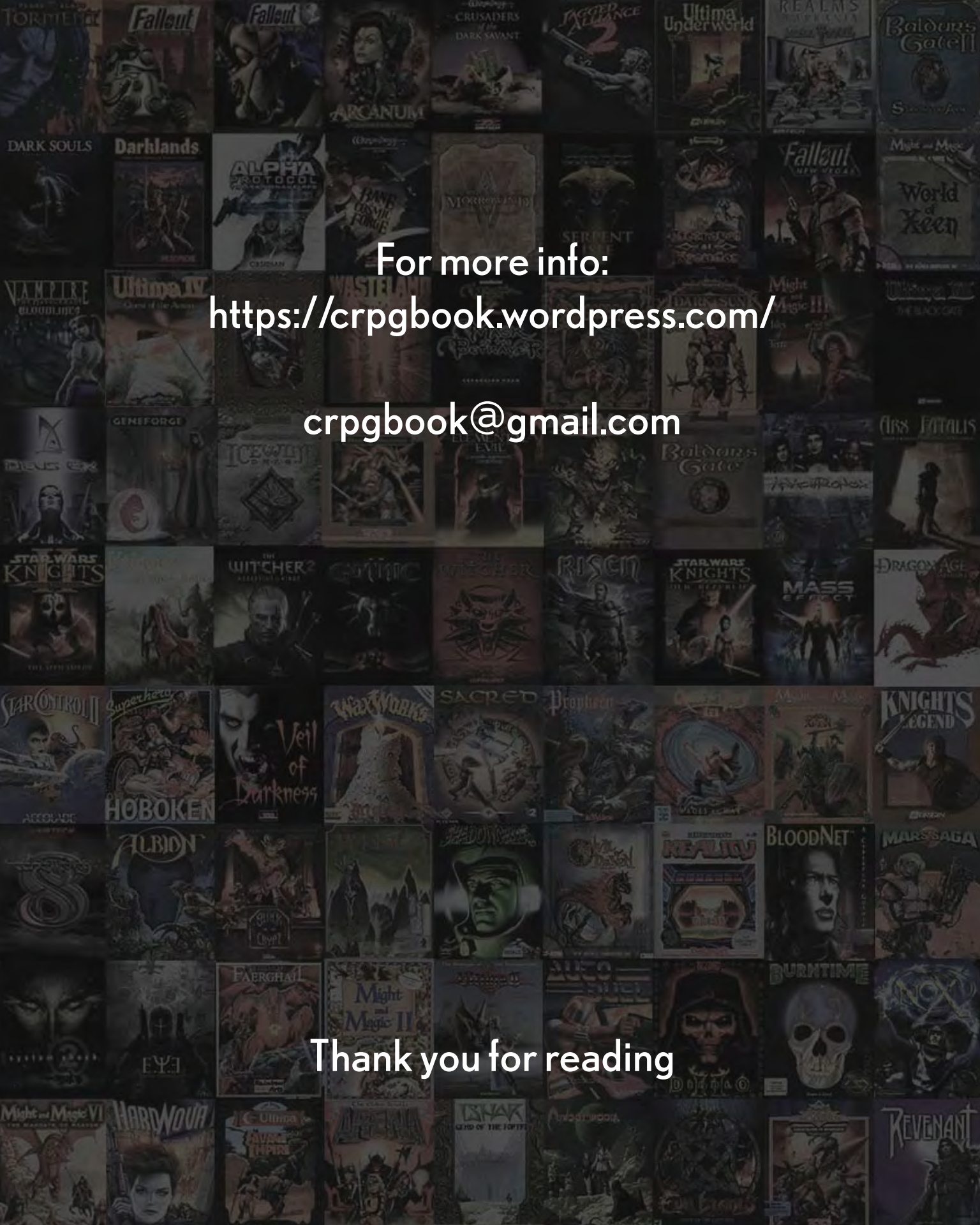


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