
THE
CRPG
BOOK
A Guide to Computer Role-Playing Games

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The CRPG Book:
A Guide to Computer Role-Playing Games

Edited by Felipe Pepe

This book is the result of five years of work
and the collaboration of 119 volunteers.

We hope that you enjoy it.

v2.0
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Introduction

When thinking about where a book dedicated to computer RPGs might come from, one might consider countries like Germany, Canada, UK or the US. Maybe France, Russia or Poland. Surely never Brazil. There's a good reason for this.

When the first personal computers and games started to appear in the late 70s, Brazil was under a military dictatorship which banned all computer imports. We couldn't buy an Apple II, C64 or IBM PC, only the slow and crude national alternatives.

Some, like my father, managed to bypass this by smuggling a computer into the country. Still, to play you also needed to find games, and those were a rarity (especially CRPGs!). You had to know someone who travelled to the US and brought the floppy disks back – and then copy those. That's how *Betrayal at Krondor* arrived at my house back in the early 90s.

Even with the computer and the game in hand, there was still one final barrier: the language. As much as I enjoyed seeing my father play, I had no idea of what those costumed people were saying. I spent months playing *Krondor*, exploring its large world, but never even left the first chapter. My biggest achievement was brute-forcing a riddle chest.

I found solace in JRPGs. Not only they were much easier to play, but consoles were growing popular in Brazil, as in 1994 we finally began to emerge from a long and brutal economical crisis. A friend in my apartment building had a Super Nintendo with *Chrono Trigger*, and that game became my passion. By then, owning a PC was finally legal, but the CRPG genre was dead – computers were *Doom* machines.

Years later, I was reading a games magazine and something caught my eye: a bizarre game where you could teach farmers about crop rotation to earn XP – but only if you had created a smart character.

I had just started playing tabletop RPGs and was fascinated by a computer game like that. So, in 1998 I bought *Fallout*, which I love to this day. Not only is it an amazing game that breathed new life into CRPGs, but I finally knew enough English to play it properly.

My younger brother didn't. He couldn't do most quests, so he just walked around and killed everyone. But that was also allowed, and we had a lot of fun talking about just how different our experiences were and all the cool things we kept discovering.

I wanted to do that with more people, to talk with my friends in school about this game, to hear their stories, to partake in the joy of a shared hobby. However, my parents had just divorced and I was then living in a small town in Brazil's countryside. My father gave me his old computer, but no one else I knew had one. They were still very expensive and complicated machines. Cyber Cafes began to appear around this time, but people played *Counter-Strike* there, not hundred-hour-long CRPGs.

Other than my brother, I had no one to talk to about the wise-cracking sword in *Baldur's Gate II*, how I became a vampire in *Morrowind* or the fact that you can shoot Anna Navarre in *Deus Ex*.

In 2004 I moved back to São Paulo, Brazil's biggest city, to go to university. A side-effect was that, for the first time in my life, I had the Internet in my house. That was when everything changed.

It sounds obvious today, we take it for granted, but the Internet freed us from all regional barriers. I could talk to anyone, anywhere, about anything!

Eventually I found the RPG Codex, where not only I could talk for hours about my favourite games, but could I learn about RPGs I missed, alternate quest solutions I never tried, cool mods, funny stories, powerful builds and much more. I was home.

In the 14 years since, I've been trying to learn as much as possible about this amazing genre. I played *Ultima, Wizardry* and other classics that I had missed, tried obscure gems, emulated the hardware I never had, and much more. I owe a lot to abandonware sites, emulator developers, wise forum members and to the great work done recently by GOG.com.

But where does one start? Just what is a C64? Does *Wizardry I* still hold up today? Is *Albion* good? Should I play the *Might and Magic* games in order? Am I playing badly or is this game extremely hard? Which mods to use in *Neverwinter Nights*?

I suffered all these questions – and many more – but finding the answers wasn't always easy.

Over the years, many guides became outdated, and when asking around you might find someone who "is tired of dumb questions", who gives poor answers or who simply hates a game that you might love. Resources such as "Top 10 RPGs" lists help, but they mostly focus on the recent, popular titles.

As such, this book represents several things.

First, it's a guide – the one I wish I'd had when I first began exploring the world of CRPGs. It shows the most important, popular and interesting titles, then tells you about what makes them so special. You can flip the book open, read about a few cool games, see the screenshots and choose what to play next.

I've made sure to add some historical context too, showing what was happening at the time. To fully grasp the impact *Ultima IV* or *Dungeon Master* had, you must know what came before and after them.

The book is also a helping hand. It has tips on how to run games that aren't compatible with modern hardware, tells you when there's a patch to fix critical bugs and even recommends some mods, so that you can have the best possible experience.

Finally, it's a gift to my younger self – and to anyone who might feel lonely like I did. Here you have over a hundred people from across the world, all willing to sit down and tell you about their favourite RPGs, the great adventures that they had and why you should try these games.

Creating this book was a long, wild ride. It first began in early 2014, with the RPG Codex Top 70 CRPGs, a poll where people voted on their favourite games and then wrote small reviews. From there came the idea of making an expanded book version, with longer reviews and adding historically important titles and curiosities. Having made the Top 70 list in about two months, I thought that the book would take around six to ten months, at most. Ha!

It took me four years.

Still, I can't complain. I learned a lot during this time, had a blast playing the 300+ games featured here, got in contact with legendary figures from my childhood such as Chris Avellone, Warren Spector, Scorpia and Tim Cain, as well as all the wonderful people that helped create and promote this project.

It's surreal now to recall a time when computers were rare, obtuse artefacts and reading a simple quest in English was a challenge. A time when a project like this would've been impossible. I'd never talked to a foreigner until I was 17 years old, yet now I live in Japan.

Isaac Asimov used to say that the role of science fiction was to predict change, so that we could better handle it as a society. Perhaps the role of RPGs (and games in general) is to help prepare individuals for challenges and adventures to come.

Felipe Pepe,
Project Editor

About the project

The CRPG Book Project is a collaborative, non-profit project created to compile the history of Computer Role-Playing Games into an accessible and educative volume. The book was written by volunteers from all continents, ages and walks of life: developers, journalists, modders, critics, scholars and fans, but also parents, couples, grandfathers, doctors, teachers, engineers, businessmen, etc.

The purpose of the project is to spread our passion for this great genre, sharing knowledge that is currently scattered across countless forums, magazines, websites and minds. The book covers CRPGs from 1975 to 2015, plus contains several articles, mod recommendations, developer quotes and interesting trivia, in an effort to create a guide that will have something to offer to old-school veterans and new players alike.

This PDF is based on the hardcover version of the book, published by Bitmap Books in 2019. That was a limited release, that helped us to get the entire book proofread and revised by a professional. The CRPG Book Project remains non-profit, and all the author earnings from that version (£12.475) were donated to Vocação, a Brazilian NGO that helps kids and teenagers from poor areas to get education and employment.

Dedicated to:

Claudia, Célia, Marco, Saphyra, Thais, Vanessa, Thiago, Carol and Caio.

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The RPG Codex, RPG Watch, Bitmap Books, Hardcore Gaming 101, Ultima Codex, The Internet Archive, Matt Chat, MobyGames, The CRPG Addict, Cyber1, CGW Museum, DJ OldGames, DOSBox, The Digital Antiquarian, Unseen64, Museum of Computer Adventure Game History, The LP Archive, Abandonia, My Abandonware, GOG, Gamasutra, Nautilus, Shane Plays, Hall of Light, Emuparadise and every unsung hero who contributed to these websites, developed emulators, ports for modern systems, mods, fan-patches, archived rare games or uploaded footage of them to YouTube. This book would have been impossible without all of you.

And, of course, a most special thanks to those who created all theses 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.

Contributors

Alberto Ourique (AO) is an experienced copywriter, but a rookie in game industry and novels. If all goes wrong, he intends to embrace immortality by becoming a lich.

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.

Andrea Marcato (AM) is a long-standing Abandonian who is amazed to be in the same credits list as Chris Avellone.

Andreas Inderwildi (AI) is a writer and freelance game critic with an unhealthy obsession for *Dark Souls* and *Planescape: Torment*. When he isn't playing games he likes to read and/or write about history, folklore, and the occult.

Andrew "Quarex" Huntleigh (QX) is a family man with a PhD, and spends his days as a federal officer when not agonising over proper paper-doll inventory management.

Arkadiusz Makieła (AR) 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.

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

BaronVonChateau (BC) Dreams of making a surrealist RPG, though he has no idea of what he exactly means by that. To trump his despair, he spends years making convoluted quest mods named after jazz standards.

Benjamin Sanderfer (BE) once helped develop software for a famous RPG publisher for their universal pen-and-paper game system. Too bad that system was such a failure it helped drive that company out of business. True story.

Blobert (BL) Started with RPGs with *Phantasie III* on the C64. Fell in love *Ultima V*, and continues to play CRPGs when his four 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 50s and thinks Philip K. Dick was the best writer ever.

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

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

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

Casper "Grunker" Gronemann (CG) dislikes most parties, excepting those with six characters or more.

Chester Bolingbroke (CHB) continues to struggle with his addiction.

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.

Christian Hviid (CH) started gaming in the 80s and still thinks 3D gaming is something new-school and dirty.

Christian Hudspeth (CHR) Husband, father, gamer and really good at all of them, just ask his mom.

Christopher Ables (CA) 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.

Darktoes (D1) is a student, gamer and self-proclaimed helpful person.

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

David Ballestrino (DB) can't look at a chequered floor without imagining how to position a party and hoping for a good initiative roll.

David Konkol (DK) is an author and game designer whose insane ramblings can be found at www.madoverlordstudios.com

David Walgrave (DW) has three uses for his deep, booming voice: to organise video game projects, to sing as the frontman of a metal band, and to quietly talk to his cute, fluffy dogs.

David "dhamster" Hamilton (DH) is ready to form a party like it's 1999.

David "mindx2" B. (M2) spends many a night perusing his collection of classic computer game boxes, pining away for that bygone era.

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

Diggfinger (DF) loves *Fallout* and everything Troika-related. Check out his wiki on Jason D. Anderson if you're not convinced.

Dorateen (DO) rolled a dwarven fighter over thirty years ago and has enjoyed this hobby from tabletop into its computer role-playing iterations ever since.

Drew Merrithew (DM) became a developer specialising in cybersecurity when it became apparent game development doesn't pay.

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

Eric Shumaker (ES) is a gamer bad boy who games for what he believes in. He has worked on many stupid games you haven't played.

ERYFKRAD (ER), His Holiness the God-Emperor of All Mankind, Lord of the Heavens above and Master of the Hells Below.

Fairfax (FAX) MCA disciple and *Civilization* modder, loves game development stories and daydreaming about making CRPGs.

Felipe Pepe (FE) is the idiot who thought he could finish making this book in just six months or so.

Ferhergón (FHG) used to host "Maniacos del Calabozo" and thinks old gold times for RPGs are long gone.

Frank "HiddenX" Wecke (HX) The Elder Spy, Game Curator & Editor at RPG Watch, RPG Dot veteran and special emissary at the RPG Codex.

Gabor "J_C" Domjan (JC) grew up in the 90s and got to see the golden age of gaming. He enjoys most genres, but CRPGs and flight simulators are his real love.

Garfunkel (GA) got a C64 for Christmas, detoured briefly to Amiga 500 before settling in with a PC in the 90s and has never strayed elsewhere.

Gary Butterfield (GB) is an author, podcaster and loving supporter to maligned CRPG sequels. He's actually sort of OK with THAC0.

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.

Ghostdog (GD) Has been in RPG Codex far too long for his sanity's sake. When he had trouble replaying his favourite game, *Planescape Torment* in widescreen resolutions, he made a UI mod to fix that.

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 (GS) has enjoyed CRPGs since playing *Ultima IV* on the C64 back in the mid 1980s.

Gustavo Zambonin (GZ) is, perhaps, the youngest among all of the contributors, slowly learning how to savour the best CRPGs released since he was born.

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 he tried his first RPG, *Planescape:Torment* which up to this day remains his favourite game.

Jack "Highwang" Ragasa (JR) is a YouTube game reviewer that attributes many years of video games to his overly verbose nature.

Jaedar (JA) had a great big think about it, and realised *NWN2* is one of the first 'real' RPGs he ever played. He's been playing catch-up ever since.

Jakub Wichnowski (JW) Story is what he values the most in games and he hopes that one day he'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*.

James "Blaine" Henderson (JBH) doesn't like whatever terrible games you like, unless they're games that he also happens to like; but he can probably find a reason to criticise you anyway.

Jay Barnson (JB) is a writer, game developer, programmer, and – in an alternate universe where the C64 never came to be – the Grand Emperor of the Western Hemisphere Hegemony.

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

Joseph Coppola (JO) is a programmer who enjoys RPGs, novels, and other word-based activities.

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

John Harris (JH) writes for @Play and on retro games, and also sometimes makes computer games. He thinks the best game ever made is *Rampart*, the fool.

Kenneth Kully (KE) 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!

Kurt Kalata (KK) took his first step towards war and made the end of battle. He also runs Hardcore Gaming 101.

Lev (LEV) likes RPGs and just wanted to appear in a book with Chris Avellone.

Ludo Lense (LL) Trades sanity for the ability to make overly long videos about games.

Luis Magalhães (LM) From doctor to marketer to writer, Luis keeps changing class in real life, but his favourite gaming genre is unchanged since the 90s. Hint: it's not FPSs.

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.

Marc Hofstee (MHO) is called the weirdest *Ascaron*-fan of all time (quote M. Worsley). He also loves *Final Fantasy VII*, an Atari ST and his seven kids.

Marko Vučković (MV) is an old strategy fan who spent way too much time playing *Laser Squad* on his C64, but regrets nothing.

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

Max Silbiger (MAS) is a developer who does translation hacks of old Japanese PC games. Sometimes, he even gets to play them, too!

Michael Mils (MI) learned to read and write on a French 8-bit computer and therefore grew both bitter and nostalgic.

Michel Sabbagh (MIS) is a bug smasher by day and word wrangler by night who has a salmon fetish.

Neanderthal (NT) Wounded, old and lecherous.

Nicolas Hennemann (NH) Freelance writer and translator, took the chance to tell you about his favourite 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.

Nyaa (NY) is an avid gamer who took up Translation LP of unique foreign games as a hobby to contribute back to the gaming industry that he loved.

Octavius (OC) aka PetrusOctavianus is one of the veterans of the RPG Codex.

Oleg "Smiling Spectre" Bobryshev (SS) is an avid gamer and game collector. He wants to play them all, but real life makes its own adjustments**.**

Outmind (OU) enjoys long walks on the battlefield and hopes robots won't take over before an *FF Tactics* sequel is released.

Patrick Holleman (PNH) writes books about the historical development of video game design. No, he does not know why, either. www.thegamedesignforum.com

Petr Hanák (PE) is a *Dračí Doupě* gamemaster that just had to create his own game system for the party. Secretly hoping to finish it and shatter the *AD&D supremacy.*

Prime Junta (PJ) has a thing for systems, worlds, and stories, and thinks RPGs on computers and off them are the coolest way we know to bring all of them together.

Reggie Carolipio (RE) has been trying not to walk and turn in 90° angles or (A)ttack stray monsters without armour since the 80s.

Ricardo Regis (RI) learned to love CRPGs as a child, while he fantasised everything that happened during tabletop RPG matches with his friends.

Richard Cobbett (RC) just wants everyone to stop with the bloody giant spiders already. Unless there's an equally giant can of RAID.

Richard Mitchell (RM) got his CRPG start with *Ultima* on the C64 in 1988. He would like to say it's been all downhill ever since but *Star Wars* and comic books would disagree.

Rob Parker (RP) studies interactive fiction and roguelikes, Managing Editor for First Person Scholar.

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

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

Rod "TronFAQ" Rehn (RTR) has a dumb nickname that he's now stuck with, and somehow went from writing FAQs to making mods for one of his favourite games.

Rogueknight333 (RK) had a hard time finding the old school RPGs he loved, so decided to use the *Neverwinter Nights* toolset to make his own, resulting in the ongoing *Swordflight* series.

Romanus "ZZ" Surt (ZZ) played shooter games before stumbling upon *Akalabeth* and *Mordor.*

Ryan J. Scott aka "Zombra" (RJS) is neither zombie nor zebra, but enjoys certain qualities of both.

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

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

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.

Shamus Young (SY) is a programmer, an author, and nearly a composer. He just won't shut up about video games.

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.

Silver Girl (SG)

Sitra Achara (SA) spelunking in *Temple of Elemental Evil* files since 2006, has yet to be eaten by a grue.

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

SuicideBunny was due to help with the book, but the universe had other plans. RIP, bro.

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.

'Tatty' Waniand (TW) would spend her perfect Sunday coding, reading books that aren't related to work, and daydreaming about gore and games**.**

Thiago Fernandes dos Santos (TF) has always loved RPGs and fighting games.

Thomas Henshell (TH) always read the manual before playing the game. Always. Patiently awaiting manuals to make a comeback.

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

Théo "Izual" Dezalay (IZ) wrote a whole book about *Fallout*, which means he obviously made all the wrong choices in his life.

Tilman Hakenberg (TI) has managed to trick everyone into thinking he's some kind of writer, but doesn't really know what he's doing.

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

Tonya Bezpalko (TAB) loves stats that turn out to do nothing when you look them up later, and other antique design elements.

Trevor "Trooth" Mooth (TM) is a self-proclaimed authority on roguelikes, and has been gaming and writing since before you were born.

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*.

Vladimir Sumina (VL) grew up playing adventure games. Then he discovered CRPGs, which showered him with an abundance of choices, and he soon realised that blowing up a door can be just as fun as unlocking it.

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.

Zed Duke of Banville (ZD) has been playing CRPGs since 1986. Although he now reluctantly plays games on IBM PCs and consoles, he spends his spare time building a time machine so that he can travel back and establish Amiga world domination.


A
B
C
D
Might and Magic
Castle Basenji
Desert of the Sphinx
Gargoyle Range
Dragon Tower
Lava La
Asp
Red Dwarf Range
Barbaric Mountains
Warzone
Jouster's Sayannah
Castle Burlock
Ogre Hills
Darzog's Tower
Winterkill
Rivercity
Fairy Forest
Darkstone Tower
Tower of High Magic
Cave of Illusion
Newcastle
Lifeforce Lagoon
Troll Forest
Land of the Giants
Nightshadow
Land of Xeen



Articles & Guides

Here we feature a guide to using this book and an FAQ on how to play older CRPGs, followed by a selection of articles about older hardware, game history and CRPG trends.

Several writers contributed here. The first article is from Jay Barnson, developer at Rampant Games and prolific writer, full of insights into the RPG genre.

The second comes from Michael Abbott. He's a game design professor and used to write for the Brainy Gamer blog/podcast. He writes about his experiences teaching about older games to new generations.

Next we have Scorpia, the anonymous legend of gaming journalism. She was the CRPG expert for the Computer Gaming World magazine during the 80s and most of the 90s. 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.

Finally, Craig Stern, creator of the *Telepath* RPG series and the Messiah board game, who wrote an article on the distant origins of RPGs.

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

Using this book

The goal of this book is not only to gather, preserve and share the history of CRPGs, but also to help people find hidden gems or experience classic titles for the first time. The games are listed in chronological order, starting in 1975, but feel free to start right at the end and slowly come back if you wish, or jump to your favourite title and explore what was going on at the time.

The book contains over 400 CRPGs – some of them legendary classics, others just curiosities – but even the worst game included here has something interesting to offer, be it a great concept that was poorly executed or just some insight into the reasons behind the game's shortcomings.

If you're new to the genre or haven't played many older RPGs, here are some tips to help you:

SAVE OFTEN!! Auto-saves and checkpoints weren't common until the 2000s, so remember to save often or you might suddenly lose hours of progress. There's no shame in saving after every battle – ignore those who say "save-scumming ruins the challenge", as really challenging games will limit your saves when needed.

Start slowly. Games like *Wizardy I*, *Ultima IV* and *Pool of Radiance* are all-time classics, but going from modern games to one from the 80s is a shock – there's no mouse support, interfaces are terrible, some features aged badly and you're expected to take notes and draw maps. Starting with them might frustrate you.

Dungeon crawlers are great for beginners. Games like *Eye of the Beholder, Lands of Lore, Anvil of Dawn* and *Dungeon Master* were designed to be accessible – they aged very well, have mouse support and a well-done difficulty curve – they start slowly but become very challenging by the end.

Suggested starting points:

– 1980s CRPGs: *Dungeon Master, Phantasie, Wasteland* and *Quest for Glory*.

– 1990s CRPGs: *Might and Magic VI*, *Fallout*, *Baldur's Gate*, *Betrayal at Krondor, Star Control II, Diablo, Quest for Glory: Shadows of Darkness* and *System Shock 2*.

– 2000s CRPGs: *Deus Ex, Morrowind*, *Wizardry 8*, *Diablo II*, *Gothic*, *Geneforge*, *Dragon Age: Origins, Valkyria Chronicles* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II - The Sith Lords*.

– Roguelikes: *Dungeons of Dredmor, Tales of Maj'Eyal* or *Stone Soup: Dungeon Crawl*.

Above all, remember to have fun. Some games may take a while to get going, but continuously forcing yourself to play something you're not enjoying will only result in burnout.

FAQ

DOS, Apple, C64, Amiga... Which version should I play?

The DOS versions are usually the most common; they are often available on GOG.com and have a powerful and easy-to-use emulator: DOSBox.

The Commodore Amiga version of some games released between 1985 and 1990 had much superior graphics and sound, but getting the Amiga emulators to run can be slightly more complex.

For titles released before 1985 the Apple II versions are usually the best alternative, as the AppleWin emulator is extremely easy to use.

What should I keep at hand while playing?

I strongly advise to always play RPGs with a pencil and paper nearby for note-taking and map-making.

The manual is important for checking rules, but some RPGs also use it as a spell book, requiring you to type the name of each spell when casting.

Also, most 80s RPGs had a Quick Reference Guide, with all the game's commands in one handy list. They are extremely useful and I suggest printing it.

Should I read the manual before playing?

That's expected for most pre-90s RPGs, as they provide little to no in-game tutorials and creating a character requires familiarity with the game's rules.

Moreover, games like *Ultima IV* have amazing manuals explaining the world and its lore, and that knowledge might be required during play.

Should I take notes?

Quest logs weren't common until the late 90s and older RPGs often have keywords, passwords or even entire magic rituals you need to know to beat the game – these might be mentioned just once during a dialog, so be sure to note them down!

Should I draw my own dungeon maps?

That's part of the intended experience in most old-school dungeon crawlers. Designers would add teleporters, spinners, dark areas and other traps to confuse players and challenge their map-making skills.

If you don't want to use a pencil and grid paper, there's great software such as Grid Cartographer. Some games also have their own fan-made mapping tools, such as *Eye of the Beholder*'s The All Seeing Eye.

Should I re-roll my character's stats?

In games such as *Wizardry*, stats determine which class your character can choose. For example, in order to become a Thief your character needs at least 11 Agility, so you'll have to re-roll until you get that.

Others, like *Baldur's Gate* allow you to pick a class regardless, but a poor stat roll can leave you with a weak character. So, again, carefully read the manual.

I'm afraid my characters will suck. What can I do?

Indeed, creating a bad character in some older RPGs can make progress extremely difficult – or sometimes impossible.

If you read the manual but still feel insecure, do an online search for recommended parties for beginners. You can copy them entirely or just take hints, and that will help you avoid hitting a wall hours later.

I can't get a game to work, what now?

Visit the PC Gaming Wiki, an amazing wiki that helps players run and optimise all kinds of PC games. If you can't find the game or the issue you're having, try checking the Vogons forums.

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 about 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 – yet 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.

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

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.

Take, for example, turn-based vs. real-time. 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 pixelated 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 – there were lots of Action RPGs back then.

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

Complexity? You've got dirt-simple titles from back in the day that make 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, like SSI'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, 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 Apshai: 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 still playing older games for the first time (I just recently finished Star Wars: *KotOR II)*, 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 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, RPG vs. Adventure. 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, 2013

Jay Barnson has 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.*

Ports:
Far beyond resolution and FPS

by Felipe Pepe

Port comparisons in today's era of multi-platform releases usually amount to small differences, such as slightly better visual effects, a slightly smoother frame rate or slightly higher resolution, especially when comparing Sony's and Microsoft's consoles. PC ports might have more nuances, such as 4K resolution, additional options like Field of View and support for mods.

Still, it's a far cry from the 80s, when dozens of wildly different platforms were fighting for consumers' preference, each with its own hardware particularities. Even basic elements like colours or sound were up for grabs – a 1986 Macintosh had a sound card but could only render black and white images, while an IBM PC from the same year could display colours but its only sound was beeps from its internal speaker.

Even among computers with colour there was a wide range of colour pallets and limitations. The blue of a Commodore 64, an Amstrad CPC and a NES had completely different tones, often making art designed for one hardware look weird on the other.

Then you had deeper differences: some computers used cassette tapes, others 5¼-inch or 3½-inch floppies. Some had mouse support, others didn't even have a hard drive. Plus all the variations in speed and capacity of each hardware.

Another factor was the time difference between ports. *Dungeon Master* was released for the Atari ST in 1987, for the Amiga in 1988 and was only ported to MS-DOS in 1992. Some companies would update the ports as time went by, so the original 1985 release of *Phantasie* for the Commodore 64 had crude graphics and clunky UI, while the 1987 Amiga version uses a new, colourful art and has mouse support.

This style of game porting would continue until the early 2000s, when several factors such as the massive popularity of consoles, the economical struggles of PC developers, the market dominance of a few giant publishers and the arrival of the Xbox pushed all games towards multi-platform releases.

For players wondering what's the best version of older games, the MS-DOS versions are usually the easiest to find and run – they are often available on GOG.com and have a powerful and easy-to-use emulator: DOSBox (the DOSBox Daum build offers more options, while DFend has a friendly interface).

The Commodore Amiga version of some games released between 1985 and 1990 had much superior graphics and sound, but getting the WinUAE Amiga emulator to run can be slightly more complex. You can also try the Amiga Forever emulator – it's paid, but comes with pre-configured setups.

For titles released before 1985, the Apple II versions are usually the best alternative, as the AppleWin emulator is extremely easy to use and you can also play online at Virtual Apple II.

The following pages will show some comparison between several ports of a same game, to give you an idea of just how different they could be.

Defender of the Crown



Commodore Amiga



Apple IIGS



Atari ST



Commodore 64



DOS (EGA Mode)



Amstrad CPC



Macintosh



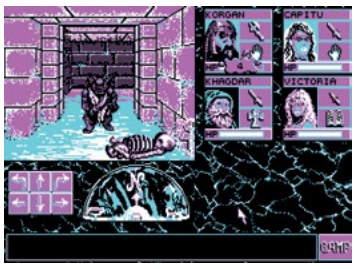
DOS (CGA Mode)



NES

Defender of the Crown (1987) was designed to show the Amiga's graphical power, and while its 16-bit rivals – the Apple IIGS and the Atari ST – could display a very similar image, they still lost some of the finer details. The comparison also show some peculiarities of each machine, such as the C64's darker colours.

Eye of the Beholder



CGA (4 colours)



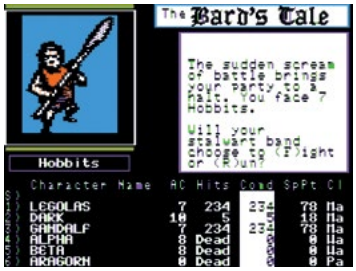
EGA (16 colours)



VGA (256 colours)

Even playing in the same platform could result in very different experiences. SSI's *Eye of the Beholder* (1991) was released for MS-DOS with gorgeous VGA graphics, but it also supported older graphics cards. While those playing today on emulators or GOG's re-release usually default to the superior VGA mode, back then players with older machines had no choice but to play in EGA or even CGA mode.

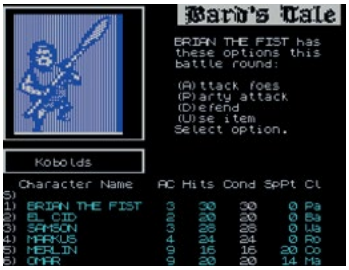
The Bard's Tale



Apple II (1985)



Commodore Amiga (1986)



ZX Spectrum (1988)

The Original *Bard's Tale* for the Apple II was an impressive graphical feat since, until then, dungeon crawlers like *Wizardry* all used wire-frame graphics. However, the Amiga version, released just a year later, added mouse support and had a massive leap in graphical quality, overshadowing previous versions. Still, the high cost of the 16-bit computers meant ports for weaker but cheaper machines like the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC would still be produced in the following years.

Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant



DOS (1992)



PlayStation (1995)



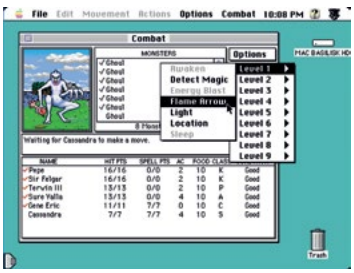
Windows (1996)

Not all re-releases and later ports are improvements. *Wizardry VII* received a Japan-only remake for the PlayStation, but the fully 3D graphics aged much more poorly than the original's pixel art. Worst yet was *Wizardry Gold,* a re-release of the game for Windows and Mac that added many bugs, blurred pixels, inconsistent art style and only ran in a window. In this case, just stick to the original release.

Might and Magic II: Gates to Another World



DOS (1988)



Macintosh (1990)



PC-9801 (1988)

Combat in most versions of *Might and Magic II* is very similar, using keyboard controls and showing only one enemy at a time. The Mac version, however, is fully mouse-driven and uses the Mac's GUI to display multiple windows at a time. While slick, many players find that managing a party of six characters is much easier with the keyboard's hotkeys. The Japanese PC-98 port is also mouse-driven, but instead of multiple windows it has an entirely different combat screen, which shows the party and the enemies.

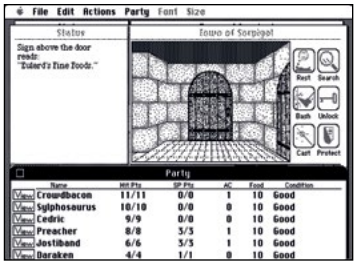
Might and Magic I - Exploration Comparison



Apple II original release (1986)



DOS port (1987)



Macintosh port (1987)



PC-8801 port (1987)



NES port (1990)



PC Engine remake (1991)

The PC Engine remake was ambitious, with character design by Yoshikazu Yasuhiko, a famous Japanese artist, and soundtrack by Joe Hisaishi, known for its work on Studio Ghibli movies.

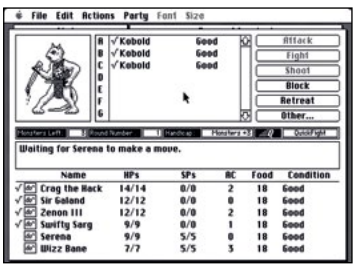
Might and Magic I - Combat Comparison



Apple II original release (1986)



DOS port (1987)



Macintosh port (1987)



PC-8801 port (1987)



NES port (1990)



PC Engine remake (1991)

Might and Magic I was first released on the Apple II. The DOS port arrived later and it's very faithful, just changing some colours and fonts. The Mac port, however, makes full use of the machine's mouse support and high-resolution (albeit monochrome) graphics, introducing a vastly superior interface. The Japanese machines were much better at handling colours, so their versions have the best visuals among PC releases.

The NES port has some drastic changes – the interface is menu-based, a mini-map was added and graphics are much better, making it arguably the best version available in English. Finally, the PC Engine version is actually a remake. Adapted to Japanese audiences, it features a cast of six fixed heroes, a fancy intro sequence, adds an on-screen mini-map and it's fully voiced. Sadly, it was only released in Japan.

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 experience, 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."*

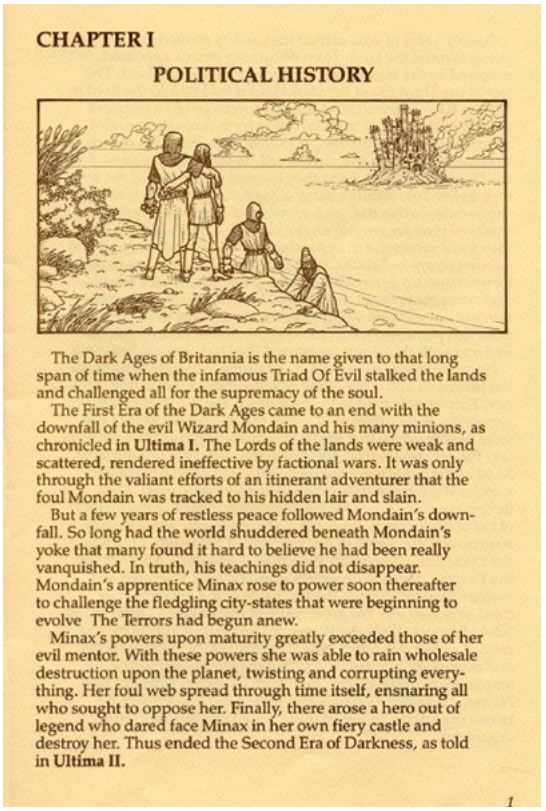
> *"I tried for a while without any walkthroughs to get the full gamer experience sort of thing and within the hour I gave up because of a combination of bad controls and a hard-to-get-into story for me at least. It reminded me of a bad RuneScape."*

> *"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 RPGs 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

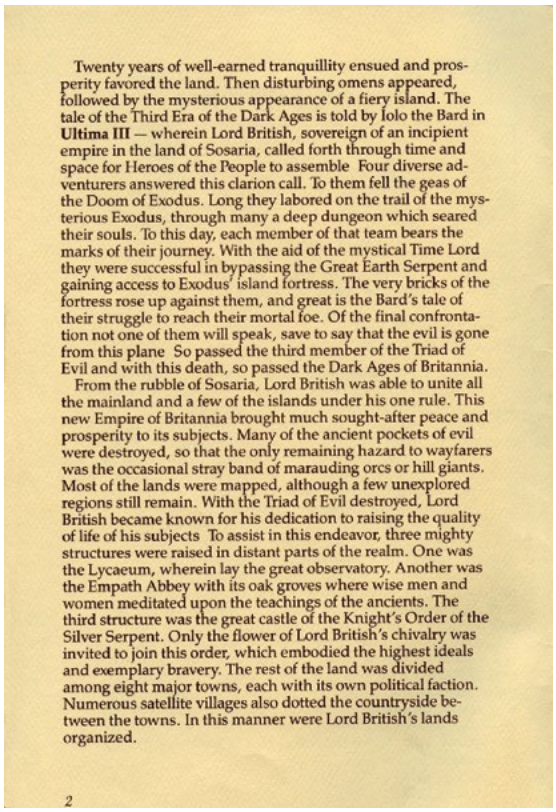
The Dark Ages of Britannia is the name given to that long span of time when the infamous Triad Of Evil stalked the lands and challenged all for the supremacy of the soul.

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.**

1



Twenty years of well-earned tranquillity 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 Lycaeum, 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.

2

Two pages from *Ultima IV*'s 'History of Britannia' 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, grasp 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, 2010

Michael Abbott writes and hosts the Brainy Gamer blog and podcast, devoted to video games and the community of gamers.

Cartography

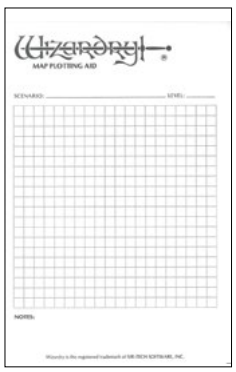
by Scorpia

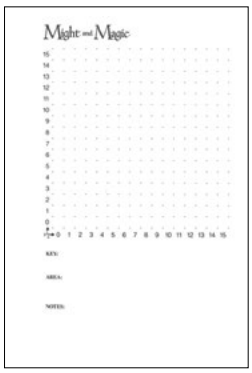
Many gamers today take auto-mapping for granted. Very likely, they couldn't imagine a product without it. We of the (cough) "elder generation", however, know otherwise. Those who go back to the "golden era of gaming" remember well, perhaps all too well, the joys of manual cartography.

I learned my lesson fairly early. It wasn't long, as I wandered in the mazes of *Colossal Cave* and *Zork*, before I realised 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 adventure games usually wasn't too bad. Aside from an occasional nasty trick or mean maze, they were pretty straightforward and, most importantly, 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.





Some companies, such as Sir-Tech and New World Computing, would even include graph paper sheets in their games' boxes.

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

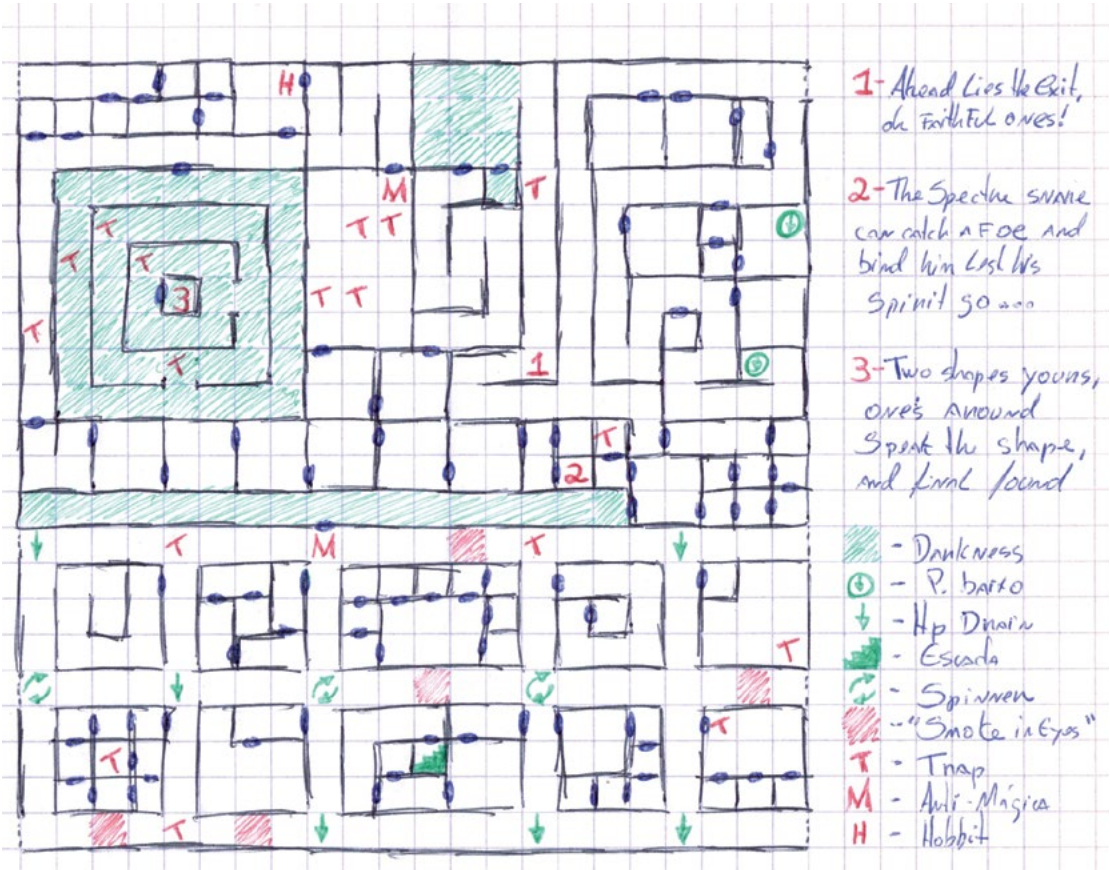
The prime example for huge was the first *Might and Magic*. I still have my 50+ maps from that one. Yep, that many. It seems incredible now, to look at those old sheets, and ponder the time and effort needed to draw the maps, one step at a time.

There was one saving grace, though: the dungeons were all standardised, 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 and 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. OK, 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.



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 you realising 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 one of us earned one, and we still have the calluses to prove it.

Ah yes, the golden age of gaming. It 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. From the 80s through to 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).

From Prussia with love
The origin of RPGs

by Craig Stern

Computer RPGs began to appear in the 1970s, more or less contemporaneously with the arrival and popularisation of pen-and-paper role-playing games – which are themselves the children of historical wargames. Thus, the CRPG has only been around for a few decades – but its history reaches all the way back to the 1800s.

Baron von Reisswitz is credited with creating the first true wargame – that is, a game meant to simulate battles with a certain degree of fidelity, and not merely a chess derivative. Created in the early 1810s, this game went by the name *Kriegsspiel (*meaning "War Game" in German). It featured units actually in use by the military of the day, and was meant to simulate battles. Character creation was a matter of faithfully emulating the real-world characteristics of the units those pieces represented, then using die rolls to simulate unforeseen factors in resolving combat.

Von Reisswitz's son created a revised version of the game in 1824. The revised *Kriegsspiel* paid such close attention to accuracy that the Chief of Prussian General Staff recommended it as a military exercise; the King of Prussia, in turn, actually ordered that every regiment of the army be supplied with a copy.



In 1811, a special table full of drawers was made so that King Wilhelm III could play *Kriegsspiel*. The table is still around, kept at the Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin.

In 1876, Colonel Julius Adrian Friedrich Wilhelm von Verdy du Vernois produced a third version of *Kriegsspiel*. Vernois was suspicious of the idea that military outcomes could be predetermined according to fixed rules, and replaced die rolls with the mediation of impartial "umpires" who would determine the outcomes of various engagements based on their knowledge and experience (yes, the first Dungeon Masters were Prussian military men from the 1800s).

The American military began putting out its own wargames around this time, with *Jane's Fighting Ships* following suit across the Atlantic in 1898. Like *Kriegsspiel, Jane's Fighting Ships* spelled out the characteristics of the game's numerous units in astonishing detail. (Google Books has a digitised copy of the rulebook online, so you can see for yourself just how intricate this got.)

Even H.G. Wells, the renowned writer, got in on the action, producing *Little Wars* in 1913. The rules of *Little Wars* were far simpler than those of other wargames, but it generally followed the practice of simulating large-scale battles, with the characteristics of different unit types decided rigidly according to the type of troops each unit represented.

It wasn't until the early 1970s that wargames started delving into the idea of individual men and women as units. The games that did this eventually became known as "man-to-man wargames" (not to be confused with Steve Jackson's ruleset of the same name). It may seem obvious to us now, but this focus on individual men and women was such a radical departure from wargaming tradition that it wouldn't be mentioned in the rules for Gary Gygax's *Chainmail* until 1971, three years after *Chainmail*'s initial publication.



Illustrated London News picture from 1913, showing H. G. Wells at his house, measuring unit movement with a string.

Even then, it seems the man-to-man rules in *Chainmail* were largely an afterthought, relegated to a mere two pages out of the entire 44-page book. There, too, character creation remained a matter of looking up prefabricated unit values in a table.

Things changed dramatically with the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974. It retained many of *Chainmail*'s rules, centring character creation around selecting from three main classes of characters: Fighting Men, Magic-Users and Clerics.

However, before selecting a class, *D&D* first had players roll three six-sided dice to determine abilities: Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Constitution, Dexterity, and Charisma. These would, in turn, impact how well-suited the character was to a given class, imposing bonuses (or penalties!) based on their chosen class's primary statistic.

This wholly upended the method of character creation that had prevailed up until that point. Statistics were no longer determined by class: instead, characters got statistics, and only then chose a class based on which roles the statistics made available to them. This approach would form the basis of numerous classic computer RPGs.

RPGs continued to diverge from wargames as the genre developed, and so too did their character creation systems. With increased focus on unique, individual characters came an increased focus on the abilities and limitations of each individual character. At their peak, these considerations would come to supplant the notion of character class entirely.

Published in 1986, Steve Jackson's *GURPS* represented a coming of age for skill-based RPG systems. *GURPS* characters have no classes at all – rather, they have four primary attributes and a huge variety of skills that can be levelled independently of one another.

In a way, this represented the zenith of the individual-focused approach to character creation. All vestiges of the old system were gone: in the skill-based paradigm, characters became unique, fully realised individuals rather than mere instances of a uniform military unit to be used in battle simulations.

This approach became quite popular among pen-and-paper role-players, not just with *GURPS,* but later with the RPGs published by White Wolf, such as *Mage: The Ascension* and *Vampire: The Masquerade. GURPS* would strongly influence the SPECIAL. ruleset eventually used in the *Fallout* series; and *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s rules would form the basis for *Vampire: Bloodlines*.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves here – although pen-and-paper role-playing games would directly influence CRPGs for many years, CRPGs have a history all their own, beginning humbly with the tinkerings of bored university students in the mid-1970s.

Craig Stern is the founder of Sinister Design; creator of Telepath Tactics and True Messiah: www.truemessiahgame.com

The PLATO RPGs

by Felipe Pepe

With home computers being so omnipresent in our daily lives, it's odd to realise just how recent a technology they are. It was only in the mid-70s when home computers began to appear – before that, all we had were giant machines that would weigh tons and occupy entire floors.

Yet some of these computers were way ahead of their time. The legendary "Mother of All Demos" presentation, made by Douglas Engelbart in 1968, shows him using a mouse and window-based GUI, clicking on hyperlinks and chatting with a colleague via video conference while co-editing an online text.

One of such avant-garde computer systems was the PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations). Created in 1960, it was a giant mainframe with user-friendly terminals designed to teach university students via a series of virtual lessons.



A PLATO terminal, with its distinct orange plasma display. By 1976 there were 950 of these terminals across the globe.

The PLATO IV system, introduced in 1972, went as far as to offer vector-based graphics, a touch-screen interface and an Internet-like network, connected to thousands of other terminals across the globe.

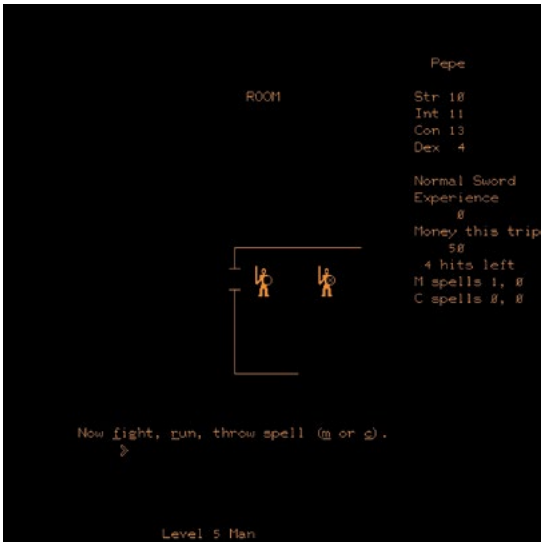
Students soon found that all this could be used to create games as well, and titles like *Empire* (1973) and *Spasim* (1974) began to appear. *Empire* is particularly impressive: it is a game where up to 30 players battle in a top-down space arena, shooting each other's ships and fighting to control the galaxy – all this in 1973!

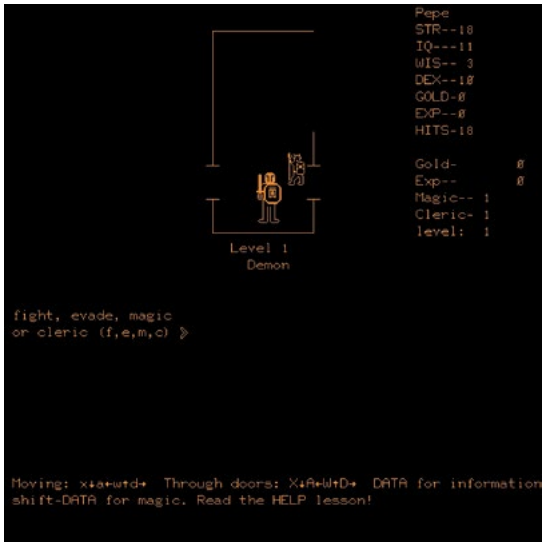
When *Dungeons & Dragons* came out in 1974, it unleashed the perfect storm: powerful computers, bored programming students and a statistic-driven game that was begging for automation. The result was the birth of Computer Role-Playing Games.

Sadly, not all of them survived. PLATO was still an educational system, so its administrators would delete unauthorised games. As such, we lost all records of *m119h*, the first CRPG ever made, created in 1974. But its successors escaped – hidden under nondescript names like *pedit5* or saved by students, they were played by thousands and influenced many later titles.

Thanks to the effort of Cyber1, a community created to preserve the PLATO legacy, these early CRPGs are still available and can be freely played. However, keep in mind that some of them have been updated since the 70s – *Oubliette*'s title screen even has an ad for its iPhone remake – so they aren't the exact version people were playing back in the day, but they still give us a good idea of how things were.

If you want to learn more about PLATO, I full-heartedly recommend *The Friendly Orange Glow: The Untold Story of the PLATO System and the Dawn of Cyberculture* by Brian Dear (2017). While somewhat light on the gaming side of things, the book is the best resource available on PLATO and its influence.





The Dungeon / pedit5 (1975)

Created by Reginald "Rusty" Rutherford at the University of Illinois, this the oldest playable CRPG. Officially called *The Dungeon,* it was hidden among the PLATO files under the name *pedit5* to avoid being found and deleted by the system administrators.

Despite its age, the game holds up quite well. You start by typing a name. The game then rolls your attributes – Strength, Dexterity, Constitution and Intelligence – and you're off to the dungeon.

Visually the game resembles a roguelike, although it predates *Rogue* (1980). You explore a maze-like top-down dungeon, searching for treasure and battling monsters – if you die, your character is erased. Your goal is to collect 20,000 XP and return to the entrance. Succeed and your score is added to the Hall of Fame.

The dungeon layout is fixed and has only one floor, but it's quite large and also features secret passages. Random encounters will occur as you explore, with the game prompting you to fight, cast a spell or flee.

There's a surprising amount of depth here, with 16 spells available. These are a selection of classic *D&D* spells, such as Magic Missile (deals damage), Invisibility (escapes combat), Cure (heals you) and Charm (ends combat). Enemies even have different spell resistances: you can't use Sleep on an Undead.

As such, *pedit5* is not only an important historical artefact, it's also a good game – especially for the time. It's a short dungeon romp with enough variety in enemies and spells to sustain repeated runs in search of high scores. It would take years until home computer CRPGs could match this level of sophistication.

dnd (1975)

Despite trying to cleverly hide itself, *pedit5* was eventually deleted from the PLATO system (luckily, a copy was saved by a student). In its wake came *dnd*, created by Ray Wood and Gary Whisenhunt.

Since Wood was one of the administrators of the PLATO system, his game was openly hosted and enjoyed a long-lasting popularity, with constant updates based on player feedback.

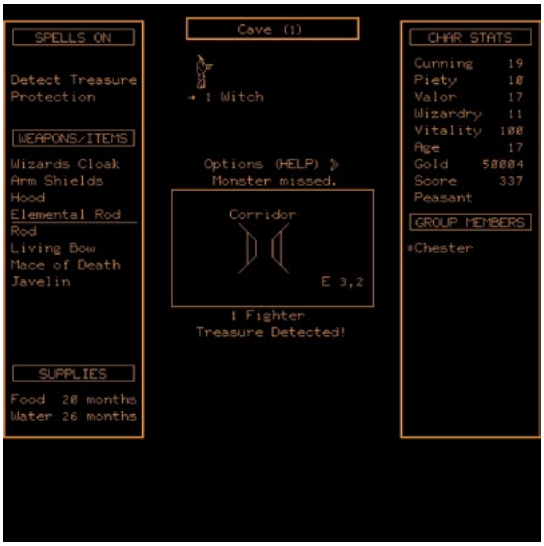
At its core, the game is very similar to *pedit5*, but with more detailed character artwork, additional monsters and spells, as well as a few extra features – such as being able to re-roll your initial stats.

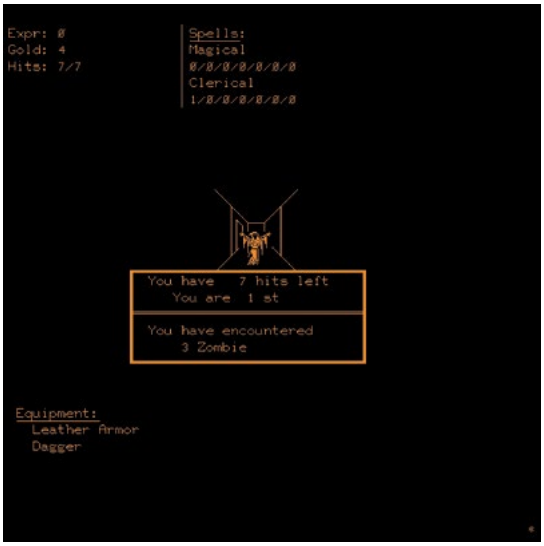
Initially the game only had one dungeon floor, but the creators kept expanding it. Inspired by pinball machines, they decided to add a high-score system. Since players then began to just race to collect gold and exit the dungeon, they decided to add an end goal: to retrieve the Orb, which was guarded by the Dragon – the first boss fight in a video game.

The creators later handed the reins to Dirk Pellet, who kept on improving the game. He added new magical items, potions, a bag for holding and even an auto-fight feature when encountering weak monsters. The most iconic item was the Genie Lamp, which could be used to make a wish: you would literally write a request to the game administrators, who would read it and, hopefully, grant your wish.

All this additional content makes *dnd* much more complex than *pedit5*, but also harder and longer. Later versions of *dnd* had as many as 15 floors, with any sense of balance thrown out of the window.

In 2012, The RPG Fanatic made an extensive video interview with the *dnd*'s creators. You can watch it here.





Moria (1975)

Both *pedit5* and *dnd* followed a similar structure, but *Moria* was a radical departure. Possibly inspired by *Maze War* (1973), *Moria* used wire-frame graphics to display the dungeon in a first-person view.

Also, despite its name, the authors weren't familiar with *D&D* or *Lord of the Rings*; they just played *dnd* and decided to make something like it. As such, it abandons *D&D*'s traditional stats, enemies and spells.

Moria's four stats – Cunning, Piety, Valour and Wizardry – are based on a 0-100 scale and increase with use. Each stat is also tied to a guild, such as Valor being used by the Knights' Guild. Instead of levelling up by earning XP, you must join a guild and pay to increase in rank, earning special bonuses as you rise.

All stats are useful in battle – Valour influences your attacks and Wizardry is used to cast spells, but Cunning is used to trick enemies into a critical attack and Piety can destroy some enemy types. Money now has a use, as stores offer dozens of weapons for sale (you can even haggle). Just don't forget to purchase water and food rations, or you'll die of starvation.

More importantly, *Moria* is actually an online multiplayer RPG. The world is shared with up to ten players, who can band together to form a party! *Moria*'s world is absolutely massive, with a large city and over 200 areas. The downside is that the game has no real end goal and its areas are just empty mazes filled with increasingly challenging enemies.

Extremely innovative, *Moria* is basically a giant sandbox for players to meet, explore and grow in power. Every MMORPG out there owes it a nod.

Oubliette (1977)

If *dnd* was the follow-up to *pedit5*, then *Oubliette* is the follow up to *Moria*. Still a multiplayer game, it expands upon it predecessor in almost every way.

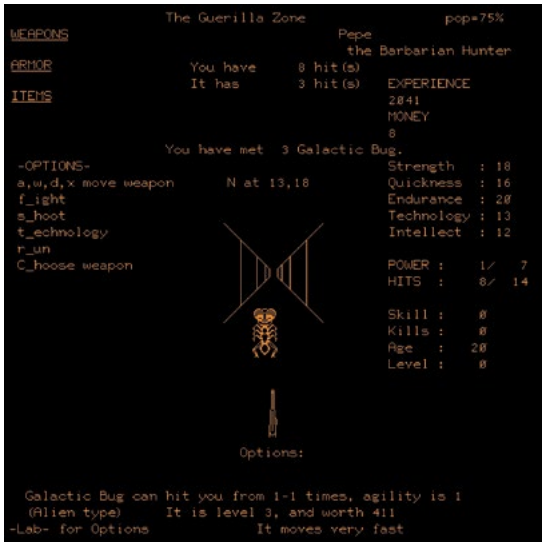
Moria had four character classes by means of the four guilds in town, but *Oubliette* expands that to 15 races and 15 classes, each with its own stats requirements! You have the usual Tolkien and *D&D* options, a few exotic ones like Ninja and Courtesan, plus some taken from *Lord Foul's Bane*, a high fantasy novel written by Stephen R. Donaldson in 1977.

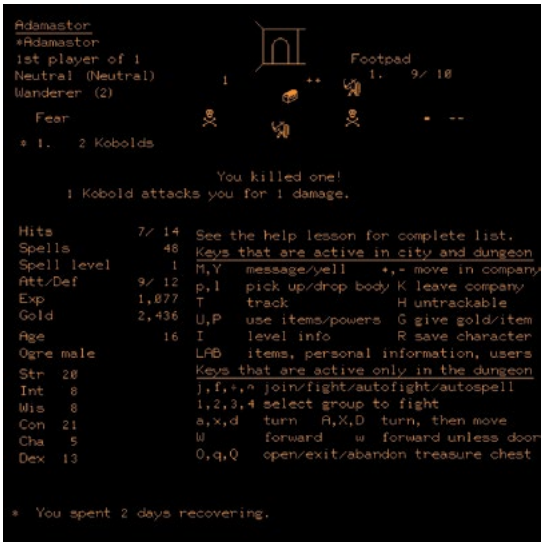
Oubliette begins at a large castle town on top of a 10-level dungeon, featuring several equipment shops, a casino with gambling mini-games, a temple where fallen characters can be resurrected (if their bodies are retrieved by other players) and even a place where you can purchase charmed monsters to take into the dungeon and help you in combat.

Spellcasting was also expanded and now uses a system of magic words. For example, in order to cast the "Light" spell you have to type DUMAPIC.

By now, *Wizardry* veterans may be thinking that a lot of that sounds familiar. Indeed, Andrew Greenberg and Robert Woodhead were PLATO users and clearly took a lot from *Oubliette*, which led to many complaints of plagiarism from other PLATO users.

Oubliette would also greatly influence *Mordor: Depths of Dejenol* (1995) and *Demise: Rise of the Ku'tan* (1999). Very few games can claim to still be inspiring successors more than 20 years after its release. For those curious to try it, *Oubliette* had an iPhone and Android version released in 2010.





Futurewar (1977)

PLATO had a lot more than just fantasy RPGs. Games like *Empire* showed that students had a passion for spaceships, sci-fi tabletop RPGs like *Traveller* were starting to appear and *Star Wars* (1977) had just come out. *Futurewar* then was PLATO's first sci-fi RPG.

The game sends players through time to the "far future" year of 2020, where nuclear war destroyed Earth and created an army of mutants. You start by choosing a team – Americans, Guerrillas, Barbarians, Martians or Cyborgs – each with its starting location and bonuses. Then, you roll your stats and can choose one of eight classes, such as Soldier, Medic, Spy and Holy Man.

Futurewar is another multiplayer RPG based on exploring dungeons, but it adds several twists such as environmental hazards: you might step on a mine, or be poisoned by a radioactive waste. It also includes a radar, which can detect nearby players and enemies.

While still based on stats, with various different weapons available, it's also a sort of early FPS. When combat begins, your gun appears on screen and you must aim and shoot to hit. There's a short time limit for each turn, effectively making combat feel real-time.

Thus, in a sense, *Futurewar* was the first FPS/RPG hybrid. Another novelty is having a soldier shooting demons in real time (ish) inside a maze, which would later appear in one of the biggest games of all time.

Of course, none of *Doom*'s creators had access to PLATO, and even back in the 70s *Futurewar* wasn't a very popular game. But it's interesting to see how shooting demons always had a special appeal.

Avatar (1979)

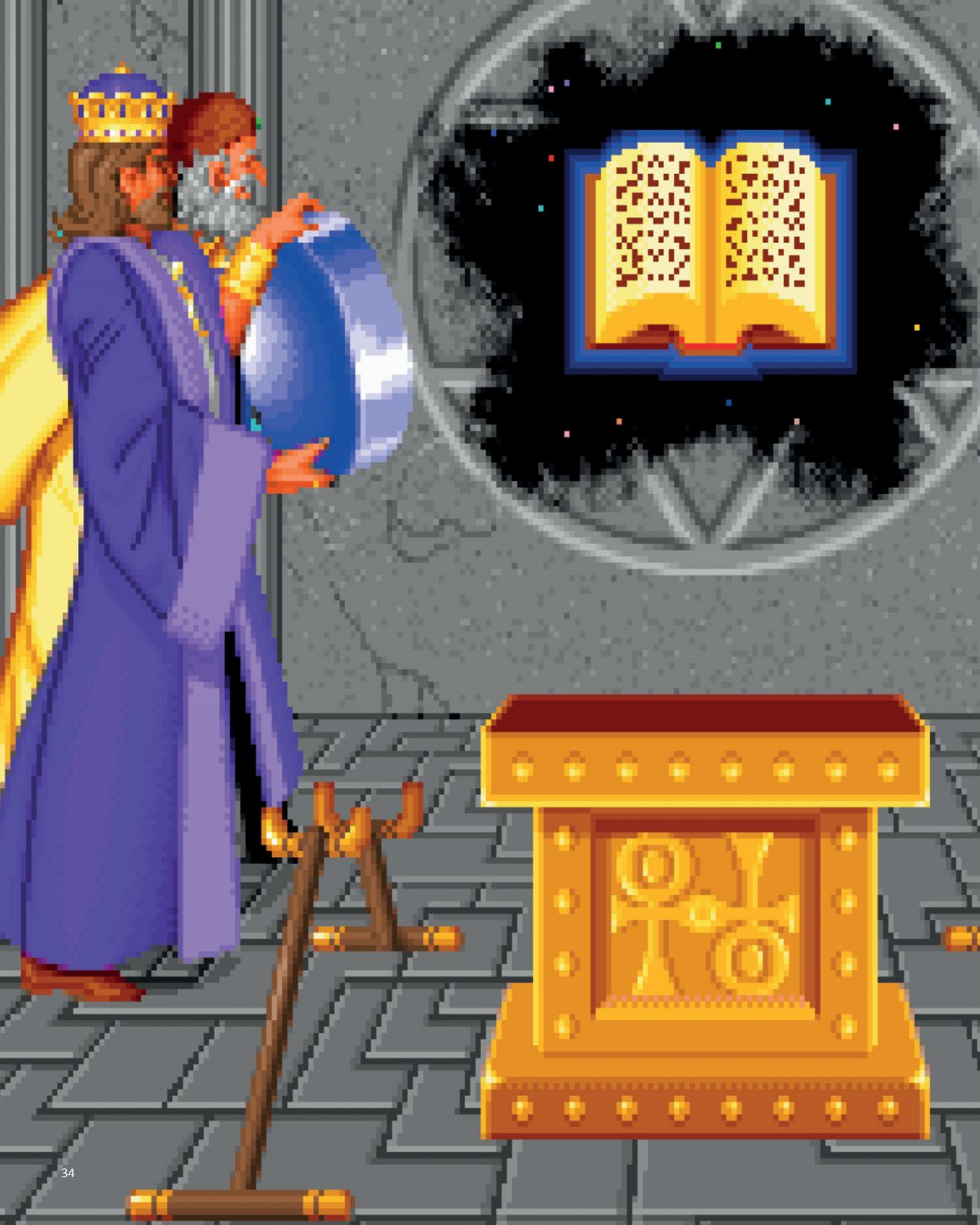
Avatar would be the last of the big PLATO games, intentionally designed to surpass all previous RPGs on the platform, drawing the best they each had to offer.

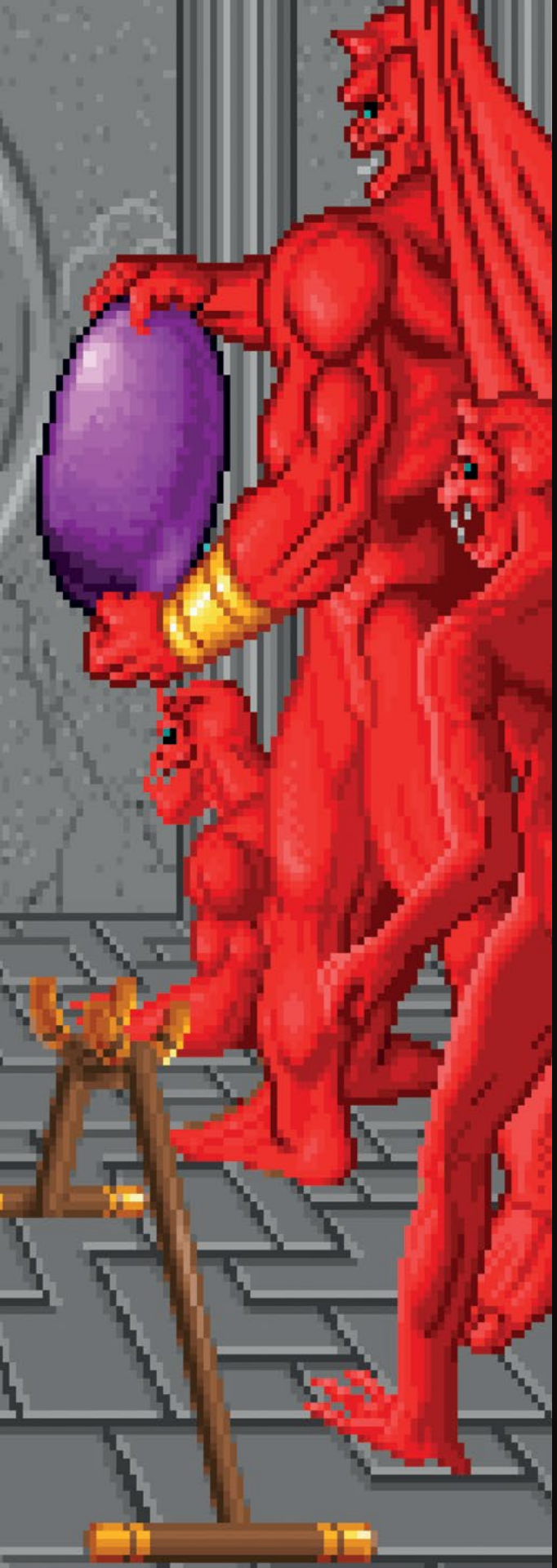
The game features 10 races and 11 classes, also tied to guilds in town. Like *Oubliette*, you start at a castle on top of a huge 15-level dungeon, but, instead of having to walk around, the town is presented as a menu (as *Wizardry* later did). Another similarity is the many new hazards inside the dungeon, such as pits, zones of darkness, spinners and anti-magic areas. Enemies are also much more deadly, and able to cause status effects, such as Poison, Sleep or Paralysis.

According to Richard Bartle, *Avatar* soon became "the most successful PLATO game ever – it accounted for 6% of all the hours spent on the system between September 1978 and May 1985". It was so complex it had a staff of volunteers that helped run everything, much like GMs in modern MMORPGs. This also allowed for custom quests that required players to hunt down certain monsters on a certain floor.

There are even reports of players bribing admins to get powerful in-game items or resurrect their characters after a failed spell teleported them into a stone wall, as well as graduating players selling their characters before losing access to PLATO.

Avatar was constantly updated over the years and still lives on the Cyber1 servers. The latest version is from 1995 and still enjoys some popularity.



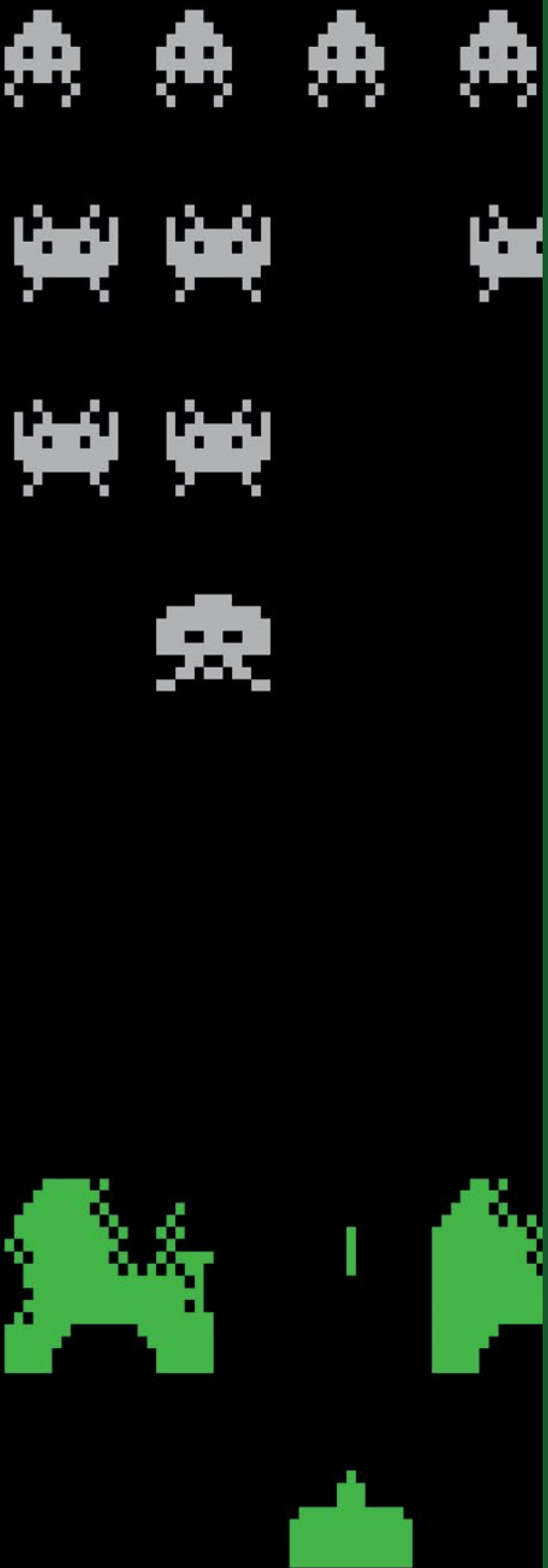


The Reviews

This is the meat of the book. Over the next 450 pages you'll find information on over 400 RPGs, all written 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 get the most out of their games.

This section is divided into several chapters, each featuring a span of 5 years. These showcase the events that happened during those years, plus add a brief overview of the changes in the gaming world during that period, giving context to the games and the technological revolution that empowered them.

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



1975-1979
The beginning of the digital invasion

It's no easy task to pinpoint the birth of video games. *Tennis for Two*, created in 1958, is an often-cited starting point, while others name 1962's *Spacewar!* or 1950's *Bertie the Brain*. All have their own merit.

Since the first surviving CRPGs were developed in 1975 for PLATO, that will be the starting point of this book. Which is convenient, since the second half of the 70s was when the video game revolution really took off, spreading across home computers, video game consoles and arcades.

Consoles began to appear in 1972, led by the Magnavox Odyssey. These were very crude machines, mostly only capable of running *Pong* and other very similar games pre-built into the hardware.

The second generation of consoles introduced the concept of ROM cartridges, allowing for companies to continuously develop new games for their machines, much like today's consoles. While it had a slow start, the Atari 2600 would become a massive hit thanks to the arrival of classic games like *Enduro, River Raid, Pitfall* and *Space Invaders*.

Computers, on the other hand, were still huge mainframes kept in universities, large companies and research centers. Some smaller models existed, but they were either prohibitively expensive or too slow to even handle BASIC. This began to change with the Altair 8800.

Small, cheap (for a computer) and with enough power to be actually useful, it sold thousands of units and was the first commercially successful home computer. On its heels came the Apple II, Commodore PET and TRS-80 – the famous "1977 trinity" of home computers.

While the Altair 8800 was made for hobbyists, these three machines were built for mass production, aimed at nontechnical users. However, although they much more versatile than a games console, home computers were expensive, extremely complicated to use and still struggled to offer their users something other than very simple applications and games.

They were highly profitable, but still sold mostly to business, gamers or hobbyists, and their popularity was relative – while the TRS-80 sold 200,000 units, the Atari 2600 sold 30 million units.

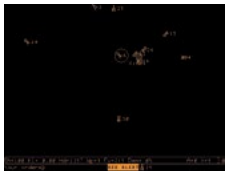
Computer games themselves were also little more than curiosities. A few, rare commercial titles were sold inside ziplock bags, but most came from technical magazines – they contained pages filled with BASIC code that people would type in their computers, recreating the games.

Arcades were also still a small business, less popular than pinball machines. They would grow steadily over the next few years, then explode with *Space Invaders* in 1979, ushering in a golden age for arcades.

In five years, video games went from *Pong* to a rich ecosystem with multiple genres, platforms and audiences. And this was just the start.

Trends:

PLATO Games: Home computers were just appearing, but American universities had large educational mainframes since the 60s. The most famous was the PLATO network, which came to host several games made by students (hidden from system administrators). Due to the mainframe's power, these games often had innovative features far beyond what an Atari 2600 or Apple II could offer. *Empire,* for example, allowed students from campuses all over the US to join in online multiplayer battles way back in 1973!



Empire is a multiplayer turn-based space game made by John Daleske in 1973.

Atari vs Activision: Atari was rigid with its employees – they weren't paid much and got no credit for the games they designed. Noticing how much money their games made, a group of developers left the company and started their own, Activision, in 1979. Atari sued them for developing games for the Atari 2600, but the court decided people could play whatever they wanted on their consoles. Activision became the first third-party publisher and opened the doors for others to do the same, setting the stage for the crash in 1983.



Boxing, released in 1980 for the Atari 2600, was one of the first games by Activision.

BBS: Private systems like the PLATO network already allowed users to post messages online, and the advent of home computers and modems soon brought that experience to households as well. The first public BBS (Bulletin Board System) went online in 1978, hosting discussions between computer hobbyists from Chicago. Over the years BBSs would grow to offer all sorts of services, from online games to paid file hosting. They peaked in popularity during the mid-90s, when they began to be replaced by the Internet.



BBSs like ExecPC were very popular during the 90s and allowed the sharing of freeware and shareware games like *Doom*.



The **Altair 8800** is released. An early pioneer, it was the first commercially successful home computer, proving that there was a market for them.



The **Apple II** is the first mass-market home computer. The only among its early rivals to have colours, it became a popular games device.



The **TRS-80** computer arrives. Created by Tandy, owner of the widely available Radio Shack electronic stores, it outsold the Apple II for years.



The **Commodore PET** is released. The first model was criticised for its small keyboard, but subsequent models were very successful.



The **Atari 8-bit** family begins. A low-cost home computer, it also had a cartridge slot for games, making it a popular gateway into computers.

1975 | 1976 | 1977 | 1978 | 1979



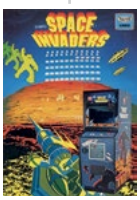
Colossal Cave Adventure (also know as *ADVENT* or *Adventure*) is created by Will Crowther on a PDP-10 mainframe. The first adventure game ever, it also influenced RPGs and roguelikes.



The **Atari 2600** is released. By far the most successful early games console, it sold over 30 million units and popularised the use of ROM cartridges, allowing for an extensive game library.



The **VHS** (Video Home System) began to be sold in the US, competing against the Betamax and the LaserDisc for the emerging home video market. VHS would win and remain dominant until the early 00s.

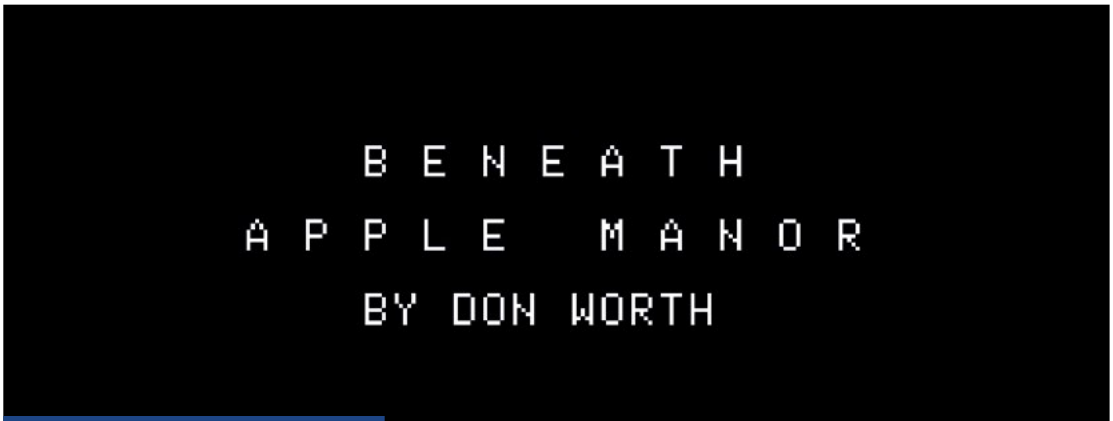


Space Invaders is released. A seminal classic, it greatly popularised arcades and video games in general. Its Atari 2600 port was also a hit, becoming the first game to sell over a million copies.



The **Intellivision** arrives. Created by toy giant Mattel, it brought in better graphics, licensed games and even a voice module. It was the Atari 2600's biggest rival, selling 3 million units.

Beneath Apple Manor



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

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 further down you went.

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

BAM could be customised, too. You chose the number of rooms per level (4-7, depending on RAM), the difficulty factor, and whether you wanted black-and-white or colour graphics. With colour, everything was a different coloured block.

I much preferred the ASCII black-and-white, where the monsters (and player, too) were represented by letters and treasure by $.

You had four stats: Strength, Dexterity, Body and Intelligence. 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 – caution was needed.

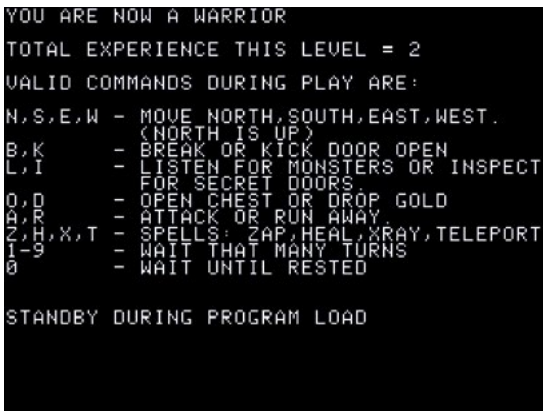
Experience was earned by killing monsters and bringing treasure back to the main staircase – the starting point of each level (it wasn't marked on the map, either, so you'd better remember its location).

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

***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.**



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 dungeon floor in colour mode. We (the blue square) 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 stats of your next "reload" 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 overmatched, and hoping you wouldn't run into too many wandering monsters.

All this had a goal: to find the fabled Golden Apple, rumoured to be in a dragon hoard 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).

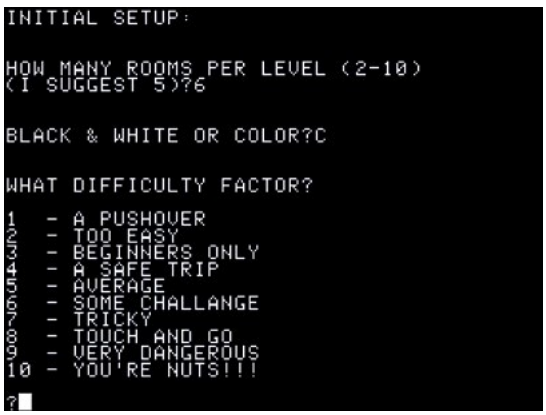
But each hoard had a supposed Apple; grab a fake, and you were soon reloading. How could you tell real from fake? Only – haha – by taking it. You don't always need heavy combat to induce sweaty palms.

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/levels, you could usually get through it in about four hours or so.

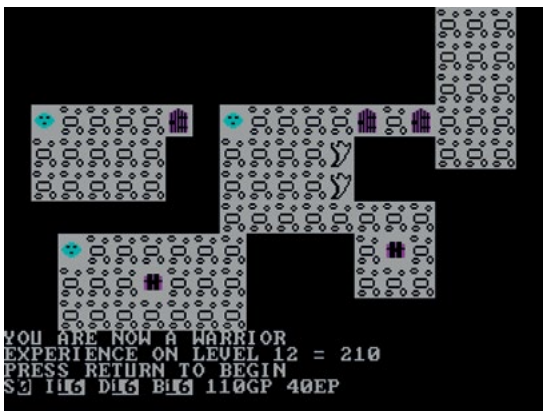
Thus *BAM* was a prototype for *Rogue* and its many variants. Sadly, it seems to have been overlooked in the history of this sub-genre, even though it arrived two years before *Rogue* itself showed up in 1980.

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**

Some historians claim that *BAM* was the very first commercial computer game, sold in speciality stores inside a ziplock bag.

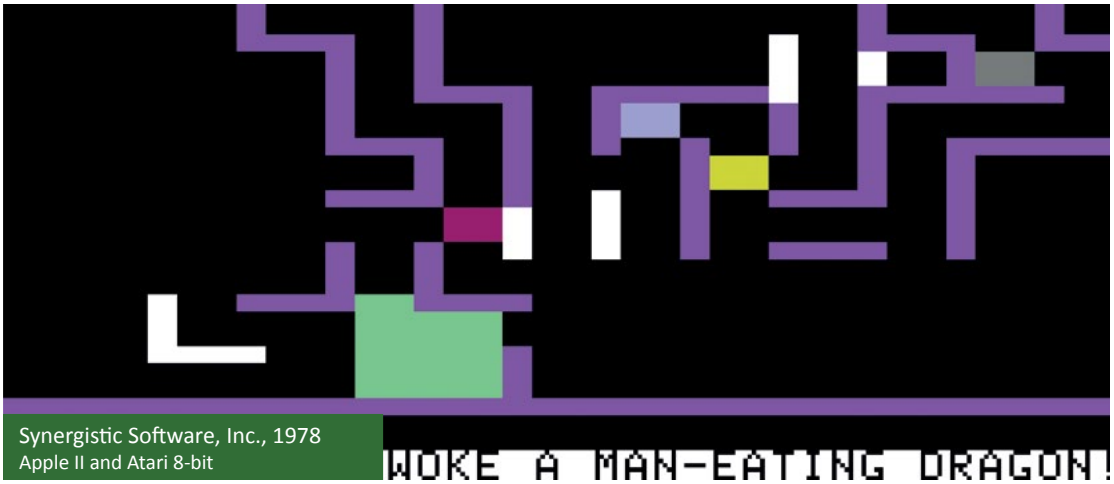


BAM allowed you to customise the size of the levels, choose between display modes and 10 difficulty settings.



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

Dungeon Campaign



Synergistic Software, Inc., 1978
Apple II and Atari 8-bit

Synergistic Software was founded in 1978 by Robert Clardy and Ann Dickens Clardy. They would create several other games in the 80s and 90s, including *Spirit of Excalibur* and *Diablo's Hellfire* expansion.

When talking about the first computer games of the 70s, people often overlook the important role played by tech demos, guides and tech magazines. The Apple II, for example, came with a reference manual which explained how the entire computer worked and contained the BASIC source code of a few simple games to teach its users.

One of these games was *Dragon Maze* (1978), by Gary J. Shannon, which randomly generated a simple top-down maze. The player had to navigate the maze by pressing U(p), D(own), L(eft) or R(ight), trying to escape before a dragon could catch them.

A series of codes that could be used to generate countless dungeons ready for exploration – this was a gold mine for any RPG fan, and Robert Clardy was one of such fans. Inspired by *Dragon Maze,* he made his own dungeon-exploring game: *Dungeon Campaign*.

The game starts by generating four dungeon levels – a process that could take several minutes on the Apple II, giving time for players to try to map it down with pen and paper, if they so desired. Once it was finished, you're sent out to explore it.



My party is the pink square, treasures are yellow, enemies are dark green, stairs are white and the pits are grey.

There's no character generation; your party always starts with 15 nameless members, including one Elf and one Dwarf. This may sound weird today, but *Dungeons & Dragons* was a very different game back in 1978 – Elves and Dwarves didn't have classes, and there was a focus on larger parties.

Each type of party member has a function. The Elf warns of immediate danger, such as a nearby trap or enemy, while the Dwarf maps the dungeon – if he dies, the map in the screen will no longer update as you explore. The rest of the party members serve as both your hit points and your strength – the game ends if they all die, but at each victory they increase their strength. This means your 15 warriors will have a strength of 15 at first, go to 30 after the first battle, to 45 after the second, but decrease to 42 if one party member dies. And die they will.

Combat is simplistic, you just roll your attack, which is added to your strength to see if you hit the enemy. Every enemy in the game dies with two hits; they just become harder to hit as you delve deeper. You also have to roll the enemy's attack, and if they hit you'll lose 1-3 party members.

The dungeon offers a few other perils, such as traps that will randomly send you to other levels, and rooms filled with toxic gas. Each of the four levels also has a guardian monster, which will run after the player and kill 1-2 party members if it reaches them. These have different behaviours – the giant snake on Level 3 moves in real time across the maze, while the spectre on Level 4 can pass through walls.

Regardless, *Dungeon Campaign* is an easy game. It's also short. The goal is not to simply complete it, but to get a high score, collecting as much gold as possible before finishing the dungeon – a score-driven design that mirrors the popular arcade games of the era.

"I had come from the paper *Dungeons & Dragons* world and anything that would roll the dice, keep track of the rules, do the maths, tally the results, and describe the results was totally awesome. The dungeon master could now play, rather than just moderate. This was pretty cool, even if the graphics resolution was 40x40 pixels, with 4 lines of text below. Ugh. Hard to believe after playing *Halo*..."

– Robert Clardy, *Dungeon Campaign's creator*



My party battles a pack of Spiders at the fourth dungeon floor (purple and green icon). The white icon is the spectre, who will kill one of my party members if it reaches me.

After the simple yet satisfying fun of *Dungeon Campaign*, Robert Clardy would quickly produce three more games, constantly pushing the boundaries.

Released in 1979, *Wilderness Campaign* is a much more ambitious RPG. Here you explore a large outdoor area, fighting enemies and exploring ruins in search of treasure, then hiring more troops and buying equipment in villages – all in order to cross the map, reach the castle and defeat the evil necromancer.

Combat is still based around the number of party members, but now you can hire hundreds of mercenaries and buy better equipment. Some offer bonuses against special enemies, such as silver daggers against werewolves, while others are used when crossing rough terrain – a mountain might require a rope, while a jungle area might require a machete.

The game was followed by *Odyssey: The Compleat Apventure* (a play on Apple and Adventure), released in 1980. Even larger in scope, it's divided into segments.

First you explore an island to gather resources, much like *Wilderness Campaign*. Then you purchase a boat and sail across the sea, battling monsters, hunger and diseases in search of a magical orb. After finding it, you travel to the castle of a mighty wizard, solving a series of text-based challenges in order to rescue him.

Robert Clardy's fourth game, *Apventure to Atlantis* (1982), continues where the previous one ended, but plays more like an adventure game, with less focus on stats and several puzzles that must be solved via a text-parser. Now playing as the new lord of the castle, you must defend yourself against invaders from Atlantis and find a way to stop them once and for all.

Almost 40 years later, these games look pre-historic and play nothing like what we now call RPGs. But that's exactly their appeal – unshackled by genre conventions, they tell whatever epic adventure they wish to tell, using whichever novel mechanics their creator had imagined. The computer is a tool for the Dungeon Master. **FE**

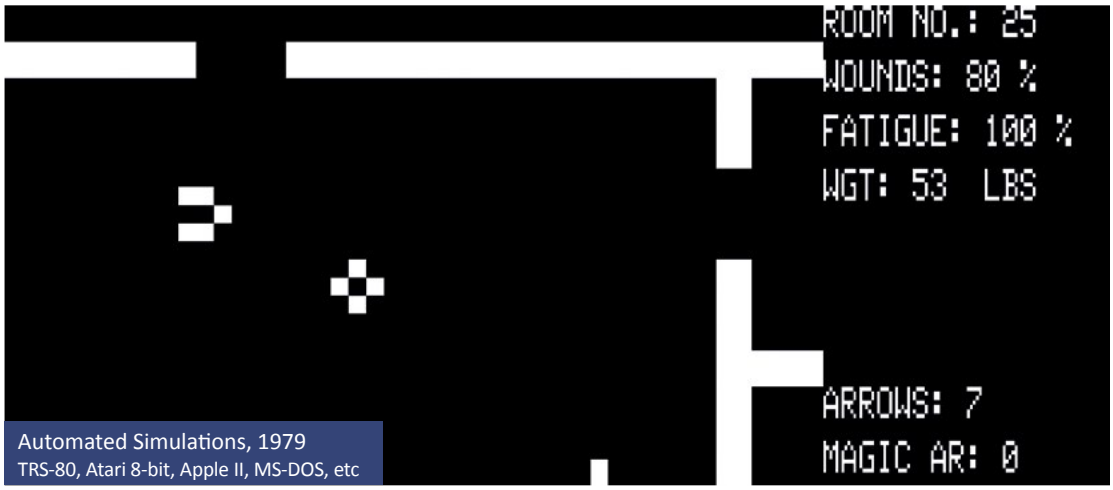


Wilderness Campaign's map is fixed, but points of interest are randomly placed, such as the town I'm at (purple icon).



Apventure to Atlantis added elements from text adventure games, such as item puzzles, static images and a text-parser.

Dunjonquest:
Temple of Apshai



Automated Simulations, 1979
TRS-80, Atari 8-bit, Apple II, MS-DOS, etc

Apshai's engine was reused for over a dozen games. Automated Simulations' refusal to update its technology eventually made it lose markets to newer games and led to Jon Freeman leaving the company.

Dungeons smell faintly of vanilla. This was one of many important life lessons I learned in my early adventuring days while descending into the depths of *Temple of Apshai*.

Conceived by avid dungeon master Jim Connelley and two of his *D&D* gaming friends, Jon Freeman and Jeff Johnson, *Temple of Apshai* was originally released to fulfil their desire for a "graphical adventure" game that required strategy and a little bit of luck to get by, as opposed to the text-only adventure games (like *Colossal Cave* and *Zork*) of the times that were imaginative but had static solutions.

It was the first in what would be called the *Dunjonquest* series. While rarely remembered today, the series spawned several games, sequels and add-ons, and was one of the best-selling early computer games, initially outselling both *Wizardry I* and *Ultima I*.

Although the blocky, black-and-white graphics of the TRS-80 received high praise back in 1979 (we didn't have much to go on), the real secrets to the success of *Temple of Apshai* was its underlying strategy system, rich writing, and sense of character.



Since you couldn't save into *Apshai*'s cassette tapes, every time the game starts you can roll a new character or type in the stats, gear and XP of a previous hero.

Like all good adventures, players begin at the inn, where they can customise their character stats (or let the Innkeeper roll the stat dice for them) and purchase equipment. Being inspired by *D&D*, the character sheet for *Apshai* used the same core stats and they could be freely edited – both so that players could import their characters from tabletop RPGs, and because it was not possible to save character data on the original TRS-80 cassette format.

Once sufficiently (or insufficiently) equipped, the adventure begins. The original dungeon, *Temple of Apshai*, is a forgotten temple consumed by wild overgrowth. It's chock-full of traps, secret doors and glittering gems, and inhabited by all manner of disgusting creatures – giant slimes, overgrown insects of all sorts, and various things that died some time ago but didn't have the decency to acknowledge it.

Released in 1981, *The Upper Reaches of Apshai* expansion added a new dungeon. A comic relief act, it takes place in the gardens and houses behind the inn. There are peculiar happenings in the vegetable garden for heroes to investigate, angry housewives and killer tomatoes to fight and, if you are lucky, a delicious pot of chicken soup or some ill-fitting laundry to find.

The second expansion, *Curse of Ra*, (1981) takes place in a cursed pyramid in the middle of a desert. Full of narrow, twisting hallways, traps at every step, and inconvenient slabs of stone that drop to block exits, heroes will square off against exotic foes like sphinxes, mummies and, worst of all, wild camels.

There are four levels for each dungeon, each one more difficult than the last, but players could choose which level to explore in any order. There's no true ending; players could revisit the dungeons as often as they liked and see it repopulated with monsters (both fixed and wandering) and treasure.



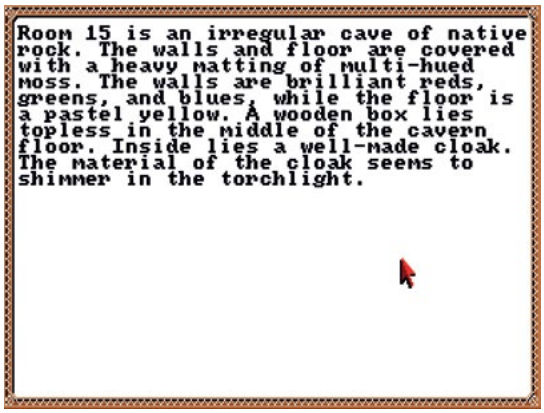
Apshai uses a simultaneous turn-based system. When you (the arrow) move or act, the enemy (the cross) acts as well.



After creating a character you can purchase equipment from the Innkeeper – and might also haggle for cheaper prices.



The 1985 remake *Temple of Apshai Trilogy* contains all three dungeons and adds vastly improved graphics and UI.



One of the remake's best features is displaying the room descriptions in-game, instead of referring to the manual.

When entering a room, players could search for traps and secret doors, grab treasure or put their ear to a door to listen for movement within the next room. With high enough Intelligence and Ego stats, an adventurer could even smooth-talk their way past deadly enemies. If diplomacy fails, combat kicks in.

Players have four methods of dispatching foes: a normal swing of the sword, a powerful thrust that could inflict great damage but also left a character more open to attack, and a parry that favoured defence over offence, and a bow to shoot enemies at a distance so long as arrows were at hand. The character's gear and experience also played a role, and players had to be careful not to become so tired they can't act.

Setting the mood for all of this was the superb writing. Each room – 233 in *Temple of Apshai* and over 500 with the expansions – had a number that players could refer to in the game's excellent illustrated manual (clearly the work of tabletop enthusiasts) to find a description of the room they just entered. These descriptions, preferably read aloud in an ominous voice, truly gave the dungeons a sense of character.

The vanilla-smelling caverns, the dim roaring sound that becomes louder as an adventurer treads in a certain direction, the "SPROINGGG!" of a crossbow trap that someone apparently forgot to load with a bolt – these descriptions gave players an environment in which to tell their own stories, and made the plain graphics pop with imagined detail.

Besides mood setting, the room descriptions also provided subtle clues as to where players could find secret doors, traps, treasures, or monsters. See some scratch marks on the floor near the East wall? Good chances of finding a secret door there. Skeleton on the floor? Don't turn your back on it, he probably feels fine. See some laundry hung out to dry? Steel yourself for the wrath of an angry housewife.

Thanks to the evocative writing and the strategic combat system, the *Temple of Apshai* is a timeless classic that still retains its replay value today. Even if one had the map of every dungeon memorised, reading the room descriptions is like going back to a favourite novel, and surviving combat is never a sure thing, even for veterans. **JY**

***Temple of Apshai* was followed by a series of "MicroQuests", very short and simple *Dunjonquest* titles that featured more arcade elements. The "real" sequel was *Hellfire Warrior* (1980), which improved the mechanics and even got two expansions, but was never as popular as the original game.**

Akalabeth:
World of Doom



Richard Garriott, 1979
Apple II, MS-DOS and iOS*

***Akalabeth can be downloaded for free on GOG, and in 2011 an iOS version was released on the App Store.**

It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that Richard Garriott is one of the most important people to ever make their stamp on gaming. Starting off as a solo programmer, his endeavours would quickly propel him into the position of one of the most famous and recognised figures in the industry.

The *Ultima* games, the founding of Origin Systems, even his alter ego ("Lord British"); Garriott is directly responsible for several of gaming's earliest icons.

Everyone has to start somewhere though, and for Garriott that starting point was *Dungeons & Dragons*. An avid player, the adventures he ran with his friends served as inspiration for another of his high school hobbies: programming computer games. Working on his school's primitive teletype machine, the teenage Garriott created a simple game that he dubbed *D&D*. Eventually, he had progressed through so many iterations that *D&D* had become *D&D #28*.

Then, in 1979, he made it commercial. He rewrote the game for the Apple II, renamed it *Akalabeth: World of Doom* and sold it in ziplock bags with photocopied instructions and a cover illustration by his mother.



There are only six items in the game. Food is vital to survive, the Axe and Shield are basic equipment, the Bow and Rapier are exclusive to the Fighter, and only the Mage can use the Magic Amulet.

This original release would find its way into the hands of the California Pacific Computer Company who offered to publish the game on a wider scale. It would become a hit for the young developer, providing the profits he needed to lay the foundation for the legacy that followed.

Sadly, for all it helped to foment, the game itself has not aged well. You're tasked by Lord British with proving yourself worthy of being a knight in the royal court. While there have certainly been adventures that launched on less, *Akalabeth* never grows beyond this bare-bones plot.

All it amounts to is entering a dungeon, killing a specific monster and then reporting back to Lord British so he can tell you to kill another one that's even tougher. Do this a few times and you win.

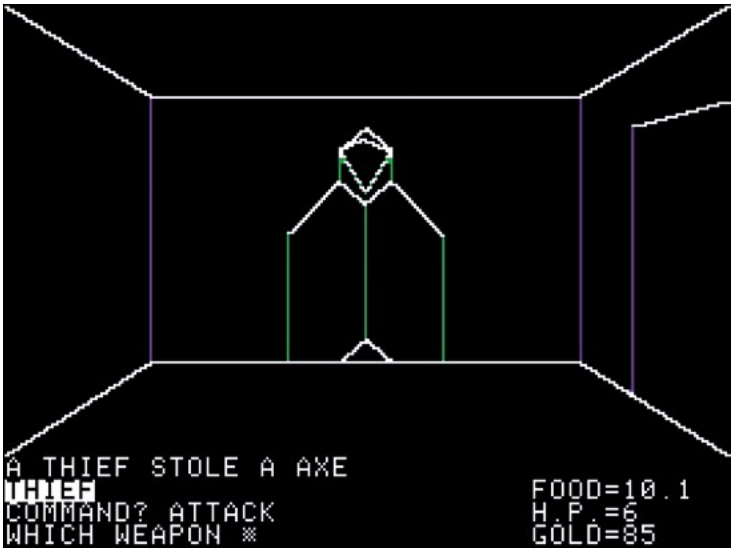
This on its own isn't necessarily a deal-breaker. In fact, none of the CRPGs that came before had any goals beside gathering treasures, so it's already an evolution of sorts. Unfortunately, *Akalabeth*'s gameplay is just too thin to stand on its own.

As you start, the game lets you pick a "lucky number", which serves as seed for its randomly generated overworld. Regardless of what number you pick, though, the worlds it creates are universally dull. The towns you visit have no real NPCs and you won't encounter any monsters outside of its dungeons.

Character creation and development is almost non-existent. Your stats are rolled randomly and your one big choice between playing a Fighter or a Mage is mostly just picking between more weapons options or being able to use the Magic Amulet, which holds a few magic spells. While combat can have some strategy, you'll often just press the attack button until someone dies. *Akalabeth* is the CRPG genre boiled down to its most rudimentary parts.

"*Akalabeth* was not made to be published. I made it merely for myself and my friends. It was John Mayer, the manager of the Computerland store where I had a summer job, who encouraged me to spend the large sum (in those days for a high school senior) of $200 to 'publish' it on the store wall."

– *Richard Garriott*, *Akalabeth's creator*



Dungeons are random and explored in first-person. Combat is turn-based and very simple, but enemies like the Thief can steal your weapons and food, leaving you defenceless.

That's not to say there's no charm or fun to be had. In its best moments, *Akalabeth* almost feels like a simple roguelike. Death can come quickly, and it can genuinely be fun to see how long you can last before you're killed. Even this experience, however, is derailed by the game's punishing approach to food.

Food, even more than hit points, is life in *Akalabeth*. Your character eats a ton of it and there's no leeway – if the food counter reaches zero, you starve to death instantly. This would be fine if it were easier to plan ahead. Unfortunately, the random dungeon and town locations can make it hard to determine how much you'll need to find your next destination.

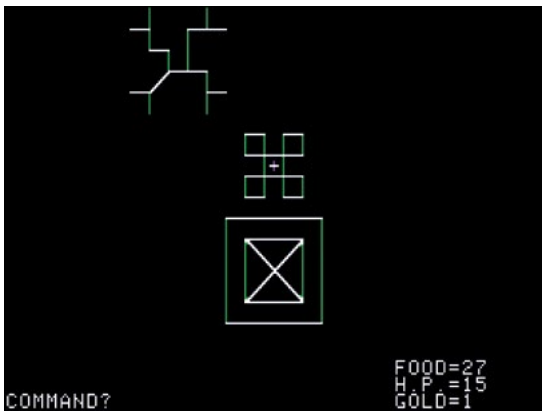
Dungeon layouts are likewise random and it's easy to get lost in their wire-frame corridors. If you start off as a Mage, you can use the Magic Amulet to transport yourself outside safely. If you're a Fighter, however, you'll have no choice but to trek all the way back out, scoffing down food with every step.

Nine times out of ten, this will be what kills you. Worse than that though, it kills the fun. Play sessions typically aren't long, but it's still frustrating when you starve to death before even reaching the first dungeon. I started giving up and restarting the second my food supply began to run low.

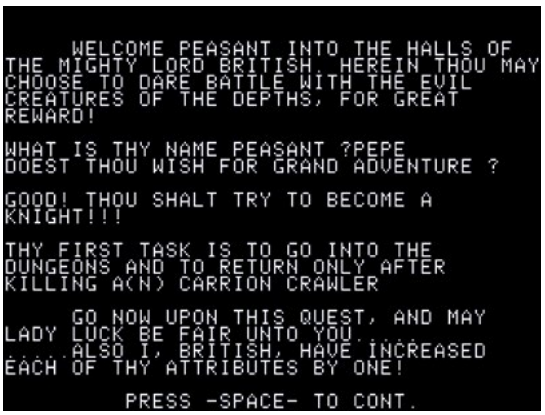
None of this should be taken to mean that *Akalabeth*'s not worth trying. It just means that you need to approach it with the proper mindset. If you start up *Akalabeth* intent on enjoying some good old-fashioned CRPG fun, you're probably going to be disappointed. There are just too many other titles that do what it does better.

Akalabeth feels best if you view it as a museum piece. It's *Ultima* in the infant stage; the birthplace of now-traditional CRPG elements like the overworld map and the quest-based progression, as well as Richard Garriott's testing ground for the ideas that would make the *Ultima* games great. **SS**

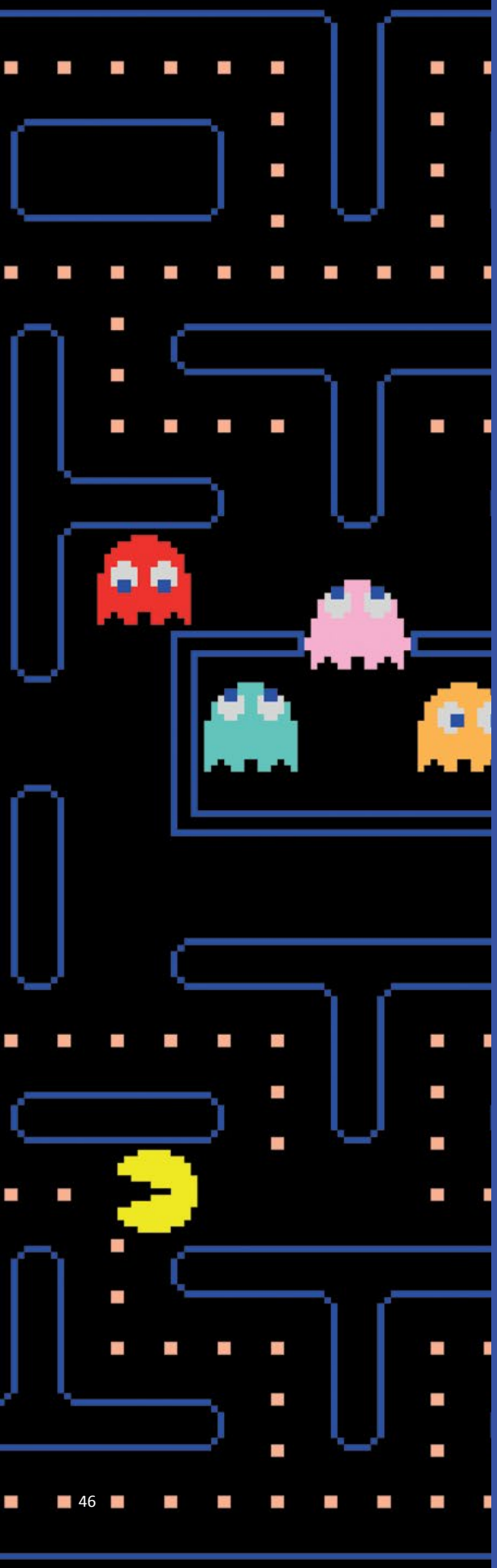
The name *Akalabeth* comes from Akallabêth, one of the chapters in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*. Another Tolkien reference is that the final enemy you must hunt is always a Balrog.



Akalabeth was the first CRPG with an overworld map. Here you can see a castle, a nearby town and a mountain.



Each time you hunt and kill the monster that Lord British requested he'll raise your stats and present a new quest.



1980-1984
The boom, the clones and the crash

The entire tech industry radically changed in the early 80s, starting with the arrival of IBM in the home computer market.

An established tech giant that dominated mainframe computers, its IBM Personal Computer (or IBM PC) forced the home computer segment to professionalise. While Apple discouraged third-party developers, IBM shared all information and had an open architecture. Empowered by the company's legendary reputation and a powerful marketing campaign, IBM PCs quickly dethroned Apple and became the leading standard, with an extensive catalogue of software and components.

But these were still costly, high-end products. Vital in popularising home computers were new low-end machines like the Commodore 64, ZX Spectrum and the MSX line. Costing a fraction of an Apple II or IBM PC, they plugged into common TVs (instead of expensive monitors), began to be used as educational tools in schools and were great gaming machines, helping to introduce a whole new generation to computers.

Meanwhile, the console market had become a free-for-all mayhem. Fuelled by the success of the Atari 2600, several companies decided to jump on the bandwagon and make their own consoles, with over a dozen console models now competing side-by-side on store shelves.

Countless companies also followed Activision, becoming third-party developers and publishing their own games. Most were of terrible quality or cheap copies of popular titles. Atari themselves also had poor standards, with failures like its crude port of *Pac-Man* and the infamous *E.T.* game.

Still, profit was at a record high and companies and retailers kept betting on ever-increasing sales for the holidays of 1982. However, customers got so burnt out that they stopped buying. Left with massive dead stocks and no way to recover their investments, the US market crashed in 1983.

What was a 3 billion dollar business in 1982 barely made 100 million in 1985. Video games went from prized products directly to bargain bins, and the US console industry was for all purposes dead.

The crisis also affected arcades, since many companies were active on both markets, and the whole video game business declared a fad. Despite this, computers were eager to satisfy those hungry for more. No longer curiosities sold in ziplock bags, computer games started to professionalise. EA, Interplay, Origin, Infocom, Brøderbund, SSI, Sierra On-line and New World Computing were all founded around this time, and would rule the market until the late 90s.

Meanwhile, in Japan, an odd coincidence occurred. On the same day – July 15, 1983 – two companies released their first consoles: the Nintendo Famicom and the SEGA SG-1000. It was a sign of things to come.

Trends:

IBM PC-Compatibles: Computers like the Apple II and Commodore PET had closed, proprietary architectures, but the IBM PC was produced with off-the-shelf components – only its BIOS was copyrighted. This allowed companies like Compaq to produce their own, cheaper machines that could still run IBM's software – the famous IBM PC-Compatibles, or PC Clones. They would be extremely popular and help IBM attain market dominance, but years later the clones would actually overthrow IBM.



Released in 1983, the Compaq Portable was the first 100% Compatible PC Clone, created by reverse-engineering IBM's BIOS.

The 1983 Video Game Crash: Video games were the icon of the digital revolution that began in the mid 70s, with the Atari as its poster boy. Its massive success led to a gold rush, with even companies like Johnson & Johnson making games for a quick profit. When it all collapsed, a cloud of negativity and doubt started to spread – even home computers were declared a fad by many analysts, arguing that there was still no compelling reason for homes to have a computer and calling it "a technology in search of a use".



Atari 2600's *E.T.* cost millions in licence fees but got only five weeks of development time. A terrible game, its catastrophic failure is an icon of the crash.

The Golden Age of Arcades: The release of *Space Invaders* in 1978 led arcades to the height of their popularity. Hits like *Asteroids, Donkey Kong, Defender, Mr. Do!* and *Centipede* were making millions – *Pac-Man* alone sold over 400,000 machines worldwide, becoming a pop culture icon with an extensive line of merchandise and even a TV show. But it wouldn't last long – arcades were soon crushed by the NES, only briefly resurging in the late 80s / early 90s thanks to beat 'em ups and fighting games.



Donkey Kong (1981) was one of the biggest arcade hits, with over 60,000 machines spread across the world.



Mystery House was released. Roberta Williams and Sierra's first game, it added graphics to previously text-only adventure games, redefining the genre.



The first **IBM PC** was released. A massive success, it would destroy Apple's dominance and pave the way for the IBM PC-Compatibles.



The **ZX Spectrum** was released. A British rival to the Commodore 64, it greatly popularised computers in Europe and South America.



The **Commodore 64** was released. The "Ford Model T of home computers", it was hugely popular and dominated the low-end market for years.



The **Amstrad CPC** line began. A popular all-in-one computer, it came with a colour monitor and tape recorder, yet was still relatively cheap.

1980 | 1981 | 1982 | 1983 | 1984



Nintendo's **Game & Watch** was released. An LCD clock with a single game, it had several models and inspired the Game Boy. In 1982 the *Donkey Kong* Game and Watch also introduced the D-Pad.



The **MS-DOS** was released. Developed by Microsoft for the IBM PC, it was also sold separately, being used in all IBM PC-Compatibles. It would remain popular until the late 90s.



3½-inch floppy disks began to be sold. Initially 360KB in size, they could hold up to 1.44MB by 1986. They replaced cassette tapes and 5¼-inch floppies, remaining popular until the early 00s.

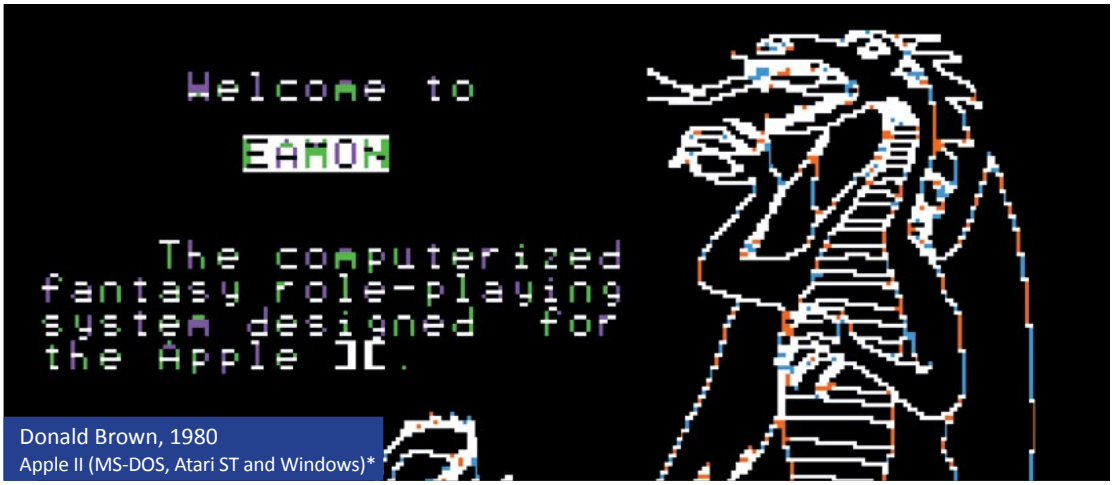


The **MSX** was an attempt to create a new industry standard. Designed by Microsoft and several Japanese companies, it was popular in Japan, Europe, the Middle East and South America until the 90s.



The **Apple Macintosh** popularises the mouse, graphical interfaces and other innovations, but it's expensive and fails to compete with the IBM PC, leading to Steve Jobs being fired from Apple.

Eamon



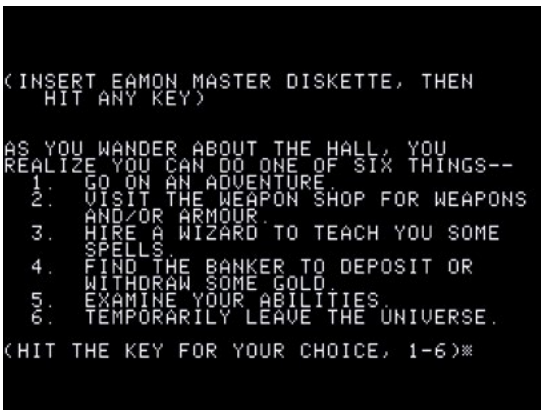
Donald Brown, 1980
Apple II (MS-DOS, Atari ST and Windows)*

Eamon was ported by fans to other platforms, including several different versions for MS-DOS. If you want to give the game a try, there's also a handy browser version.

You walk into the Adventurer's Guild, register your name and abilities, then buy a weapon and a piece of armour. After asking the nearby wizard to teach you some spells, you enter a hall lined with doors – each leading to a different adventure, in a different setting, written by a different person. Welcome to *Eamon*.

Eamon isn't just one game, it is a game system – a set of rules and tools for creating more games. Initially circulating by word of mouth, it became popular via *Recreational Computing*, an American computer magazine. Their July 1980 issue was entirely dedicated to "fantasy games", with articles about how to create such games, their future as a genre and also a few games, such as *Eamon* and *Wizard's Castle*, with their authors explaining how they work and the next few pages containing the game's entire BASIC code.

Readers would type the code on their computers and then save it on a tape or disk in order to play. This was cheap way to distribute games before the Internet, but also an invaluable resource in helping aspiring programmers learn from other's code.



The Main Hall, where your characters are created and come to rest between adventures. The shops offer only a few items, so you'll need to go out exploring to find the cool stuff.

Created by Donald Brown, *Eamon*'s heart is its "Main Hall" program, used to create your character and load adventures. You simply type a name and the game will generate a character based on three stats: Hardiness, which determines HP and carries weight; Agility, used in combat and when activating traps; and Charisma, which controls how friendly NPCs are (mostly if they'll attack you or not) and store prices.

You can buy weapons and armour at the store, as well as spells from the wizard. There are five weapons types, three armour categories and four spells – Heal, Blast, Speed and Power – which heal, deal damage, boost Agility or ask the gods for a favour, respectively.

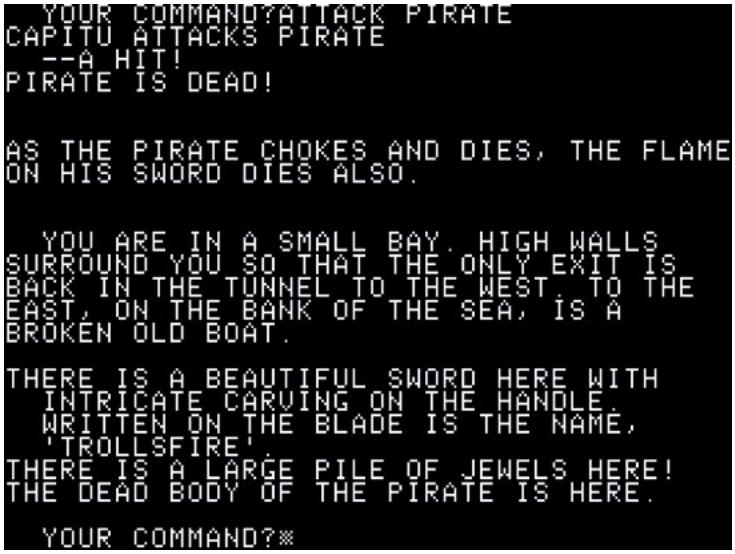
The Main Hall also includes a sample adventure called Beginner's Cave, and it's a good taste of what *Eamon* is. It plays much like text adventures such as *Colossal Cave* (1976): the game gives a description of the room you're currently in and you act by typing commands, such as NORTH (or N) to head north, GET SWORD to grab a sword on the ground, etc. *Eamon's* novelty was introducing RPG elements, with combat being based on dice-rolls and your stats and weapon skills slowly increasing as you use them.

Furthermore, as soon as you finish the adventure you're returned to the Main Hall (given you survive) and can use your new weapons and skills in hundreds of brand-new adventures, all created by other players using *Eamon*'s Dungeon Designer Diskette.

This means you can take the magical sword at the end of the Beginner's Cave into a space adventure, use it to stop an alien invasion and then bring your newly acquired blaster rifle to Ancient Greece to battle the Minotaur – or any other adventure whose disk you managed to get at college or at work, trade by mail or create yourself. Remember, this was long before the Internet or even BBSs became popular!

"Unlike most games, there is no clear single goal in a fantasy role-playing game. Instead, you are directing the actions of a character to achieve the goals you want him/her to achieve. Although most people accept normal goals such as 'make lots of money' or 'become a feared warrior', you can choose any yardstick you want to measure your success. After all, it's your life – you ARE the character."

– *Donald Brown, Eamon's creator*



I kill the last enemy of the Beginner's Cave and he drops his magical sword, which I'll carry to new adventures. It has the special power to produce fire, which can be used to solve puzzles in this adventure.

Seeing the game's success, Donald Brown created *SwordThrust* (1981), a sequel to *Eamon*, but this time a commercial product. Despite several improvements, such as a better interface and more spells, it was never as popular and had few adventures made for it, resulting in Brown abandoning game development.

The free, public domain nature of *Eamon* had made it spread across the US and, with Brown leaving *Eamon* behind, the community rose to the challenge of keeping the game alive. Programmer John Nelson hacked the system to allow for more complex designs and in 1984 founded the National Eamon Users Club, an association that catalogued *Eamon* adventures and published a newsletter with reviews and design tips.

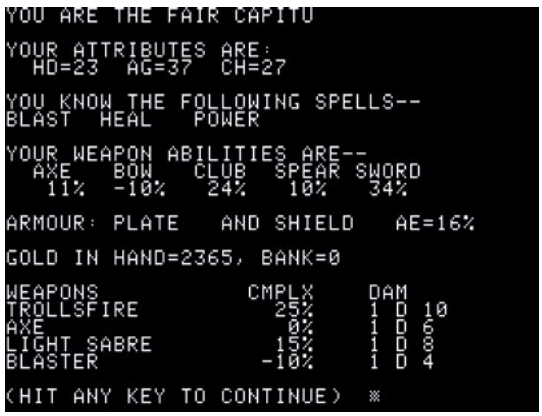
In 1988 the club became The Eamon Adventurer's Guild, helmed by Thomas Zuchowski, and can still be found at www.eamonag.org. Their records contain 256 adventures, most created between 1984 and 1994, but sadly it stopped being updated in 2005.

Today it's easy to download these adventures and enjoy how diverse they are. You might be a pirate, a cop or a time-traveller, delve into Moria, hunt hackers, fight cyborgs, explore the inside of the Death Star, or even play as Batman pursuing the Joker.

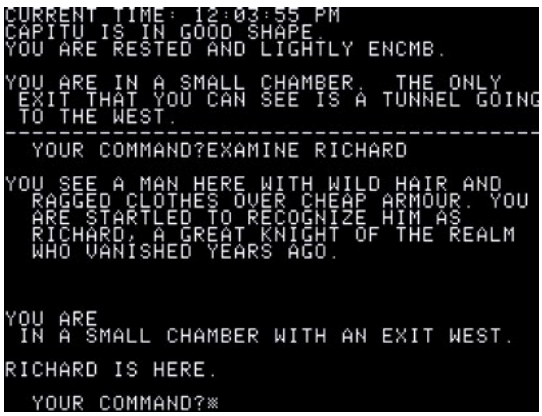
Of course, the problem with having a game entirely based on user-generated content is that the quality varies wildly. Some games are creative and well-designed, while others suffer from poor writing, cheap deaths, obtuse puzzles and tiresome combat. The *Star Wars* adventure listed above sounds cool, but it's filled with endless battles against stormtroopers.

Yet, I finished it. Mostly because I really wanted to bring a lightsaber with me. Mind you, the lightsaber functions like any other sword, and it was actually weaker than the weapons I had. The only thing special about it was its name. But this incredible power that words have to feed our imagination is precisely why *Eamon* conquered so many fans. **FE**

The Eamon Adventure's Guild produced a CD which comes with 242 public domain adventures, maps, guides, all their newsletters and some emulators. You can download it here.

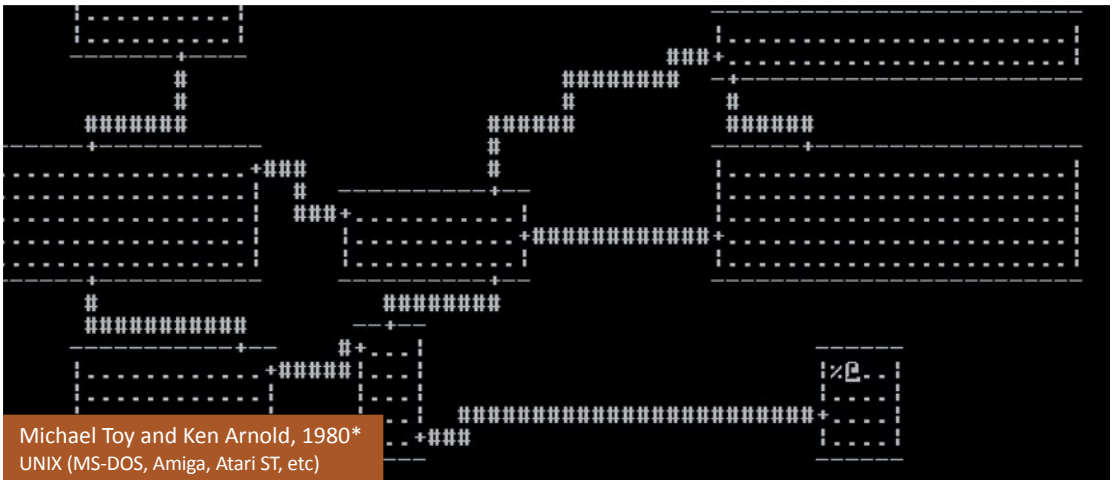


The status screen showing stats, gear and skills. Don't get too attached: weapons break and character death is permanent!



SwordThrust introduced several improvements, such as a status window on top, but was never as popular as *Eamon*.

Rogue



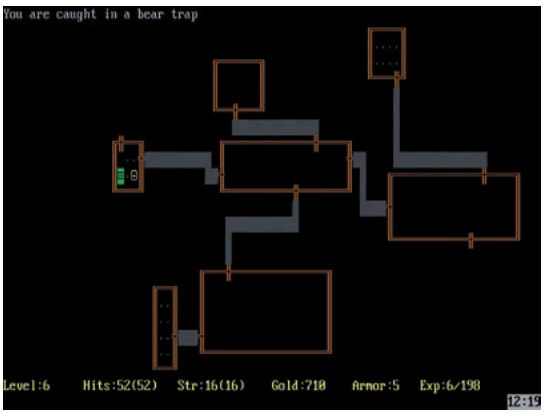
Michael Toy and Ken Arnold, 1980*
UNIX (MS-DOS, Amiga, Atari ST, etc)

***Rogue* first appeared on Unix terminals in 1980. It was then ported to MS-DOS by A.I. Design in 1984 and published by Epyx in 1985 for several platforms.**

Rogue gave the roguelike sub-genre its name. It was inspired by popular text-based adventure games like *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976), but where adventure games emphasised world-building, hand-crafted puzzles and story, *Rogue*'s primary goal was replayability: its elements would be randomised between each playthrough, producing a new experience every time. *Rogue*'s objective is straightforward: descend into a dungeon to find the Amulet of Yendor and bring it back to the surface – without dying!

The game was developed by Michael Toy and Glen Wichman, with later input from Ken Arnold at Berkley's University of California. Created using the university's Unix terminal, *Rogue* became so popular it was included on the Berkeley Software Distribution (BSD), an open-source operating system, spreading to other campuses.

Excited by the game's renown, the developers founded a company, A.I. Design, and made a deal with Epyx to publish it as a commercial title. But it was too late. People had already embraced *Rogue* as a public domain game, creating and sharing their own "*Rogue*-likes", spawning a an entire sub-genre.



Monsters respawn constantly, but you'll also have to deal with traps and hidden passages.

I spent years banging my head against the ludicrous complexity and idiosyncratic mechanics of roguelikes like *NetHack*, *ADOM*, and *Angband* before I got around to playing *Rogue*. I was a little surprised at the simplicity of its design: There's no character creation to speak of. You name your rogue and the game plops you down on the first floor of the dungeon.

The dungeon design is also relatively simplistic. Each floor is composed of a 3x3 grid of rooms. The only thing that changes in the layout is the presence or absence of a room, how the corridors connect the rooms, and the shape of the rooms. On later levels, the hallways may become more complex and difficult to navigate, and some rooms may be dark, limiting the player's field of vision. There is only one stairway down on each level. You cannot go back to previous levels until you retrieve the Amulet of Yendor.

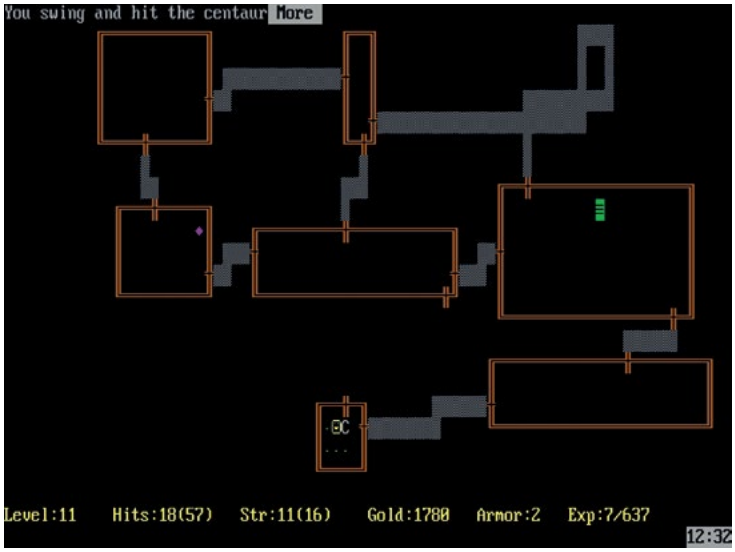
As a result, the structure of *Rogue* is more linear than something like *NetHack*, but that also makes it far more accessible: the moment-to-moment decisions a player needs to make are leaner, more focused.

This isn't to say that *Rogue* doesn't have a lot of compelling depth to it. As with most other roguelikes, it features potions, wands, staves, rings, and scrolls – all of which have random effects and must be identified by experimenting with them. Figuring out different strategies to mitigate the risk involved in identifying these items is one of the chief pleasures of any roguelike, but here it feels a lot more manageable than later versions, especially for new players.

In many ways, calling the games that were created in the image of *Rogue* "roguelikes" is a bit of a misnomer. The games that sprung from its combination of dungeon crawling, procedural generation, and permadeath expanded on its formula in a range of ways that give them only a passing resemblance to their inspiration.

"In a lot of ways, I think playing *Rogue* is to playing *Diablo* as reading a book is to watching a movie. When reading a book, you don't see the characters or special effects or action, but you imagine it in your mind, and the effect of the book is just as strong as the effect of a movie. The difference is that you get to make up the images in your own head. Just as some people prefer reading to watching a movie, there are still some (including myself) who prefer *Rogue* to the newer, more graphically intense games."

– *Glen Wichman, Rogue's co-creator*



The MS-DOS version of *Rogue*. Combat is turn-based and very simple, you just move in the direction of the enemy. But there are several items, scrolls and potions, as well as monsters with special abilities.

Many in the roguelike community only bring up *Rogue* as a marker of how far the genre has come in implementing randomness and increasingly complex systems on top of the core mechanics. I feel like that interpretation sells the game short, and places too much emphasis on overwhelming complexity. Playing *Rogue* taught me the importance of clarity and restraint.

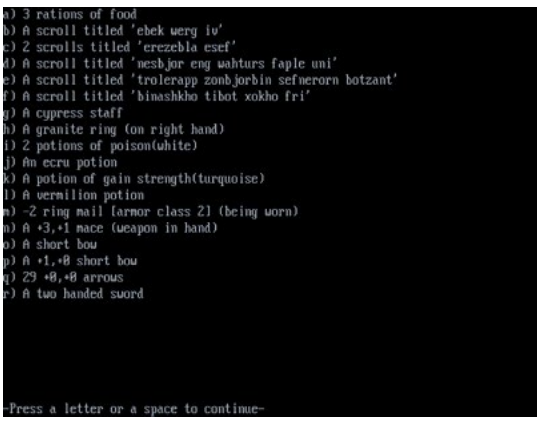
There's something pure about its singular focus on dungeon crawling. It leads to far fewer opportunities for new players to get themselves killed. While there will certainly be times where they'll die due to a miscalculation or misunderstanding of the game, the sheer amount of information and knowledge demanded is far lower than other roguelikes.

It's rare, but the clarity of design found in *Rogue* occasionally shines through in more modern designs: Brian Walker's *Brogue* (2009) takes *Rogue*'s classless system to heart and even simplifies it further by making it so the player doesn't need to kill monsters to level up.

Similarly, *Dungeon Crawl Stone Soup* (2006) has a design philosophy that emphasises the need for clarity and an aversion to grinding or deaths that feel unfair. They are not shy about removing mechanics or character creation options that run counter to those goals.

Is it still worth going back to *Rogue*? It's a tough question to answer. I get a lot out of playing *Rogue* and still replay it on a regular basis. But that interest is a combination of nostalgia and the affections of someone who is already deeply interested in roguelikes as a genre.

In many ways, it's a shame that *Rogue* doesn't come up in discussion as frequently as *ADOM* or *NetHack* does. Its simplified design provides a smoother on-ramp than other roguelikes, whose idiosyncrasies and impenetrability frequently place new players in utterly inscrutable and fatal situations. To that end, I think it's a worthwhile starting point: the lessons you learn here will help prepare you for the far more complicated (and unforgiving) fare the genre is known for. **RP**



The game's inventory, with some identified potions but several magical scrolls whose effects I still don't know.



Epyx also released a graphical version of *Rogue* for Amiga and Atari ST, but the zoomed view made it harder to play.

Wizardry:

Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord



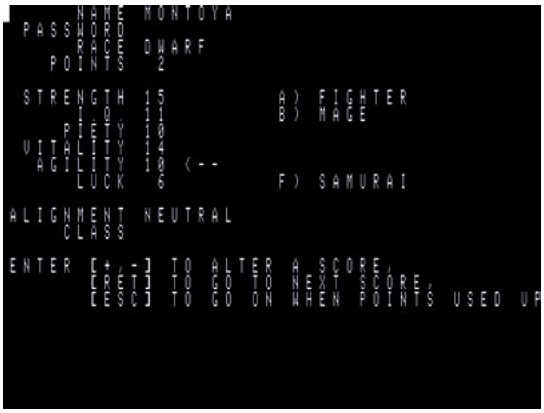
Sir-Tech, 1981
Apple II, MS-DOS, C64, Mac, NES, SNES, etc*

Back in 1978, two university undergraduates, Andrew Greenberg and Robert Woodhead, started to develop their own computer RPG. They took a lot from the PLATO games (especially *Oubliette)*, but also added some revolutionary ideas, which kept their friends playing for nights on end.

This would be the first game to give players control over a party of characters instead of just a lone hero, sending them to explore an expertly crafted dungeon full of perils and secrets. It was the birth of the most influential dungeon crawler of all time: *Wizardry*.

However, they coded the game using Pascal and had to wait months for Apple to actually support the language before the game could run on any Apple II. In the meantime, they kept improving its technical aspects, as well as balancing the gameplay, creating the most complex and polished home computer game released so far. It even had an animated intro!

Wizardry quickly became one of the best-selling computer games of the 80s – a true phenomenon that topped sales and rating charts for years and led to the birth of unofficial game guides, trainers and edit tools.



Characters can be Fighters, Mages, Priests or Thieves depending on their stats. Those with high stats can change into elite classes: Bishop, Samurai, Lord and Ninja.

***Wizardry* was exclusive to the Apple II until 1984, but has since been ported or remade for dozens of systems, such as the SNES, PS1, Saturn, mobile phones, etc. Sadly, many of these versions only came out in Japan.**

Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord is a pure dungeon crawler. Unlike *Might and Magic* or *Ultima,* it makes no attempt at creating a detailed setting with a rich history. It doesn't even provide a world outside its dungeon – the town of Llylgamyn is nothing more than a menu from where you can access services like a shop, an inn, a tavern and a temple.

There is, of course, a quest you're supposed to accomplish: defeating the evil arch-wizard Werdna and retrieving his amulet. But the game is ultimately about exploring a massive dungeon, surviving tough battles and power-building your party. This is where *Wizardry*'s secret lies: a focus on a seemingly simple, yet highly addictive and replayable gameplay.

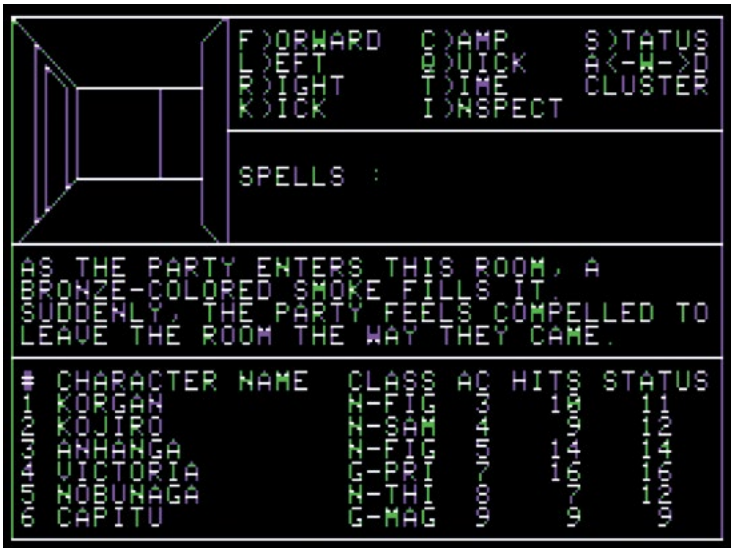
Wizardry is a claustrophobic experience, and it uses difficulty to enforce this concept. There's no save feature – if a party member dies you have to find and drag his body to the temple for a chance at bringing him back, use rare resurrection spells that would reduce the character's Constitution, or just re-roll a new character. The same applies if the entire party dies, obviously.

Thus, *Wizardry* is a game of danger assessment and resource management, in which your ability to win encounters unscathed decides how deep you'll be able to go. This makes every fight relevant; if you lose hit points or waste spells in non-lethal encounters, they'll quickly add up and force you to return to town – not via a handy Town Portal, but by walking back.

Besides the battles, the dungeon itself proves to be a big challenge. There's no auto-map, of course, and each level is full with false walls, spinners, teleporters, chutes and other nice surprises. The huge dungeon is divided into ten descending levels, and your primary task in each of them is to find the stairs or elevator that allows you to go deeper. All of this may sound more frustrating than fun, but believe me, it's both.

"Both Andy [Greenberg] and I were active on the PLATO system, which was a tremendous influence on us. PLATO had email, chat, newsgroups, multiplayer real-time game, and much more, all starting in the early 70s. The multiplayer dungeon games were particularly good [...] *Wizardry* was in many ways our attempt to see if we could write a single-player game as cool as the PLATO dungeon games and cram it into a tiny machine like the Apple II."

– Robert Woodhead, *Wizardry's co-creator*



Wizardry wasn't the first game to have first-person dungeons, but their complexity was revolutionary. Instead of randomly generated, they were hand-made and filled with secrets, events, traps and many other surprises.

Wizardry has some balance issues (Thieves are useless in combat) and rather unfair mechanics (levelling up can decrease stats), but a common criticism is how empty some parts of the dungeon are, as special encounters and locations are rare and far between.

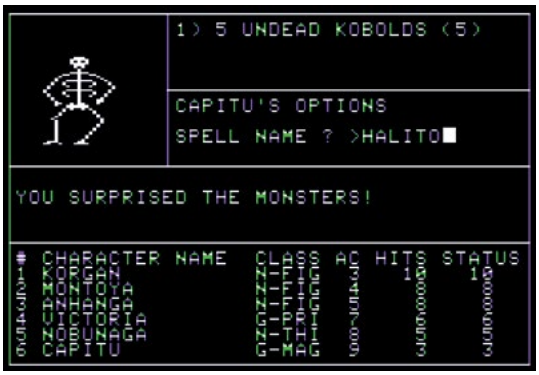
This was addressed in the two next *Wizardry* games, *Knight of Diamonds* and *Legacy of Llylgamyn*. They focused on bringing better content, with only minor gameplay adjustments. While nowadays these games are referred to as sequels, they were originally sold as "scenarios" – extra content for the first game.

Knight of Diamonds was released in 1982 and originally required that you transferred your party over from *Wizardry I* (later ports added character creation). The characters are then tasked with finding the pieces of a legendary armour set, which can be used by them. Each level featured distinct puzzles and had more interesting encounters aside from just combat, making exploration much more meaningful.

The final entry in the original trilogy is *Legacy of Llylgamyn* (1983). This time your previous party isn't exactly imported, but rather used as ancestors for new characters; their stats carry over, but you'll start with a level 1 party. The game expands the role of alignments, as some areas can only be entered by good characters, while others are exclusive to evil ones. This forces the player to handle two parties, or to plan an alignment switch mid-game. More importantly, the design of the dungeons remains great and features more unique puzzles, locations and content than previous titles.

Wizardry is more than a series: it's an entire genre. Besides the eight main titles developed by Sir-Tech, there are over 30 official *Wizardry* games made in Japan, plus hundreds of clones and variants known as DRPGs (Dungeon RPGs). There's a reason why this is one of the most influential and long-lasting series ever: it remains extremely fun. But don't take my word for it, the dungeon awaits you! **DB**

Nowadays the best way to play *Wizardry* is with the fan-translation of *Wizardry: Story of Llylgamyn*, a Japanese remake of the first three games for the SNES, featuring much better graphics, UI and balance.



Wizardry has a deep magic system with 46 spells in two schools. To cast them you must manually type their names.



The SNES remake of the initial *Wizardry* trilogy has much better graphics and interface, making it a great entry point.

Ultima



Richard Garriott, 1981
Apple II and Atari 8-Bit*

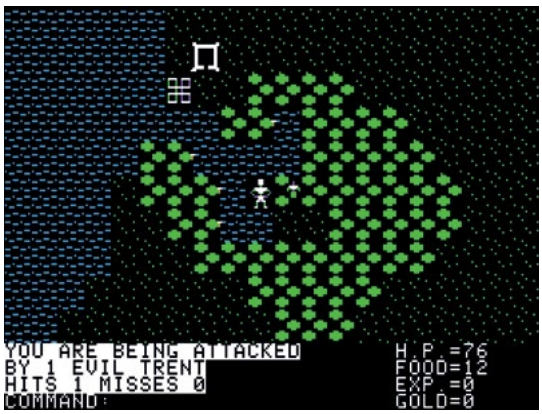
*In 1986 *Ultima* was re-released as ***Ultima 1: The First Age of Darkness***, with new versions for the Apple II, C64, IBM PC and various Japanese computers, such as the MSX2 and FM-Towns.

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, colourful and innovative overworld map, the randomly generated wire-frame dungeons from *Akalabeth* and even 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 to 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 hope is to collect four magic gems to power a time machine to go back in time and slay 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.



The innovative overworld map. I'm inside a forest fighting an Evil Trent. To the north lies the town of Britain and the Castle of Lord British.

Most of that time is spent gaining enough gold to buy food and supplies to survive, along with getting enough experience 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 signposts spread throughout the world, with bonus points rewarded for going to these signposts 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 princesses from castles.

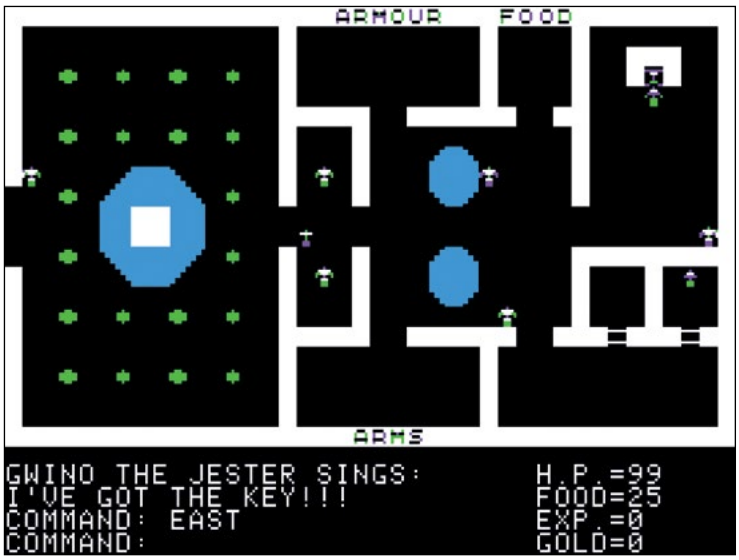
Combat itself is very similar to *Akalabeth*, but you have a time limit to act, or you'll lose your turn. And now there are random enemy encounters on the overworld map as well, not only inside dungeons.

Towns and castles are one-screen areas where most of the game's solutions are uncovered via jesters talking out loud, or by spending money in bars. Items and food can be bought – or stolen, though that may anger the tough guards. As the player progresses, the technology of the world advances, and various new weapons and armour 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.

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.

"With the success of *Akalabeth*, I decided to start fresh with my first work intended for public consumption. I began a game originally entitled 'Ultimatum'! Built on much of the same code base as *Akalabeth,* it continued to refine the Richard Garriott virtual world-building techniques. The game maps were largely based on the *D&D* worlds I created called Sosaria. When finished, we launched it under the name *Ultima."*

– *Richard Garriott, Ultima's creator*



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

The magic system is quite simple, with only a few different spells sold as one-cast scrolls. And really, only two are useful: Ladders Up & Down. Those aid in making dungeons much easier, as they allow one to avoid having to seriously map or look for secret doors.

This is part of why *Ultima* was so revolutionary: while other RPGs were dungeon crawlers, *Ultima* was an epic adventure – you would explore a large world, visit towns, talk to kings, ride horses, travel in time, go to space and, yes, also battle monsters in dungeons. Yet it was easy to get started; just read the gorgeous manual illustrated by Denis Loubet to get immersed in the world, and then use 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 C64.

It taught me keyboard layouts and how these "RPG things" worked. To look for clues. To explore a world with much of its flavour 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?

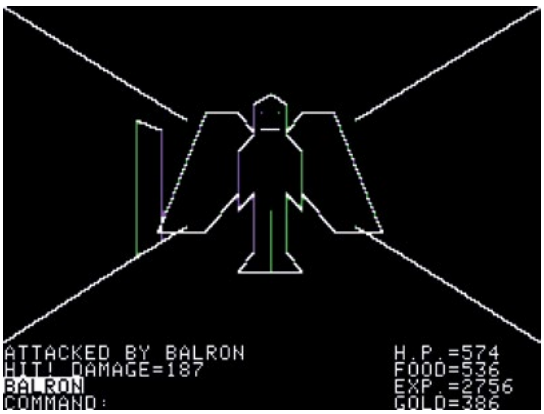
Would *Apshai*, with its far more finicky control scheme, world detail hidden within multiple paragraphs to read in a booklet and far slower form of character advancement have done the same?

Probably not. **RM**

Fan Joseph Propati created a board game adaptation of *Ultima*, made for solo play. It's free, and you can find it at www.boardgamegeek.com



After buying the space shuttle, you must dock at star bases, acquire a spaceship and shoot down TIE-Fighters. clones.



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

Dragon's Eye



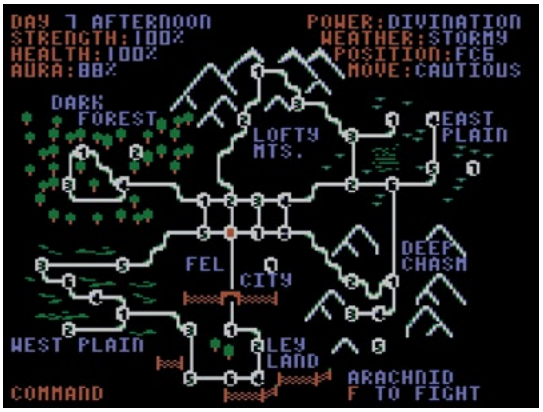
Southern Software, 1981
Atari 8-bit, Apple II and Commodore PET

Among the several "proto-RPGs" made in the late 70s and early 80s while the RPG genre was still defining itself, a popular style was the "gather treasures across the land" games.

Directly inspired by *Colossal Cave* (1976) and board games like *Magic Realm* (1979), these were games where you (often alternating turns with other players) raced to explore an area and collect treasures, competing to see who can earn a higher score.



In combat you can perform several actions, like leaping, dodging or executing a barrage of attacks, all which drain your strength meter.



There are 40 locations to explore, divided into seven areas. You can travel quickly between them, or move slowly trying to avoid random encounters.

Being a very early title, still sold in cassette tapes, *Dragon's Eye* is a simple game, beatable in an hour or so. You start by naming your hero, then choosing a weapon and a title, after which you'll get a random selection of spells and be sent to the world map.

Your goal is to find the mythical Dragon Eye and return with it to the starting city within 21 days. Once you do so, you win the game and will be rated on how many battles you won and treasures you recovered.

You play by moving around the world map and searching locations for treasures or clues to their location. Actions like walking, searching and resting take a certain amount of time based on factors like your speed and weather, but you can use spells such as Cure Self or Teleport to help with the time limit.

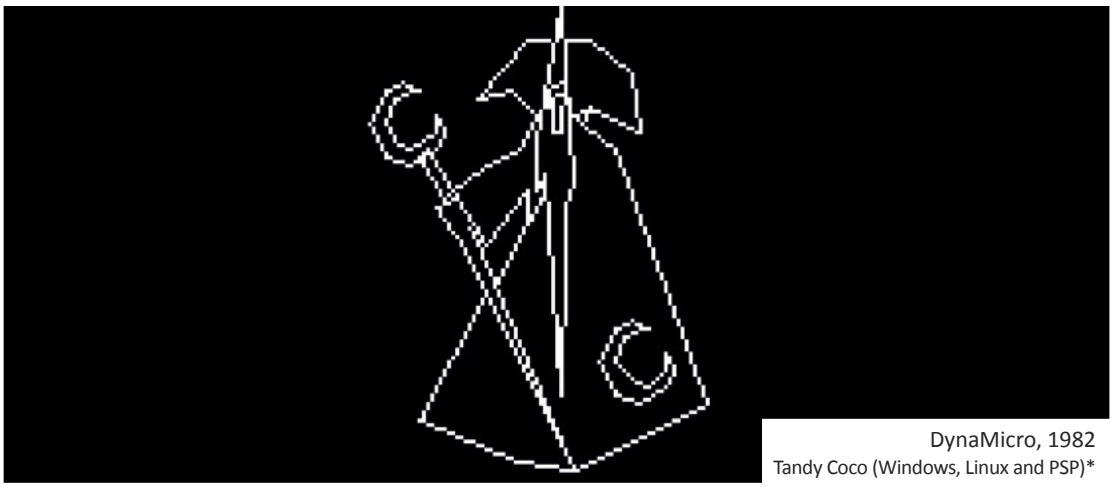
Unlike other games of this kind, *Dragon's Eye* has no competing AI opponents, quests, special events or dungeons – you just walk around searching areas repeatedly, as there's a high percentage chance to find items.

What makes *Dragon's Eye* stand out is its combat. When you encounter an enemy, the screen goes to a 2D side-view and you control your character much like in a fighting game, but in turns: you can order it to move left or right, chop, do an overhead attack, leap, dodge, block, use an item, fire an arrow, etc.

Each action drains your strength, reducing the power of blows and forcing you to rest afterwards. It's primitive and unreliable but highly original, coming from a time before fighting games even existed.

This unique blend of 2D combat and turn-based RPG would be revisited in *Windwalker* (1989), and later games like *Wizards Wars* (1988) and *Moonstone: A Hard Days Knight* (1991) would greatly expand the "find all treasures" concept, but *Dragon's Eye* deserves its praise as one of the many forgotten pioneers that helped shape video games. **FE**

Dungeons of Daggorath



DynaMicro, 1982
Tandy Coco (Windows, Linux and PSP)*

Tension flows at every step. The only sounds you hear are your own heartbeats, and the distinct roar of beasts who wish to stop it. *Dungeons of Daggorath* is, in many ways, the logical follow-up to the similarly brutal *Akalabeth*.

Players takes the role of a prophetic hero out to defeat an evil wizard who spreads darkness over the land. In desperation, your village sends you into the wizard's dungeons, with nary but a wooden sword and a torch to light the way.

Daggorath ramps up the stakes from prior first-person dungeon crawlers by being fully real-time. Commands must be quickly input in the text parser, since enemies won't patiently wait for their turn. To make things easier, you can use abbreviations, such as typing "A R" instead of "Attack Right" to strike with the weapon in your right hand.

Linked in deep with this is the mechanic of a constant heartbeat representing the character's health. It will steadily accelerate as the player takes action or gets hit by enemies – exhausting yourself or taking too much damage will send your heart into a tailspin, possibly leading to a blackout. Players must find a safe place and catch their breath for a bit, lest they want to risk a heart attack ending their adventure.

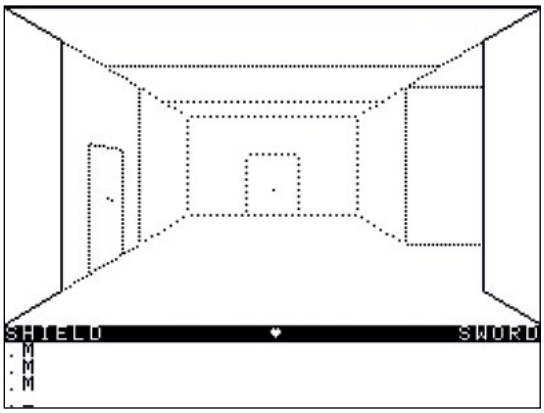
Exploration is limited by torches the player collects. If a torch begins to dim, your hit rate against monsters becomes lessened as their outline becomes dimmed. Having to replace torches or other items requires real-time inventory management, during which a slow player can be decimated.

The real defining characteristic of *Daggorath* is its atmosphere, using its monochromatic colour palette and foreboding heartbeat sound to the fullest. Each step carries not the just the fear of being overrun by monsters, but also of getting lost in the dungeon.

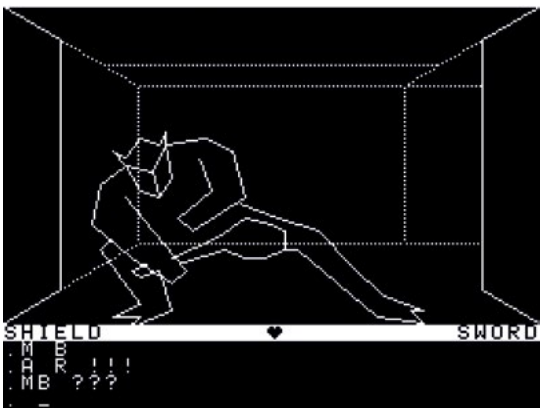
The game culminates on the fifth level of the dungeon, wrestling with the parser to activate a magic ring which finally gives the wizard what for, and the player taking his position as the ruler of Daggorath.

Dungeons of Daggorath is certainly still worth experiencing, being an important precursor to *Dungeon Master* (1987). It's not easily digestible, but every single element has a purpose. The RPG legacy owes at least a respectful nod to *Daggorath*. **EJ**

***Douglas Morgan, former president of DynaMicro, released the source code of *Daggorath*, which led to fans creating various ports that can be legally downloaded.**



The dungeon has no traps, but is full of fake walls. It also changes colours: some floors are black while others are white.



Powerful enemies such as the Stone Giant can kill you in one blow, so quickly attacking and running is key to your survival. But be careful not to mistype!

Telengard



The Avalon Hill Game Company, 1982
C64, Apple II, Atari 8-bit, TRS-80, etc

When I was eleven, I discovered *Telengard*. While not the most advanced CRPG at the time, it was incredibly addictive and replayable. The game is built around almost arcade-like runs into the dungeon to see just how far you can get in a single session before inevitably conceding defeat.

Every few years, I still wander back to try my luck delving the depths of the dungeon. *Telengard*'s biggest strength, however, is also its greatest weakness.

Over the years fans have created enhanced versions of *Telengard*, and a Windows port. The latter was created by Travis Baldree, co-founder of Runic Games.



Telengard is brutally unfair. You can start the game, encounter a very powerful monster and die permanently in a few seconds.



Instead of directly controlling your character, you input cardinal directions and move from screen to screen.

Apart from the dungeon layout, everything is randomised – your initial stats, which monster you are going to face, what their levels are, and what treasures you will manage to scrounge up. The wild nature of the RNG ensures that every session is wildly different, but can also lead to frustration. It's a game that requires patience to get a good start, and tenacity to not despair when you lose everything from one uncontrollable moment – especially since you have a short time limit to input your actions every turn.

This is why I keep coming back to *Telengard*; most CRPGs are carefully designed around difficulty curves, balance, and making sure the player is always in control. *Telengard* just ruthlessly throws the player in and starts delivering the fun. The feeling of having survived a mid-level dragon early in the game is unsurpassed by what other games give you when they have a encounters perfectly balanced for where you are in the game.

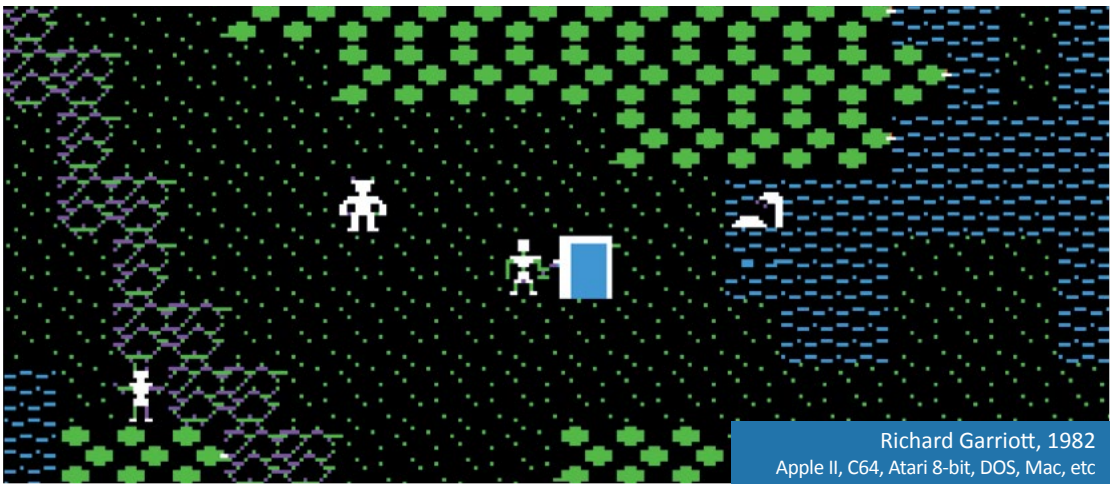
In the end I still do crave control, and will drift away from *Telengard* for a while every time, but that feeling when you get back to it is hard to beat.

While *Telengard* is often mislabelled as a roguelike, its dungeons aren't random but procedurally generated, spanning 50 massive floors. On the other hand, there's no end goal – you just survive as long as possible.

The game's developer, Daniel Lawrence, claims he created *Telengard* as a home computer port of a game called *DND* that he wrote while at Purdue University. The controversy is that Lawrence's *DND* and *Telengard* have many elements that are similar to PLATO's *dnd*. This led to criticism and many plagiarism accusations, since *Telengard* was released as a commercial title.

Regardless, we didn't knew about any of this at the time. *Telengard* became a popular title among early CRPG fans, and many like myself still enjoy challenging its unforgiving RNG from time to time. **DM**

Ultima II:
Revenge of the Enchantress



Richard Garriott, 1982
Apple II, C64, Atari 8-bit, DOS, Mac, etc

After the success of *Ultima I*, Richard Garriott spent over a year working to create a sequel. During this time he taught himself how to program in assembly language, allowing for several improvements in graphical variety and scale.

But what really defined *Ultima II* was that in the meanwhile Garriott saw Terry Gilliam's *Time Bandits* (1981), a light-hearted fantasy movie about a kid who meets a group of dwarves and travels through several time periods by using a magic map.

Heavily inspired by the movie, Garriott moved *Ultima II* from the magical land of Sosaria to Earth. After the wizard Mondain was defeated in the previous game, his apprentice and lover Minax learns time travel and floods Earth's past, present and future with her evil minions. Lord British calls upon a new hero to step forward and undo Minax's wicked work.

To do so, the hero travels across five time periods using magical gates – which would become an iconic feature of the *Ultima* series. As in the movie, a map shows all the gates and where and when they lead to. This map was actually a physical cloth map, included in the game's box. Back then most games were still being sold inside crude ziplock bags, and Garriott was snubbed by several publishers until Sierra On-Line agreed on producing a box with the map.

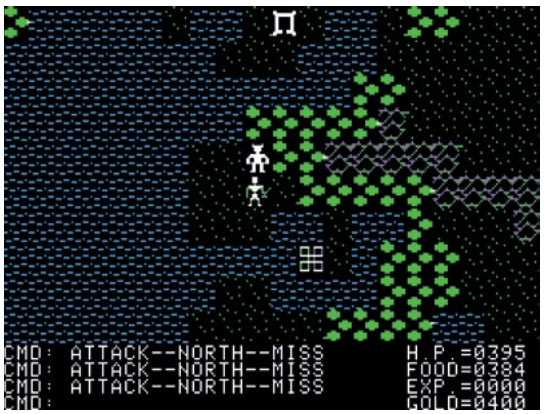
If time travel isn't enough for you, *Ultima II* also goes into space, allowing you to visit the nine planets of our solar system (back when Pluto was a planet!). Sadly, all these areas have barely any content or story to them – apart from a few Easter eggs – and even the first-person dungeons are mostly pointless.

Truly, you'll spend most of the game battling monsters for key items that randomly drop, cursing the poorly balanced character system and grinding until you're strong enough to attack Minax's fortress.

Another reason why *Ultima II* isn't discussed much today is because its events were retconned in future games of the series. This solved the confusing mess of why Sosarian characters were on Earth and any plot holes derived from timeline-altering events.

Ultima II had great ideas that impressed gamers back then, but the repetitive gameplay and lack of meaningful content makes it the most dated game in the series. Still, greater things were yet to come. **FE**

In 1983, Sierra On-Line published *Ultima: Escape from Mt. Drash*, a crude dungeon crawler for the VIC-20. It has nothing to do with the *Ultima* series, but Garriott allowed Sierra to use the series' name.

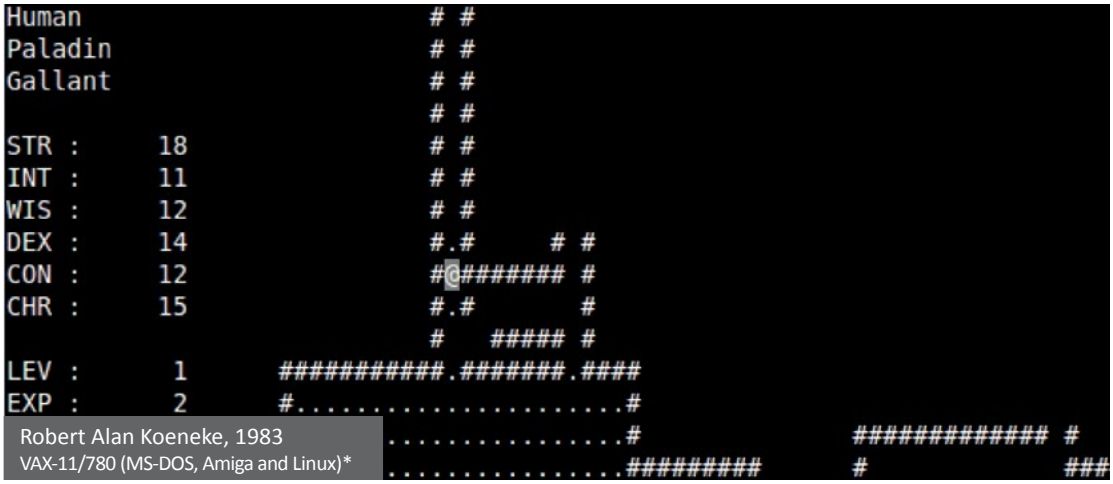


Fighting an Orc in 1423 BC Europe. The world map isn't very big, but it's slightly different in each time period.



While *Ultima II* looks a lot like its predecessor, it packs discrete improvements such as large towns to explore and animated water tiles.

Moria



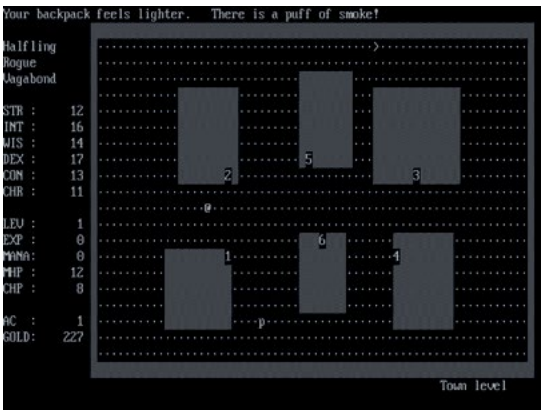
Robert Alan Koeneke, 1983
VAX-11/780 (MS-DOS, Amiga and Linux)*

***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 mini-computer (not to be confused with the 1975 *Moria* game for PLATO). As 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 features that would later become essential to certain sub-genre of roguelikes: a town with shops at the top of the dungeon, scrolling multiple-screen maps, spells, artefact 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 randomised (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 ones, replenish food and torches and identify unknown items.



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.

The game (as well as others 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.

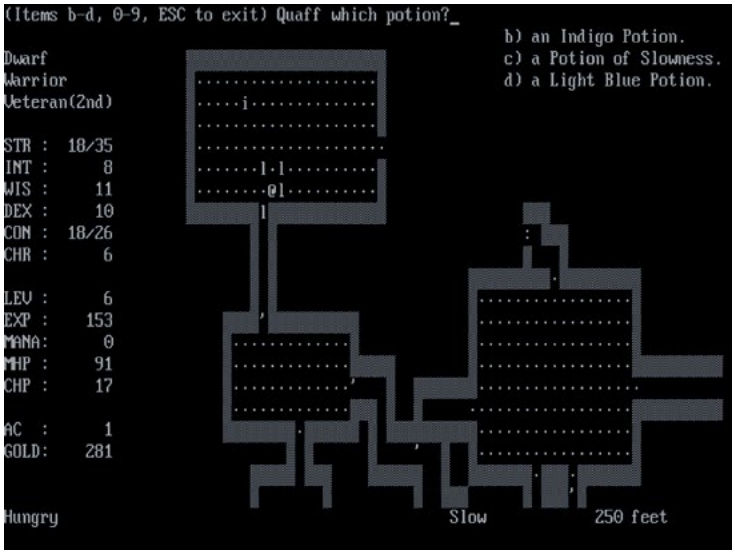
The game is played through a text terminal (with the usual possibility of playing the game remotely through Telnet or SSH) and controlled with the keyboard. The control scheme might be a problem for laptop owners as most versions of *Moria* are controlled with the numpad, without the possibility of using 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 generators, 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 a high level of difficulty.

"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 immortalised. And, of course, I went in and plugged up the trick he used to win."

– *Robert Alan Koeneke*, 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 Koeneke, 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 derivative titles, especially *Angband* (in fact, the sub-genre 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**



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

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 colours 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 popularise the *Moria*/*Angband* sub-genre of roguelikes.



Angband allows for tilesets, as well as ASCII graphics.

The Return of Heracles



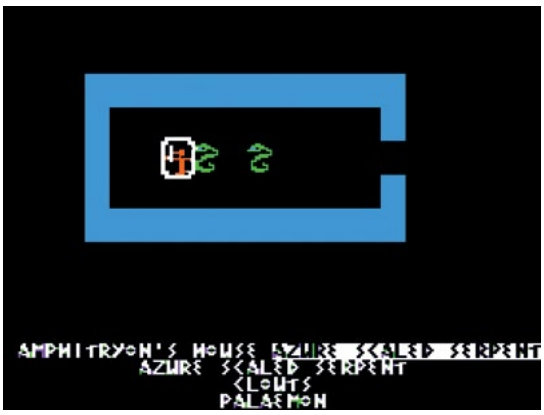
Stuart Smith, 1983
Apple II, Atari 8-bit and C64

Stuart Smith would go on to create the *Adventure Construction Set* in 1984, an influential toolset that allowed players to create their own CRPGs.

Stuart Smith is a somewhat enigmatic figure from early CRPG history. His output was top-notch, reflecting his belief that creating mindless games without educational value was a pointless exercise, which may have led to his seemingly early and permanent exit from the game development world.

His first game was *Fracas* (1980), an early RPG where up to eight players could explore a maze-like city, competing (or cooperating) to see who would complete self-imposed challenges first. A defining feature of *Fracas* and Smith's subsequent games is the autonomy that NPCs have: every single creature in the game is unique, and explores the maze just as you do, picking up items, fighting enemies from other factions and eventually even levelling up!

The concept evolved with *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1981), which gave players a more complex dungeon to explore, populated by 40 thieves, shops, NPCs like Aladdin and other unique creatures. Your goal here is to rescue Princess Buddir-al-Buddoor and, besides the obvious *Arabian Nights* influence, the game also took cues from Tolkien's books and folk tales.



Each of the 19 characters has its own traits. Palaemon, Heracles' original name, begins by facing two snakes sent by Hera, while Odysseus is accompanied by his dog, Argus.

Smith's next game would be more coherent and, for many fans, remain his best. *The Return of Heracles* is so embedded in Greek mythology that it likely falls in the category of "edutainment", but in the same way *The Oregon Trail* does – you virtually have no choice but to learn about myriad (mostly-accurate) aspects of Ancient Greek myths, legends, and culture.

There is a relatively shocking degree of non-linearity in the game, as you can choose everything from which Greek hero to play (Perseus, Hippolyta, Jason, Achilles, Odysseus, etc.), how many characters you'll control (anywhere from one to all 19 of them) and whether you'll spend your time trying to avoid combat or killing every character you meet.

Some combat is unavoidable, as the purpose of the game – completing the Twelve Labours of Heracles – does necessitate fights such as the traditional slaying of the Hydra and the Nemean Lion. But you are free to try to duck and weave your way around the vast majority of characters, and there are even wholly optional areas in the game.

The learning aspect should definitely be emphasised; charming vignettes explain various myths and historical information, and characters come to life even with the hardware limitations of the time. My childhood memories of the tragic figure of Endymion (in myth and, usually, in-game) stayed with me my whole life, and my son's middle name is Endymion almost entirely because of the experiences I had here.

The switching between the overworld maps of Greece and the "interior" maps is fairly innovative for the time, and someone with a passing knowledge of Greek geography and mythology could likely guess where to go for various quests (to some degree) without having to stumble randomly through the game's sizeable world or consult the Oracle of Delphi.



Each hero has its own stats, which can be improved by training, acquiring new equipment or earning blessings.



The score system greatly increases the game's replayability, with players still competing for high scores and speedruns.



Knowledge of Greek myths is vital to avoid certain deaths, such as being cursed and then devoured by Actaeon's dogs.



For all its complexity, the game is extremely easy to play. All you need are the four arrow keys, Space and Enter.

But make no mistake, the role-playing adventure aspects of the game are fabulous for the era as well. The time limit of 200 turns per quest keeps the game fast and intense, while random elements like roaming NPCs and the whim of the gods (climbing Olympus might earn you either a gift or a curse) keeps every playthrough fresh. There is a solid economy which enforces tough choices as the monetary resources are (mostly) finite. Thus, the more characters you have, the more difficult it becomes to properly equip them.

Minimal-character "speedruns" are evidently popular within the retro community but, if you do choose to take the full panoply of characters, then it can be heartbreaking when your nearly-naked characters succumb to the hordes in the Trojan War segment.

Compared to today's 100-hour RPGs, it's amazing how *The Return of Heracles* throws virtually the entire "greatest hits" of Greek mythology at you rapid-fire, one screen after another. Certainly any game where you can obtain the Golden Fleece, triumphantly board the Trojan Horse, and climb Mount Olympus in the span of a few minutes does not lack in action.

Speaking to other aspects of immersion, the relatively minimal amount of sound in the game is implemented so well that it remains striking even today. There are ambient sounds of crashing waves in maritime scenes, sounds of gates opening and closing, and distinctive tones indicating the amount of damage done by an attack – from a barely-audible glancing blow, to a bass-heavy deathblow dirge. The musical score is easy to call masterful for the time, as the few songs are all excellently memorable and thematically appropriate.

Overall, *The Return of Heracles* stands out for the sheer amount of entertainment stuffed into it, particularly given its age. The only real competition in 1983 were the third releases from *Wizardry* and *Ultima*. But *Wizardry* was never meant to be a similar sort of game, and it would be another two years before Lord British refined his own technique and released a CRPG with the kind of narrative depth and resonance that Stuart Smith had already mastered – although Smith did have the advantage of using stories that had already been honed for thousands of years. **QX**

Ultima III: Exodus



Origin Systems, 1983
Apple II, MS-DOS, C64, Amiga, NES, etc

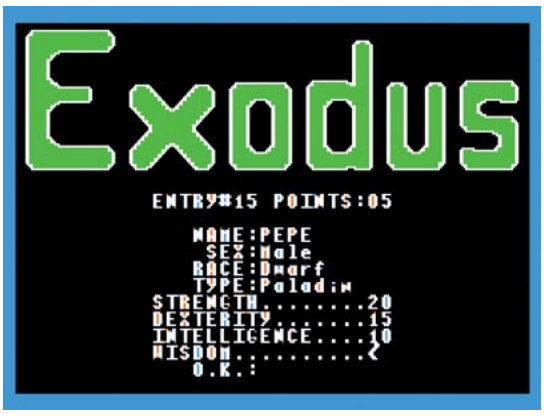
Ultima III is an important departure from its predecessors, allowing players to control a party of adventurers for the first time in the series. The enemy you face is also one of the strangest in gaming history: the half-demon, half-machine offspring of Mondain and Minax called Exodus.

This creature threatens Sosaria, requiring you to return to the setting of *Ultima I*, though my advice to you is not to get too attached to the place.

One of the reasons Richard Garriott has a great reputation as a programmer is due to how well he handled technical improvements from game to game. While the *Wizardry* series saw small incremental changes through the first five games of the series, the transition from *Akalabeth, Ultima I, Ultima II*, and then *Ultima III* is startling, especially knowing that each of these games was coded by the same person.

Once more, the geographic area was expanded from the previous game. In sound, the game made another impressive jump with more rhythmic tunes that changed depending on the party's game location, which strongly pushed the mood.

Those who wish to play *Exodus* can try the MS-DOS version with the *Ultima 3 Upgrade* mod, which adds VGA graphics, MIDI sound and many other cool improvements.



You start *Exodus* by creating four characters for your party. It's the only *Ultima* to allow this, and the last one to feature fantasy races like Elves and Bobbits.

In the previous two games, combat was simply a matter of attacking a foe standing in front of you, but *Ultima III* moves all battles to a separate, tactical combat map. Now you must carefully consider the position and movement of all your characters, greatly expanding your options in combat. On top of this, the game also adds new character races, classes and different spell groups for Wizards and Clerics.

Outside combat, the game is also much tighter. The space battles and most sci-fi elements of *Ultima I* and *II* were removed, and talking to NPCs is more important now, as conversation trees were added. The game also packs a twist, with a final encounter that requires more puzzle-solving than combat.

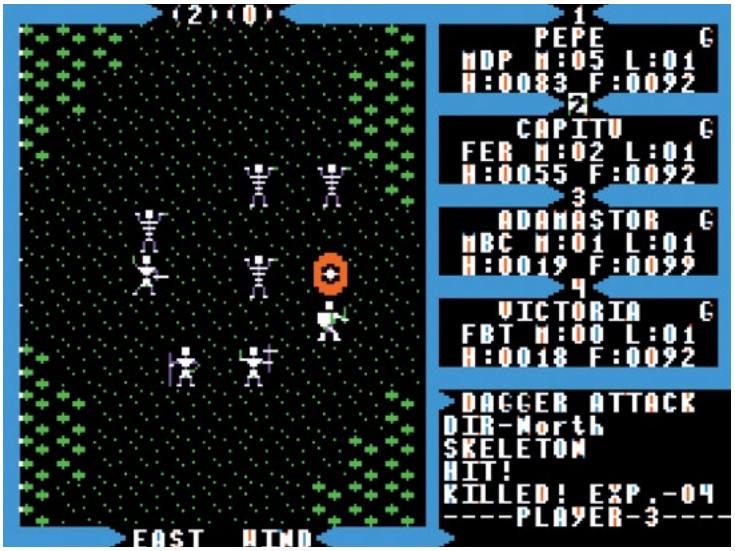
Although a cloth map was once again included with the game box, a new continent that could be found off the map was made available, adding a sense of wonder. The same could be said for a secret spell that was not included in the manual and required puzzle-solving and exploration to discover. The time gates of *Ultima II* were back, now officially called Moongates, and would allow travel dependent on phases of the planet's twin moons.

Garriott felt that allowing the character to be able to interact with his or her surroundings was vital to the CRPG experience, so he sought to improve upon the things that one could do. Players could pick up more objects and manipulate them on the screen, allowing for further puzzle design and problem-solving.

Of course, all of these improvements would be the result of brand-new programming code. Garriott had left Sierra On-Line after *Ultima II* was published, claiming that they stopped paying him his royalties, and started his own game company – Origin Systems. If his fledgling creation was to survive, then *Ultima III* would have to be a hit.

"Once I published *Ultima III* suddenly a large number of people wrote to the company, and I began to see exactly what people thought of the game. They would often describe how they would play the game. As I quickly realised, people were playing completely differently than I thought – they were min-maxing for power, versus role-playing as the hero. It was really eye-opening."

– *Richard Garriott*, *Ultima III's creator*



While obscure CRPG *Tunnels of Doom* (1982) pioneered the tactical party-based and turn-based combat, it was *Ultima III* who popularised this feature.

Luckily, his hard work and brand-new code was successful enough to sell over a hundred thousand copies of *Exodus*, resulting in Origin's continued survival and the game receiving a Gold Award from the Software Publisher's Association.

A transition piece, *Exodus*' game design feels much closer to *Ultima IV* than *Ultima II*, but the game is narratively tied to its predecessors. This is the last we'll see of Sosaria, and the last we'll see of some of the character classes and races we were able to play in the previous games. *Exodus* ends with a cataclysmic event that will reshape the world into Britannia and destroy the social order of those that survive.

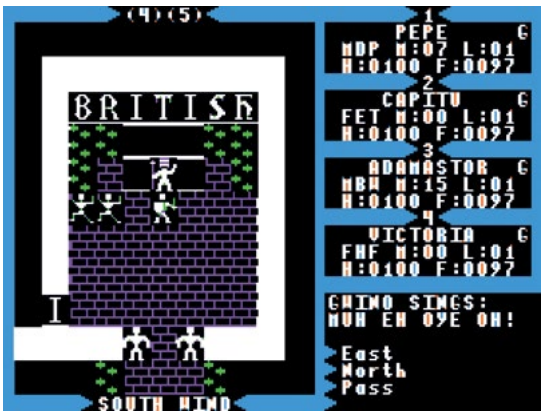
We'll still see some familiar locations in future games, such as Britain and Yew, but this is goodbye to places like Grey and Monitor. Remnants of Sosaria will be brought up in future games, but I can't help but wonder what the series would have been like if Garriott had kept them in his future games.

Ultima III would have a deep, lasting influence, popularising tactical party- and turn-based combat among Western developers – which would later be expanded by *Wizard's Crown* (1985), *Pool of Radiance* (1988) and many others.

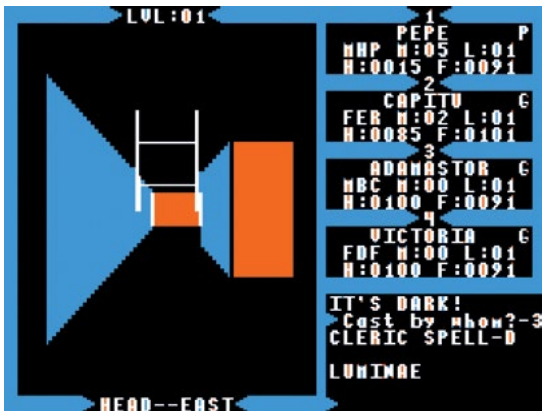
And it would also be a hit in Japan. The previous *Ultima* games were ported to Japanese computers, inspiring games like 夢幻の心臓 (*Heart of Fantasy*, 1984), but *Exodus* was the first game of the series to be ported to Nintendo's NES/Famicom consoles. This port, released a few months after *Dragon Quest* (1986) had redefined JRPGs, was the first Western RPG of many Japanese developers, as well as many console gamers across the world.

While not as fun as some of the games that would come after, this is where the series really begins to kick off, and I would still recommend *Ultima III* to fans of old PC games and those that enjoy experiencing the origins of an important RPG series. **DT**

Players who beat the game were told to send a letter to Origin reporting their deeds. In return, they would get a completion certificate, signed by Lord British himself. This tradition would continue up to *Ultima VIII* (1994).



Ultima III added a line-of-sight system, so walls, doors, forests and mountains all block how far you can see.



Dungeons now have solid colour walls, while encounters are more sparse and fought in the tactical combat view.

Questron



Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1984
C64, Apple II and Atari 8-bit

Questron was SSI's first published RPG. It became a hit, surpassing all the strategy games the company was known for.

The early years of CRPG history show a wide variety of game styles. They all look and play quite differently. It was a new frontier; people where still trying to figure out how an RPG should play on the computer. Some brought ideas from the PLATO RPGs, but most stories are about programmers who bought an Apple II and tried to make a game on it, using their favourite tabletop RPGs, books and movies as reference.

Questron is different. It was born when Charles Dougherty played *Ultima I* and fell in love with it. He had never played an RPG before, but he was a skilled programmer, so he decided to see if he could make his own game – based on the only RPG he knew.

When the game was done, he sent it to publishers, hoping for a deal. Brøderbund began displaying the game at conventions, and in one of those Richard Garriott happened to pass by and complained about how similar the game was to *Ultima*. Brøderbund gave up on publishing it, but Strategic Simulations Inc. (SSI) wanted to get into the CRPG market and decided to strike a deal with Garriott.



Once you arrive at the Land of Evil, you'll be able to explore first-person dungeons. While most RPGs used straight wire-frames, *Questron*'s dungeons are more cave-like.

And so, after a few changes, *Questron* was released in 1984, featuring a disclaimer: "Game structure and style used under licence of Richard Garriott".

It sounds a bit mean today, considering how often popular titles are copied, and that the following years saw dozens of RPGs heavily inspired by *Ultima,* like *Shards of Spring*, *2400 A.D.*, *Magic Candle*, *Deathlord*, *Dragon Quest*, *Exile*, etc. But *Questron* was the first, and it's indeed extremely similar to *Ultima I and II*.

There's no character creation, you simply type a name and spawn on the game's massive open world. Your first goal is to gather gold and grow stronger, buying weapons and armour in the various towns, and visiting cathedrals to increase your HP.

Questron has no XP system; to improve your stats you must pay to play mini-games, e.g. skeet-shooting will slowly increase your Dexterity. While quite original, this means that fighting monsters is mostly pointless – it wields little gold, no XP and will drain your HP. You're better off gambling in town, playing blackjack or roulette. Not very heroic.

Once you're rich and powerful enough, the king will summon you. You'll be tasked with travelling to the Land of Evil, where you must defeat the evil wizard. This new land is another large continent, but it features more dangerous enemies, a few first-person dungeons and a giant eagle you can mount to fly around.

While the journey has few innovations, *Questron*'s ending was revolutionary. Today we expect extensive cutscenes that will bring closure to our adventures, but, back in the day, games would just say "You Won!" and shut down. *Questron* was the first CRPG – and possibly the first video game – that rewarded you with a long animated victory ceremony, with trumpeters announcing your arrival, the king appointing you Baron and even some sequel-teasing.

"One of my regrets was never calling Richard [Garriott] to talk about it [the similarities with *Ultima*]. But, bear in mind he was a big name, I was a nobody living disconnected in the Midwest, and Brøderbund and SSI were telling me that he was pissed. I had no idea what to say to him."

– *Chuck Dougherty, Questron's co-creator*



A town with four shops, a casino and a jail. I bribed the guard to let me speak with the prisoner, who is giving me some hints. Like *Ultima*, the shop's inventory is time-based, with new items being available over time.

Questron became a best-selling hit, so Charles and his twin brother, John, founded Quest Software and made their second game, *Legacy of the Ancients* (1987). It features an updated engine, with large towns, better graphics and an item durability system, but follows a very similar formula to *Questron*, where you must earn gold by gambling or fighting and then raise your stats in mini-games until you can defeat the evil bad guy.

However, *Legacy* had a unique hook: you start the game inside a Galatic Museum, where the exhibits are magical – they may teleport you to a city or secret dungeon, or grant an item or stat boost. To interact with them you need special coins, which must be found by exploring. The game still doesn't use XP; instead you must do quests for the museum's caretaker, who will grant you levels and unlock new areas of the museum.

After releasing *Legacy* under Electronic Arts, the brothers partnered again with SSI, who assigned Westwood Studios to help them create *Questron II*.

Released in 1988, *Questron II* had fancy new graphics, but was practically a remake of *Questron I* – the same single-character RPG based around getting gold to buy gear and raise stats. Lacking the novelty of *Legacy*'s Galactic Museum and with a primitive style of gameplay, it had little to offer next to big 1988 titles like *Wasteland*, *Ultima V* and *Pool of Radiance*.

The brothers still made one more game in 1988, *The Legend of Blacksilver*. It mixes the best of *Questron* and *Legacy* in a polished package, but it's ultimately more of the same. Furthermore, its publisher, Epyx, went bankrupt and failed to properly promote the game, so the twins decided to retire from game development.

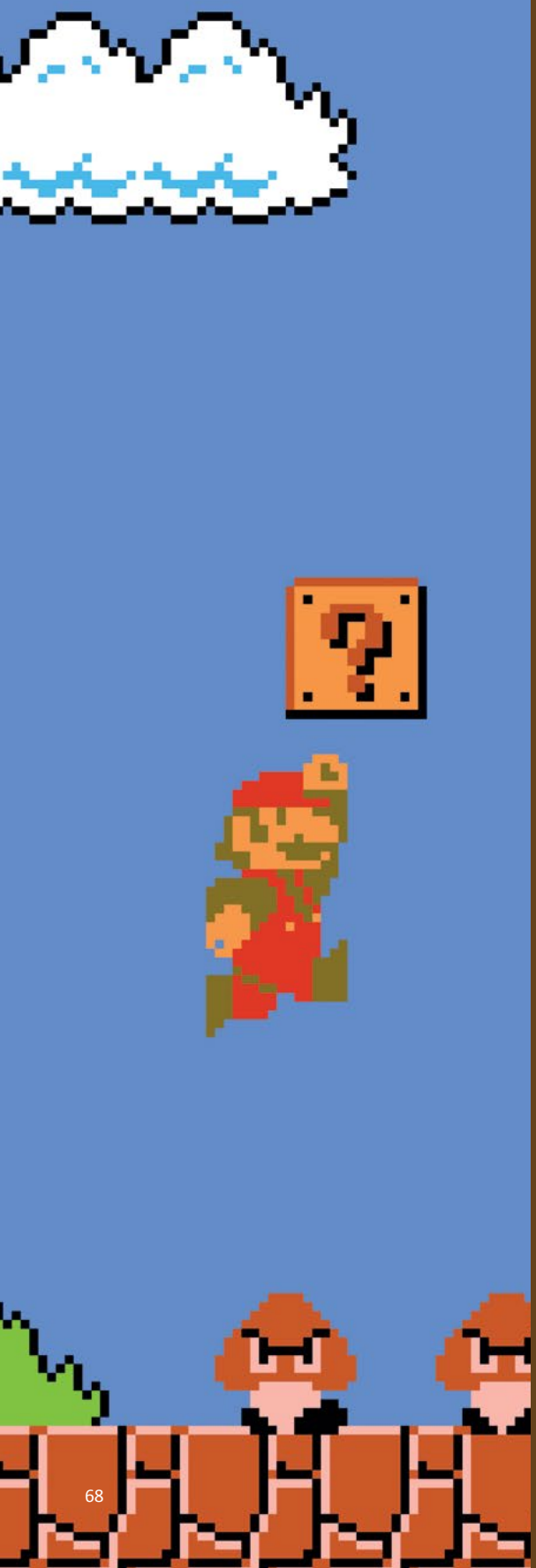
It's an interesting story. Neither Charles nor John had any previous experience with RPGs – they simply loved *Ultima* and decided to make games like it. This led to several iterations of the same concept, but unfortunately it all fell apart when they failed to move on as times changed. **FE**



Legacy of the Ancients features an iconic Galactic Museum, where you can use exhibitions as gates to faraway lands.



Questron II's graphics were improved, but the gameplay felt simplistic next to games like *Ultima V* and *Wasteland*.



1985-1989
Here come the new challengers

After the crash of 1983, video game consoles had become a dirty word in the US – neither retailers nor parents were willing to spend money on one. But where people saw a dead fad, SEGA and Nintendo saw an opportunity to cross the seas and conquer a new market.

Nintendo's solution was to sell their Famicom console not as a video game console, but as a toy – a "Nintendo Entertainment System" (aka NES), bundled with a Zapper Light Gun and ROB, a plastic robot that would assist players in some games (and was quickly abandoned after release).

Still, Nintendo's masterstroke was the "Nintendo Seal of Quality", the company's answer to the countless bad, buggy and sometimes even obscene "shovelware" games that flooded the market. Now Nintendo guaranteed the quality of each game they published, and a lockout chip prevented other companies from releasing unlicensed NES games. This would reshape the console industry and become the new norm, with developers now being forced to sign deals with console companies.

These tactics, together with a library of titles like *Super Mario Bros, The Legend of Zelda, Metroid, Castlevania, Mega Man* and *Final Fantasy* made the NES a cultural phenomena, resurrecting game consoles.

Meanwhile, computers were also facing a change of guard. A new generation of personal computers arrived, led by the Commodore Amiga and the Atari ST. They brought in massive improvements in performance, audio and graphics, but the outstanding revolution was the adoption of the mouse and Graphical User Interfaces. This allowed home computers to become more intuitive and accessible, as even a child could drag the mouse across the screen to click on objects and icons.

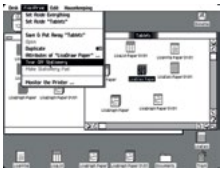
While IBM PC-Compatibles remained the most popular platform, they also faced several changes. In 1985, Intel released its i386 processor and Compaq quickly incorporated it in its DeskPro 386, gaining market by producing an IBM clone more advanced than IBM's own machines.

IBM tried to recover its throne with the PS2 family in 1987. It was an innovative machine, with an all-new operational system (*OS/2*), new ports and a new VGA graphics card that allowed it to rival the Amiga and ST. However, IBM doomed itself by trying to enforce a proprietary architecture in order to regain control over the clones. Simply put, IBM's new machine wasn't IBM PC-Compatible. It faced severe backlash and only further increased the dominance of clones, who managed to replicate its features without relying on IBM.

Overall, the second half of the 80s brought in a wave of innovation that revitalised the whole industry, setting the foundations for the creative explosion that would follow in the 90s.

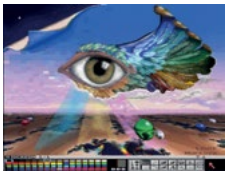
Trends:

Graphical User Interface: People often mistakingly believe that before *Windows 95* the only operating system computers had were black DOS screens, but the Xerox Alto, created in 1973, already had a mouse and a graphical operating system. The Apple Lisa popularised the concept in 1983 and soon every big company followed suit. The Amiga, Atari ST and Macintosh all had their own graphical operating systems with mouse support, while IBM-PCs could use *OS/2, GEOS, GEM* or Microsoft's newly released *Windows*.



Apple's Lisa already had its own graphical interface in 1983, with mouse support, multiple windows and drag-down menus.

Graphic Modes: One of the most noticeable advances of the new generation of computers were the graphics. Previously most computers could only handle up to 16 colours, but now 64 colours became the standard – and special modes like the Amiga's HAM rendered up to 4096 colors at once. IBM PC-Compatibles relied on CGA cards, which allowed only 4 colours. In 1984, EGA cards raised that to 16 colours, and in 1987 the VGA cards pushed it to 256 colours, finally standing up to the Amiga, Apple IIGS and Atari ST.



An image created on Amiga's *Photon Paint*, using the machine's 4096 colours at once.

Sound Cards: Early computers could produce nothing but a few "beeps" as sound. Dedicated Sound Cards were first created as tools for professional musicians, with later machines like the Amiga and Atari ST offering built-in audio chips. IBM-PCs were left behind until 1987, when the AdLib sound card arrived, followed by the Sound Blaster, the Roland MT-32 sound module and many others. Sound Cards would be a competitive business until the mid 90s, when they began to be replaced by built-in audio chips.



King's Quest IV was released in 1988 and was the first game to support IBM PC sound cards.



The **Commodore Amiga** family begins with the Amiga 1000, an accessible home computer with cutting edge CPU, graphics and sound.



The **Nintendo Entertainment System** arrives in the US. A cultural phenomena, it reignited game consoles and sold over 60 million units.



The **Apple IIGS** is released. Apple's answer to the Amiga and Atari ST, it was cheaper and ran Apple II software, but was slow and outdated.



SimCity is released. Selling over one million copies, it expanded the horizon of video games beyond combat and epic adventures.



The **Genesis / Mega Drive** is released. SEGA's biggest success and the eternal rival to the Super Nintendo, it sold over 30 million units.

1985 | 1986 | 1987 | 1988 | 1989



The **Atari ST** family is launched. A cheaper alternative to the Amiga, it was also the first computer with a coloured GUI. Its built-in MIDI ports made it very popular with musicians.



SEGA's **Master System** arrives in the West. While technologically superior to the NES, it suffered from a smaller game library. It sold over 10 million units at the time, being very successful in Europe and Brazil.



Dragon Quest is released in Japan for the Famicom. Blending *Wizardry* with *Ultima* and Akira Toriyama's unique art style, it defined JRPGs and sold over 2 million copies.



The **IBM PS/2** was IBM's attempt to regain control of the PC clones market. Although it did introduce several innovations, it was heavily criticised for its closed architecture.



The **Game Boy** is released. While it faced competition from handhelds like the Atari Lynx and SEGA Game Gear, its low price and excellent games made it the victor, selling over 118 million units.

Wizard's Crown



Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1985
Apple II, Atari 8-bit, C64, Atari ST and MS-DOS

While SSI had published RPGs before, *Wizard's Crown* was the first one created by their internal team, a group of wargaming veterans led by Paul Murray and Keith Brors, who would also create the Gold Box series later.

Wizard's Crown is a turn-based, tactical CRPG created by my favourite gaming company of all time, SSI. The backstory is simplistic, involving a ravaged land, crazed wizard evil guy, and a McGuffin held by said wizard. The player puts a team of eight heroes together, has them explore their surroundings, and eventually gathers enough skill and special equipment to kill the evil wizard and take his crown back home.

The game features five classes – Warrior, Thief, Priest, Ranger and Sorcerer, but character creation is done through a point-buy system, allowing you to customise a character's stats and skills. Thus, you can create a powerful pure warrior who excels as a sword and shield fighter, but the system also allows for multi-class characters, such as a lightly armoured Ranger/Priest with some points in healing in order to complement the party's dedicated Priest.

Characters never level up, but instead earn more skill points, which can be used to improve how well they use a particular sort of weapon, block with a shield, identify items, cast spells, etc.



The city offers some shops and taverns, but most of your time will be spent in the ruins next to it, trying to find new locations and fighting random encounters.

The entire game takes place in a very limited area, consisting only of a crime-ridden half of a city, bandit-filled woods north of the city, and the ruined remnants of the second half of the city to the south.

Overworld movement is done from a 2D top-down perspective through a map of grid squares, though the party can enter certain structures and shops. When the party enters a building or dungeon that requires exploration, it is brought into another map. Non-combat skills become important, as there are often locked doors and secrets to discover.

Similarly, when the party encounters enemies the game goes to a combat map, complete with walls and furniture that affect movement and line of fire.

Combat is really where this game shines. Here you can see the sort of design choices that would later come into play in the famous Gold Box series, which SSI began in 1988 with *Pool of Radiance*.

You start battles by positioning your heroes, and the direction a combatant faces is important, with better defensive values against frontal attacks, while attacks from behind are more devastating.

Once combat begins, there's an outstanding number of actions available. Characters can go prone or zig-zag to avoid arrows, sacrifice defence for a more reckless attack, spend an entire turn aiming their bow, break shields with axes, guard against approaching enemies, hide, etc. Besides hit points there's also a detailed injury system, and unconscious companions can die by bleeding out unless one of your characters stabilises them. Furthermore, if a battle takes too long, morale starts to drop, making it harder.

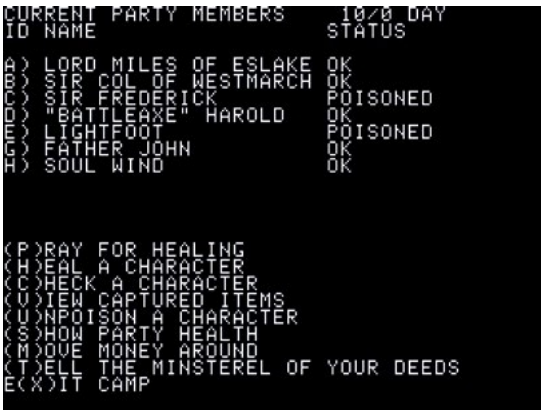
Wizard's Crown is by far the most tactical RPG of its time – battles are an elegant dance, with forward lines of soldiers protecting allied archers and spellcasters, while supporting healers running in between.



Character creation offers a great amount of options, and you also get to pick icons to represent each hero in battle.



Characters can be injured in several ways, and can go down unconscious even if they still have all their hit points.



After battles you must carefully treat your characters. Unconscious heroes will be left behind if you move on.



The Eternal Dagger added new features, like being able to talk, surrender or hide from enemies, but it was still tedious.

However, if fighting long tactical battles against random hordes of enemies gets tiresome, *Wizard's Crown* offers a novel "Quick Combat" option – the game does all the fighting, you just monitor your party status and order a quick retreat if needed.

The downside is that the AI won't fight as well as a decent player – it's especially inept with magic, leading to some costly victories. But the real issue is that if you skip combat, there isn't much game left.

The biggest problem with *Wizard's Crown* comes from how limited the backdrop is. There simply isn't enough territory to explore to justify the amount of hours it takes to beat the game. Once you clear out the beginning portion of the city there is nothing left to explore, but the northern woods and southern ruins have enemies too tough for you to defeat.

So you will spend a large amount of time running through places you've already cleared, trying to attract wandering monsters for a few earned skill points and items to sell. *Wizard's Crown* requires ridiculous hours of grinding so you can eventually improve your characters enough to move on.

The sequel, *The Eternal Dagger* (1987), tried to fix this by introducing a larger world map, with varied terrain types and even adding puzzles. Sadly, it also added a new fatigue system, more micro-managing and longer travelling times, demanding even more patience from players. More complicated than complex, it was a step back from its predecessor.

I really can't recommend *Wizard's Crown* to new audiences, especially when the Gold Box games took much of what was good here and made for a much better experience. Still, *Wizard's Crown* will always have a special place in my heart.

When I was a tween, my father purchased an Atari PC version of the game for me, though I was unable to get far in it back then. In 2015, I was watching over my dying father during many long days alongside his bed. I showed the *Wizard's Crown* end screen to him when I beat the game and asked if he remembered buying the game for me and he gave me a warm smile. He was dead a handful of days later.

So although I can't recommend it to others, I have no regrets over my time with it. Thanks again, Dad. **DT**

The Bard's Tale



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

Eight novels were written around the *Bard's Tale* lore, by famous authors such as Mercedes Lackey, Josepha Sherman and Michael 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, *Wizardry*, *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 *Bard's Tale's* greatest pleasures lies in the 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.



The original Apple II release may look simple today, but the smooth animations were revolutionary next to *Wizardry's* crude wire-frame corridors.

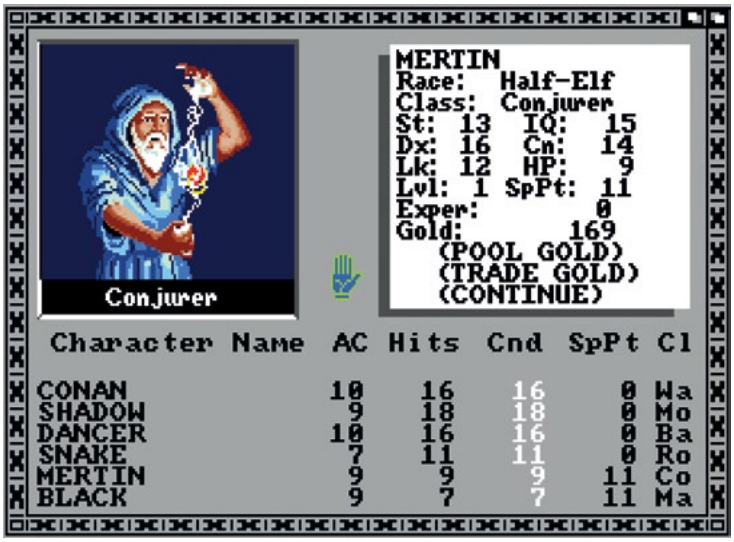
A distinctive aspect to the *Bard's Tale* character system is the array of magic classes at the disposal of the player. In addition to the classic Bard class, who can weave a limited number of magical songs in and out of combat to influence proceedings before requiring a stiff drink, the player can also 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 spellcasters 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 wintery streets and dungeons: to finally face Mangar himself!

"I had a vision for abandoning *Wizardry*'s wire-frame 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*



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 and large outdoor areas, plus more save-game chances. Players could transfer their parties from *Bards Tale I* or *Ultima III*, use the services of banks, gamble in casinos and take advantage of ranged combat.

Also new is a starter dungeon to assist players in getting up to speed with their chosen characters, alleviating the first game's entry barrier. As portrayed in the 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 worldwide. I would argue that *Bard's Tale II* is the most arduously challenging game of the trilogy – which is no small feat.

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. You must traverse the dimensions and solve their individual quests to collect magical items and topple the mad god Tarjan.

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. Due of the variety of locations, descriptive prose within dungeons and overall story, the third game remains my favourite and closest to my heart.

Personally, I found much delight in the writing as it's richly atmospheric and yields many poetic moments – from the articulate to the poignantly romantic and even tragic. I fondly 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! Raise a tankard to the great *Bard's Tale*! Huzzah! **RB**

Interplay lost the *Bard's Tale* name to its publisher, Electronic Arts, so the fourth game in the series had to be transformed into *Dragon Wars* (1989). Many failed attempts to make *Bard's Tale IV* followed until 2018, when Brian Fargo's inXile released a crowd-funded sequel to the original games.

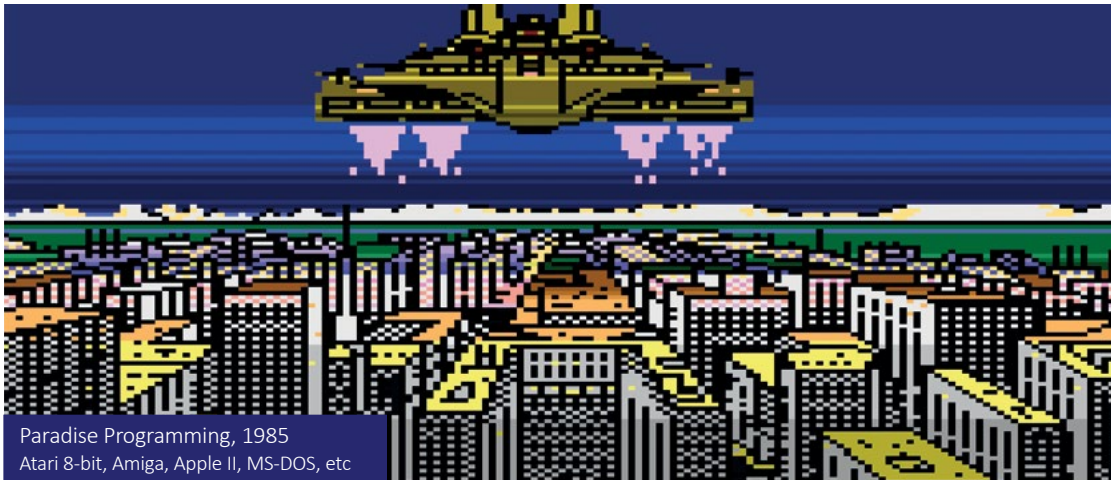


The series is often criticised for the massive amount of random encounters, and it's quite self-aware about it.



The series received a faithful remaster in 2018, featuring redrawn graphics, bug fixes and a new automap system.

Alternate Reality: The City



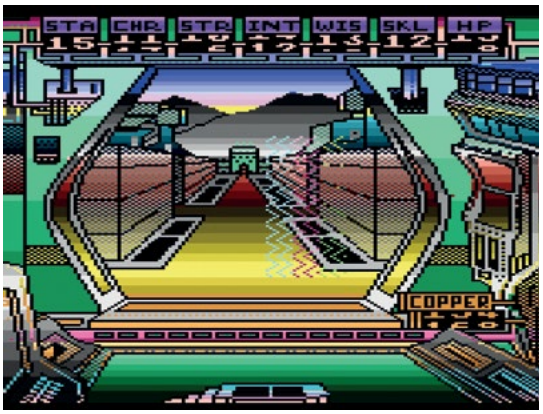
Paradise Programming, 1985
Atari 8-bit, Amiga, Apple II, MS-DOS, etc

In 1999, Philip Price and Gary Gilberson teamed up again to create an MMO called *Alternate Reality Online*, but the project was cancelled 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 centre 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-and-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 maximising 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. **GS**

***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 in development, but you can try it at www.crpgdev.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



Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1985
Atari ST, Amiga, C64, Apple II and MS-DOS

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), all 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.

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.

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 sorceror, Nikademus, is bent on conquering the world with the help of his patron, the dark god Pluto. Zeus cannot allow this 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.



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.

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 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 organise themselves in rows, while your party remains on the bottom of the screen.



Phantasie 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 *Phantasie* series. The battle system is phase-based with enemies organised 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.

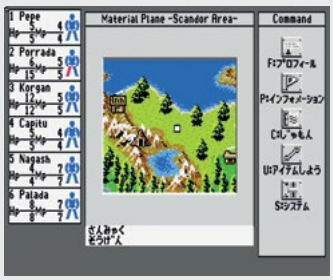
Not all battles are random though, and there are many unique encounters to experience in the games, such as a creature called J.R. Trolkin in the first game, an obvious homage to J.R.R. Tolkien. More memorable though are Pluto's Minions from *Phantasie II* (1986), a collection of nine unique and challenging monsters whom Pluto keeps as pets.

This all leads to a final confrontation with Nikademus in *Phantasie 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:

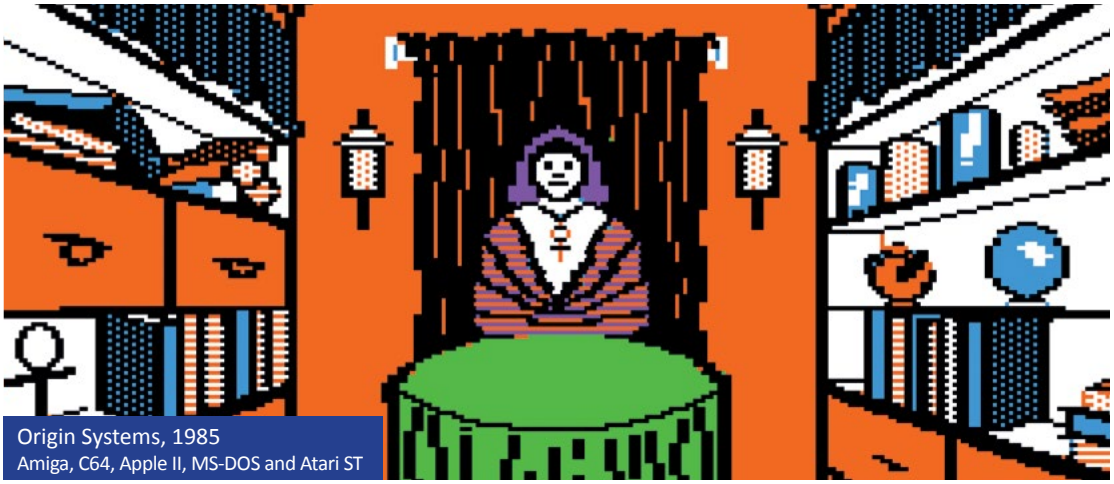
The *Phantasie* series was localised in Japan by Star Craft Inc. Several changes were made, such as altering the art style and using a side-view combat screen. The games were a success, and in 1991 Winston Wood travelled to Japan to develop *Phantasie IV: Birth of Heroes*, which remains unreleased in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





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

Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar



Origin Systems, 1985
Amiga, C64, Apple II, MS-DOS and 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: Valour (Fighter), Honour (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 – killing monsters, collecting loot and saving the world. 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.

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.



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

No game, before or since, has had such an objective. All others have been concerned with making you a better warrior or spell-slinger, 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 Valour – but Valour is only one virtue. Developing those other seven depends upon how you react to and treat other people.

There's no backsliding here 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.

There's also *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, and it's 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, levelling is not a big item; eight is the maximum level you can reach.

"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*, even if it was very limited in previous games. 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 important 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 not 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 "favours". Everything you learn, every item you obtain, is for your own use.

Perhaps the most iconoclastic 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 really know what it means to be the Avatar.

However, if you're looking for a unique experience that doesn't rely on hack-and-slash or endless "side jobs", then *Ultima IV* is still one-of-a-kind, even after all these years. **SC**

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*.



There are no quests in the sense of doing a task to get a reward. What you must do is be (and remain) worthy.



Ultima IV introduced seven recruitable companions, who became important recurring characters in the series.

Autoduel



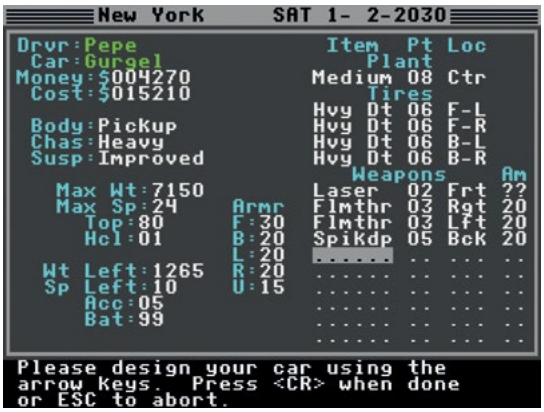
Origin Systems, 1985
MS-DOS, Apple II, Amiga, C64, Atari 8-bit, etc

Dystopian futures often feel like interesting RPG settings, but late 70s cinema delivered two cult classics that just begged to be played: *Death Race 2000* and *Mad Max*. Steve Jackson artfully translated that drive into 1980's *Car Wars*, a popular tabletop RPG all about building your own vehicle of destruction and driving it across post-apocalyptic US. *Autoduel*, born of a deal between Steve Jackson and Origin Systems, is its CRPG adaptation.

***Autoduel* was created by Chuck Bueche and Richard Garriott, in one of his rare ventures outside of the *Ultima* series.**



There are 16 cities you can travel to, either by taking a bus or by manually driving there (and surviving the trip). You can even visit Origin's HQ in Manchester.



Building your own car is *Autoduel*'s high point. There are many options and factors to consider, from weight, speed and cargo room to weapon and armour placement.

Although a licensed product, *Autoduel* features a massive difference: while *Car Wars* was turn-based, Origin's team took some lessons from Midway's 1983 arcade hit *Spy Hunter* and made the game an arcade-y, top-down real-time driving game that requires fast reflexes and is best played with a joystick.

True to its source material, *Autoduel* features an incredibly detailed car-building system. You'll choose from various car types (compact, van, pickup, luxury, etc.) and equip it with your choice of chassis, armour, suspension, tyres, weapons and power plant.

This is where the game shines. It's a joy to build your own vehicles, creating a fast car that can outrun enemies and lay mines or buying a large power plant to use laser weapons. There's also a robust locational damage system, as weapons, tyres, armour layers and even the driver have their own hit points. Get shot at a side that has no armour left and you're likely dead.

You can freely drive across the Northeastern US, hunting outlaws (and salvaging their cars), battling in arenas and taking delivery quests. It can get a bit repetitive after a while, but build enough prestige and you'll unlock a final mission for the FBI.

Unfortunately, *Autoduel*'s top-down driving and combat aged badly. Yes, it was great for 1985, but lacks that visceral feedback we have in modern 3D driving games. However, its real flaw is the extreme difficulty. The combat is fairly challenging, but gets frustrating when paired with permadeath – if you die the game erases your save, forcing you to restart from scratch unless you have a very expensive clone of yourself.

If you enjoy such high challenge (or don't mind making manual backups of your save files), then be sure to take *Autoduel* for a ride. While there are many other vehicular combat games out there, very few can match the complexity of this classic. **FE**

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*-styled 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 threated by the evil Lord Dragos, who has one of the two legendary Rings of Zilfin. Your rather ambitious goal 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, dungeons and deserts. 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 time; 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 fatigue, which is necessary to perform actions such as attacking, casting spells or just travelling. 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 travelling from one area to another, you must always go through a long and repetitive side-scrolling journey, battling monsters, collecting food and resting. These journeys 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 disappointing really, for the rest of the game is surprisingly smooth and well-crafted, even though it's an easy game, clearly designed 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**



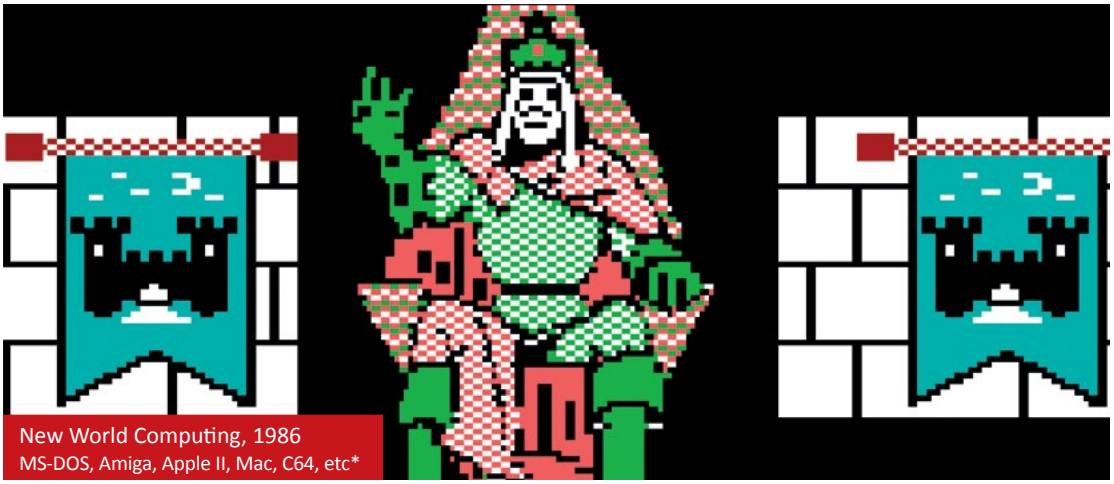
Night Birds might appear during your travels. You must quickly shoot them down, in *Space Invaders* fashion, or they will call more monsters.



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

Might and Magic:

Book I - Secret of the Inner Sanctum



New World Computing, 1986
MS-DOS, Amiga, Apple II, Mac, C64, etc*

***Might and Magic* was a huge hit, earning several awards and being ported to multiple systems, including later remakes for the NES and the Japanese computers.**

Might and Magic - Book I is the first of a long series of party-based "blobber" RPGs initiated by John Van Caneghem, founder of New World Computing. It offered a new take on the sub-genre then dominated by *Wizardry,* with a large outdoor open world and a "real" turn-based combat system, as opposed to the popular phased one.

In games like *Wizardy* and *The Bard's Tale* all commands were issued in bulk at the beginning of the turn, then played out. *Might and Magic* made every command be executed immediately, both for the player and the enemies, allowing players the opportunity to instantly react to how events unfold.

Preference for one or the other is a matter of taste, but this new way to handle a party in combat offered an interesting alternative.

The open world brought a sense of liberty few games had dared offer until then. The map lured the player in with promise of discovery and developments, and that the promise the game does keep. Environments include forests, deserts, swamps, mountains, oceans and ethereal realms.



Might and Magic's open-world structure was novel at the time, and a refreshing change from linear dungeon crawls.

The world is a large patchwork of puzzles. Forest mazes are not designed to appear natural, but rather offer a challenge to access secret areas that reap higher rewards, including keys to unlock areas you may have run into previously but were unable to enter.

The game's artful use of impenetrable forest, mountain walls, portals and secret passages make many areas a challenge that needs to be revisited repeatedly before you can confidently draw that last square and complete your own map.

Many will be shaken off by the necessity to draw the maps and keep notes. But these challenges to the player's rigour will make stepping out of the comfort zone worth it. Every challenge brings its lot of satisfaction when it is overcome, and carefully building your own maps is no exception.

The combat system, backed by dozens of tactical spells, is an experience in nail-biting suspense where one poor decision can often turn the tide against you and spell defeat. A good one can lead to a satisfying victory against apparently disastrous odds. Granted, not every battle offers these situations but they come around enough to make the game memorable.

While there is, to some extent, a bit of level scaling (as encounters adapt to the strength of your party), it only goes so far. Roaming the world therefore leads to encounters that inevitably lead to an untimely death. Even within the same map, accessing a remote area might lead to scripted encounters that offer an unexpected level of resistance, keeping you on your toes.

Another aspect that keeps you alert is the fact that the only way to save your progress is to return to the inn. This saves in a single slot, overwriting the previous entry, and can lead to intense frustration, but it also makes each battle more suspenseful.

"The biggest challenge for me was being the designer/creator of the games and the CEO of the company. This dual role always created personal conflict. On one hand I wanted to make every game perfect, more features, better polish… and on the other I had to pay the bills. My ongoing compromise was: if I stayed profitable, I will always be able to make another game."

– *Jon Van Caneghem*, *Might and Magic's creator*



The high difficulty and the long play hours one can lose by dying makes retreating or surrendering very useful options.

Then there is the world and story. Little regard is given to realism. You will run into an odd mix of magic and alien technology, and be attacked by unlikely parties where insect swarms, vampire bats and clerics can just as easily form an alliance against you as more typical formations of Orcs and hippogriffs. This gives an out-of-this-world sense that adds to the experience without wrecking it as a less abstract title probably would.

Might and Magic I is light on text, but it manages to form the foundation of a rich lore and a storyline that will be expanded upon with future titles. NPCs will offer quests that contribute to this, and mention is made of legendary characters in short bursts of text found in key locations throughout the world.

All these intricate pieces and hard-won victories of this large world fall together toward a finale that opens the way to one of the longest series of role-playing adventures (ten titles!).

The second of which, *Might and Magic II: Gates to Another World* (1988), largely offers more of the same. The combat system, for one, is quite similar, albeit with a new list of spells, new skills to acquire at higher levels, and running away is riskier.

The levelling system evolves as well, offering many more levels but with less noticeable effects. There are two new classes (Ninja and Barbarian), non-combat skills that can be acquired while adventuring (path-finding, mountaineering, etc.), a rudimentary automapping feature (which requires the acquisition of a skill to be enabled) and much improved visuals.

While the early *Might and Magic* games have a challenging (and sometimes frustrating) gameplay, the satisfaction in overcoming them is still something special that's rarely rivalled. As an indie developer, they inspired me to undertake my own series, *Swords and Sorcery*, following on John Van Caneghem's footsteps decades after these were published. **CC**

SPOILER: *Might and Magic II* had a unusual and controversial ending: after the final battle you had to solve a cryptogram in under 15 minutes or you would die.

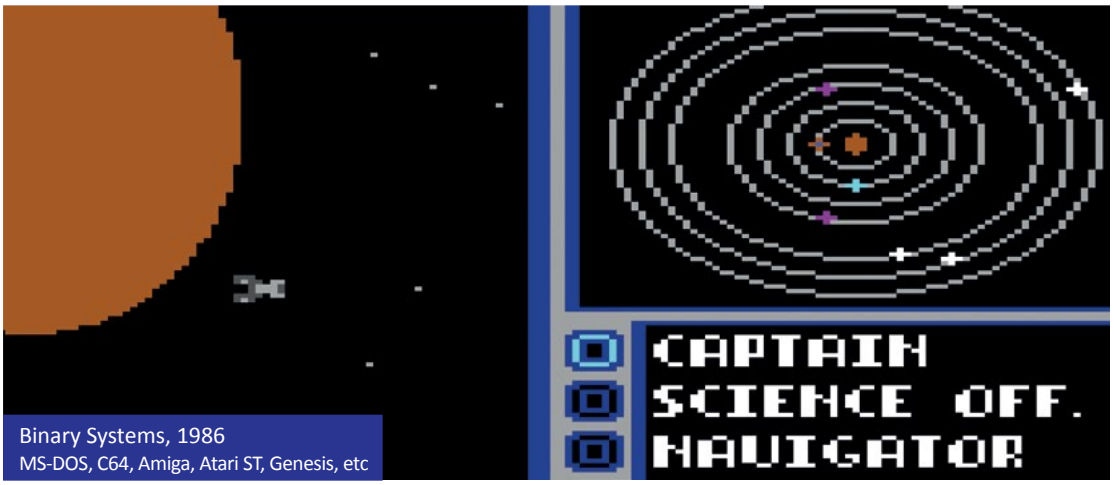


Combat is text-only, but offers great tactical depth. Actions are performed one at a time, giving you time to react.



Might and Magic II introduced improved graphics, new character skills and an automap, but still plays similarly.

Starflight



Binary Systems, 1986
MS-DOS, C64, Amiga, Atari ST, Genesis, etc

At a time when games were made by two or three people over 6-12 months, it took a five-man team over three years to develop *Starflight*.

Starflight perfectly captures what made *Star Trek* so endearing: exploring, negotiating with alien races and life-and-death space battles. All set in an open-world procedurally generated galaxy you could explore for hundreds of hours. Not bad for a game crammed in 64KB of memory.

Planet Arth is in trouble. Deadly solar flares are occurring all over the galaxy, threatening to wipe out civilisation. Your task is to must find fuel for refugee ships leaving Arth, find colonisable planets for them, uncover ancient alien artefacts, and figure out why the solar flares are happening in the first place. All this is accomplished through scanning planets, exploring their surfaces and speaking with the star-faring aliens.

The adventure begins at Interstel's space port, where you walk your avatar through various departments preparing for your journey, in one of the first "walking menus" in games. There you can recruit up to six brave crewmen from five different races, such as a quick learning plant-based species and a highly skilled robot race. The robots are an interesting first choice, as it starts with high initial skills, but can never improve through training like the other races.



The five races you can recruit all have very different skills, learning rates and durability. Your crew composition also affects your dealings with other races.

You begin with a small budget to equip your ship and train your crew. These are tough initial choices. Should you add weapons and shields or train your Science Officer to scan planets accurately? There's no hand-holding here: leave the star port without cargo pods and you have cut yourself off from much of the revenue-generating opportunities in the game.

Once ready, you can open the ship's galactic map. It's awash in nebulae, worm holes, hundreds of stars and over 800 procedurally generated planets waiting to be explored, making one feel very small and alone in this sea of opportunity. Your only limitation is fuel.

The ship is easily piloted by the cursor/numpad keys, no pesky Newtonian physics to deal with. Further actions are spread across your officers, in a simple and immersive UI – e.g. to heal a crew member, select the Doctor, open its menu and choose the Treat option.

Once you reach a planet, you can order your Science Officer to scan it, and based on his skill you will see important details like gravity and average temperature. Should you decide to land, simply select a landing area and confirm. The game will then render a first-person landing into the exact point you selected – quite an impressive feature at the time!

The crew will then disembark into a tank-like rover and start exploring the procedurally generated surface, using a scanner and your intuition in search of resources. Where do you go? Anywhere you please! But don't stray too far from the ship, as your rover's fuel won't last long. This creates some of the most stressful risk/reward decisions in gaming: to travel just a wee bit further to get some valuable mineral or alien creature, or head back to the ship.

Mistakes are deadly. Permadeath means not only does your intrepid crew dies a horrible death, but the game bounces out to DOS and deletes your save file.



Having a well-trained Communication Officer is vital to avoid misunderstandings with the many alien races.



You start the game with limited resources, and will be forced to make hard choices when first configuring your ship.



Always analyze planets before landing, else you risk being crushed by gravity or destroyed by extreme temperatures.



Your goal when exploring planets is to capture specimens, collect rare minerals and survive their many hazards.

Exploring the universe will also inevitably bring you into contact with alien ships. This displays the scariest line one can read in this permadeath game: "Scanners indicate unidentified object!"

These encounters are real-time events. You can manoeuvre around the aliens ships and make choices such as raising shields, arming weapons, scanning or hailing the aliens. Firing is as simple as pressing the space bar, with the game choosing the appropriate weapon based on range from the target. Your actions will obviously affect communication opportunities.

In an age dominated by text parsers, conversation is, thankfully, abstracted to a few efficient questions, postures and statements. It may seem sparse but the game does it surprisingly well, filling out your choices with richly worded text. As you learn more, questions get better and responses reveal more.

It's interesting the designers chose a real-time conversation system. After making a choice, you wait. Are they simply not responding, are they preparing their weapons, or are they just thinking? This kind of tension hasn't been explored much in other games.

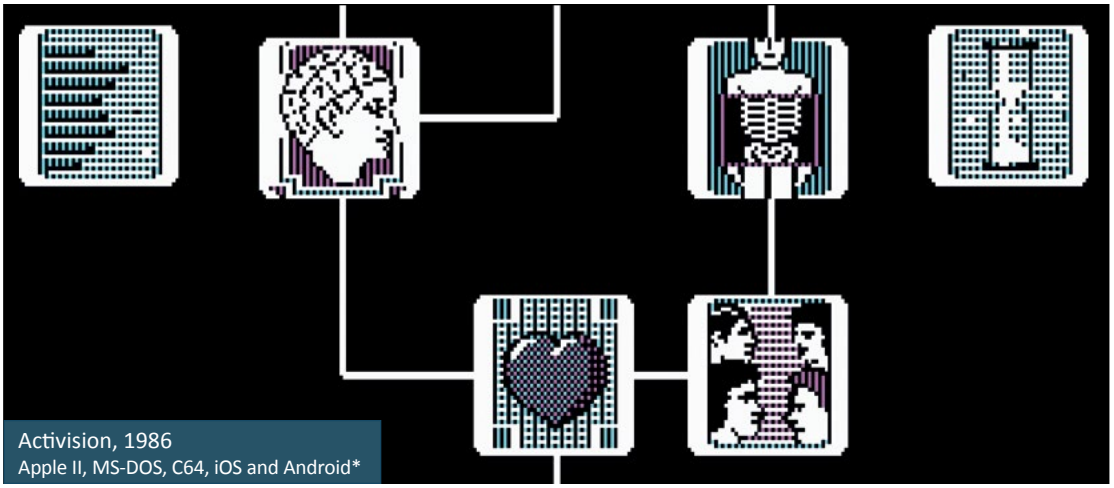
The game also pioneered a system they called "story network". Time passes in the universe while you are off exploring, with solar flares and other events occurring on a regular schedule. When you return to the star dock, new missives are available either based on time, your actions or both – propelling the story forward to the next node.

The sequel, *Starflight 2: Trade Routes of the Cloud Nebula* (1989) is simply a better *Starflight 1*. With a new story, improved graphics, reduced emphasis on mining, higher emphasis on trading and interacting with aliens, it generally smoothed out the sharp edges. Years later, *Protostar (1993)* began development as *Starflight 3* but went its own way due to contract issues. The series would also go on to inspire *Star Control* (1990), and its lasting influence is still strongly felt on games like *Mass Effect* and even on *Dwarf Fortress*.

A genre-defining game, it was perfectly summed up by famed science fiction author Orson Scott Card (of *Ender's Game*): "*Starflight* is the first science fiction computer game that actually gives you something of the experience of roaming through the galaxy". **TH**

***Starflight* sold a very respectable 100,000 units on DOS, then was ported to multiple systems and sold over 1 million units. In 1991 a heavily updated Mega Drive/Genesis version was released.**

Alter Ego



Activision, 1986
Apple II, MS-DOS, C64, iOS and Android*

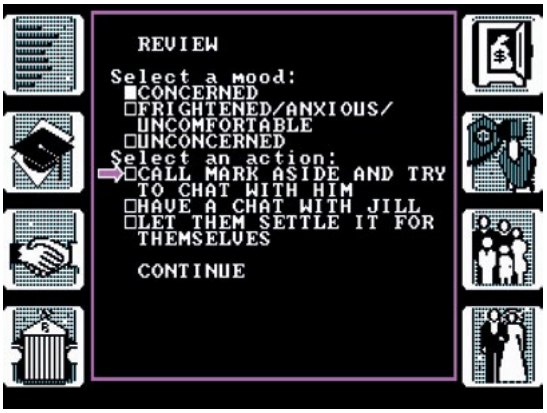
The phrase "computer role-playing game" brings to mind certain connotations. Heroic battles, esoteric character systems, medieval European pastiche, player control of the narrative, etc...

However, few games express the idea of role-playing quite like *Alter Ego*. Helmed by Peter J. Favaro, a child psychologist, the game is more concerned with the endless permutations of mundane modern life than with slaying orcs or uncovering conspiracies.

***Alter Ego* was recently re-released for iOS, Android, and browsers. Its stewards are also working on expanding and updating the game for today's society.**



Based on several interviews by a psychologist on memorable life events, *Alter Ego* touches on family, relationships, work, drugs, and sexual life.



After each event you're shown moods and actions you can choose in reply. The outcome of those is based on your personality and past history.

In *Alter Ego* you'll play through key life events with probability altering statistics behind them. The game starts with a series of questions, akin to *Ultima IV,* that will determine the character's initial personality. Afterwards, the player can choose one of seven life stages to begin, or start all the way from the womb.

Gameplay consists of selecting a series of themed vignettes represented by symbols for love, family, career, etc. Each scenario presents the player with an age-appropriate situation and offers choices as to how to react. Honest answers or true role-playing are both options, as is kicking the hornet's nest in order to put one's avatar through the wringer. These choices impact character relationships, finances, career and health through a set of statistics. Though most stats are visible, worrying about them isn't necessary for play. Becoming wrapped up in stats in *Alter Ego* is missing the point.

So many RPGs claim that no two games will play the same, but *Alter Ego* provides such a wide variety of esoteric situations that it feels like it delivers. You can become a money-hungry business tycoon or be murdered in an alley. Remain single or take a spouse. Die alone or die surrounded by family. When a game ends, you're tempted to start over to see what would have happened if you had just chosen differently – a ludic expression of an all too common real-life dilemma.

One major criticism of *Alter Ego* is that it definitely feels of its time. Originally sold in separate "male" and "female" versions, the game is rather sexist sometimes, fails to account for homosexual / bisexual relationships or being a single parent and seems to reward playing according to 80s' conservative values.

Regardless, *Alter Ego* remains essential to this day, especially for fans of modern adventure games such as Telltale's offerings. Haven't you ever wondered what it would be like to live a different life? **GB**

Alien Fires 2199 A.D.



Jagware Inc., 1987
Amiga, Atari ST and MS-DOS

The first thing to be said about *Alien Fires* is that it's a very bad game. A terrible one, among the worst in this book. Yet it's such an interesting title that it would be a disservice not to talk about it.

The manual explains you are a Time Lord, sent by the enigmatic Elders to find a scientist by the name of Dr. Samuel Kurtz. A genius, he built a time machine and wants to use it to go back to the Big Bang and witness the moment of Creation. You must stop him, as some secrets are not meant for mortal eyes.

It's a creative premise, and expectations remain high as you boot the game, see a colourful intro with a nice soundtrack and reach character creation, where you'll distribute points between seven skills.

Once that's done, you board the oddly-shaped Galaxy's End space station. While almost every other dungeon crawler is built and navigated in a square grid, *Alien Fires* uses all sorts of odd angles and allows players to turn in increments of 45 degrees, making exploration and mapping quite a challenge.

You'll soon meet a friendly alien, who greets you not with text, but with voiced dialogue! Turns out *Alien Fires* uses the Amiga's text-to-speech feature to make its NPCs "speak"! The technology is primitive – every NPC has the exact same "voice" and it's often hard to understand what's being said. But the real issue is that dialogue is pointless.

You'll talk to many exotic NPCs via a text parser, navigate oddly-shaped rooms and collect several keys and items, but it's all for nought. Keys are useless, NPCs don't say anything of value and all you really need to do is cross six small levels until you reach the last floor and find Dr. Kurtz – then fight a shoehorned boss battle.

In fact, you could beat the game in a few minutes if not for the frequent random encounters. And here, once again, the game fails to provide any satisfaction.

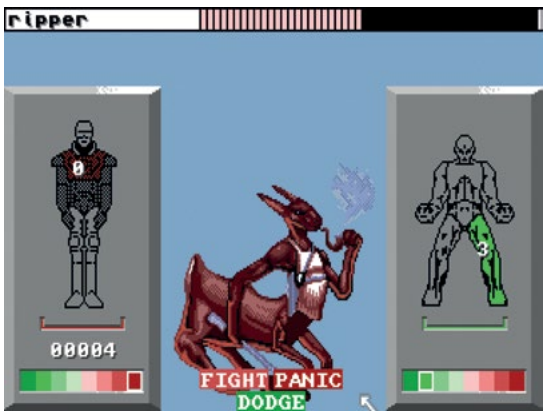
During combat you just press the "Fight" button and watch as you character and the enemy trade blows. There are no tactics involved, fights play mostly the same and the most important factor is luck.

In the end, *Alien Fires* feels like an ambitious tech demo. The premise is original, the art and music are often great and ideas like using text-to-voice and creating dungeons in odd angles are interesting, but unfortunately there's no real game beneath them. **FE**

***Alien Fires* was later ported to Atari ST and DOS, losing the text-to-voice feature. The game hinted at a sequel and even asked players to keep their character's save file, but *Alien Fires 2* never arrived.**

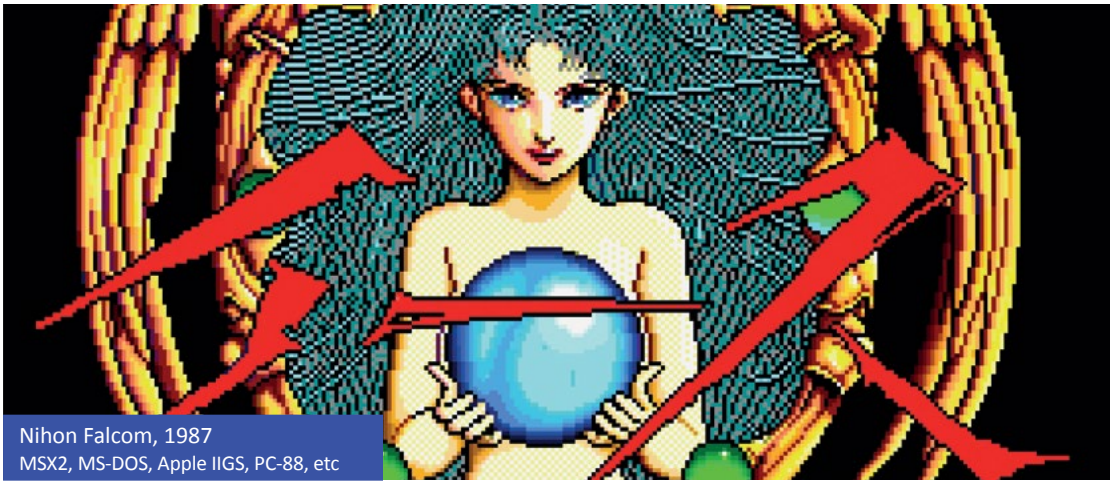


Dialogues use a text-to-voice system and a competent text parser, but the NPCs themselves have nothing of value to say.



The game offers melee and ranged weapons, limited ammo and armour for specific body parts, but during combat you just click on "Fight" and watch.

Ys
The Vanished Omens



Nihon Falcom, 1987
MSX2, MS-DOS, Apple IIGS, PC-88, etc

Nihon Falcom is one of the most important Japanese game developers. In the 80s it stood side-by-side with Square and Enix, but focused on the Japanese PC market – a, reason why they aren't as well-known in the West.

There were a number of action-based RPGs in the early days of Japanese computer games, such as T&E Soft's *Hydlide* (1984) and System Sacom's *Märchen Veil* (1985), but the most well-known is Falcom's *Ys* (pronounced "eese"). The company had previously eschewed turn-based RPGs with earlier games like *Dragon Slayer* (1984) and *Xanadu* (1985), but *Ys* was a more ambitious game.

It told the story of red-haired hero Adol Christin and his journey to uncover the legendary land of Ys, which had broken free from its spot on the Earth and flown into the sky. With the help of a mysterious fortune teller, Adol learns of six magical books and two ancient goddesses of Ys, who have since descended from their thrones to live among the humans.

The game was so large that it was split up into two separate games – the first, *Ancient Ys Vanished* (also known as *The Vanished Omens*) is where Adol searches for Ys, and the second, *The Final Chapter*, has him finding and exploring the sky-bound kingdom. In most modern re-releases, these are bundled together as a single release, which makes sense.



Boss battles can be difficult, forcing you to grind. But there are a few items and equipment available at shops (or hidden) that can help you.

The first *Ys* game consists only of two towns, a tiny overworld and three dungeons, one of which is so gigantic that it occupies about half of the game. The second game is much longer and more involved, sending Adol through lands of ice and fire before reaching the shrine to defeat the evil Darm.

Like many early Japanese Action RPGs, you fight enemies by bumping into them, where your rate of success is based on your experience level. However, your power is much greater if you hit the enemy at an off-angle. The second game introduces a magic system that allows Adol to throw fireballs, which is much easier to deal with. Amidst other combat spells, there's also a spell that turns you into a monster, allowing you to talk to other bad guys, whose various musings are not only funny but provide valuable hints.

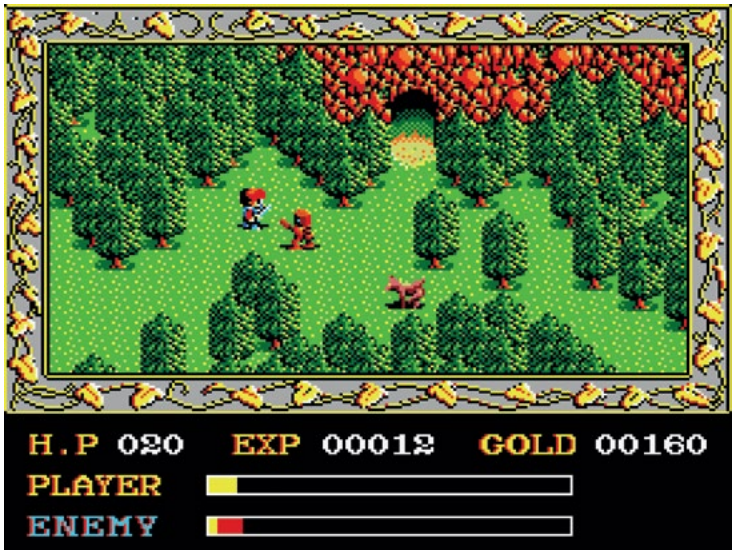
It may all sound overly simplistic, considering much of what one does is to roam the landscape, ramming into every enemy in sight, but that's really part of the fun. *Ys* doesn't bog itself down with puzzles or aimless wandering. For the most part, they're straightforward adventures that are fairly short, but full of the same sense of wonder and adventure that made the *Zelda* games so consistently popular.

Ys was originally released on the Japanese PC-8801 in 1987, but was ported to several home computer and consoles. It was released internationally on various platforms, first on the SEGA Master System, then on the MS-DOS and Apple IIGS.

These were OK conversions, though the PC ports butchered the excellent soundtrack. They had limited success, but the TurboGrafx-16 version was included as a pack-in for the US TurboDuo console, leading to much greater exposure. This version also included new cinematics, professional voice acting and incredible redbook arrangements of the music.

"Recent RPGs have been very difficult, and it takes a lot of willpower to finish them. So eventually we came to have our doubts: was this really 'fun'? With *Ys*, therefore, we set out to create the opposite kind of game, something that would be accessible, easy to play, and not geared toward hardcore RPG maniacs."

– *Masaya Hashimoto, Ys' programmer and designer*



In combat all you have to do is bump into enemies. But you must do it slightly off-centre, as in the picture, for attacking head-on will likely just get you killed.

Falcom revised these two games several times over the years, the most significant starting in 1998 with the *Ys Eternal* games for Windows 95, which included an expanded world map for the first game, remade SVGA graphics, new music, and smoother controls. These were later ported to the PSP and to modern PCs, then localised into English courtesy of XSeed. Outside of those who prefer the 90s-era rock synth soundtrack of the TurboGrafx-16 version, these are widely viewed as the definitive releases.

The *Ys* series has become Falcom's flagship franchise over the years. While the first two *Ys* games tell a complete story, *Ys III: Wanderers from Ys* (1989) switches to a side-scrolling perspective and changes the setting to an entirely unrelated scenario. After this point, Falcom experienced a significant staff shortage, resulting in the fourth game getting licensed out to two companies for two very different titles, one for the Super Famicom, the other for the PC Engine.

Ys V (1995) was developed in-house by Falcom, though only for the Super Famicom, which attempted to modernise the series by replacing the "bump" system with a standard *Zelda*-style attack button.

The series returned to PCs with *Ys VI: The Ark of Napishtim* (2003), which was something of a series re-birth, switching the background graphics to 3D (but keeping the 2D sprites). This engine was used for the next two games: *Oath in Felghana,* a remake of *Ys III*, and *Ys Origin*, a prequel with many storyline ties to the first two games. Falcom then shifted development back to handheld platforms, with *Ys VII* (2009) and *Ys: Memories of Celceta* (a remake of *Ys IV*).

Despite being one of the most important CRPGs in Japanese history, *Ys* never quite reached worldwide popularity in the way of *Final Fantasy* or even *Dragon Quest*. A shame, for the series is full of fast-paced action and adventures in faraway lands, with some of the best music in the history of gaming. **KK**

The *Ys* series also inspired quite a bit of tie-in media, including a manga series, two separate anime OVAs and a whole series of soundtrack releases.



Ys II was only officially released in English for PCs in 2013, but the game is very light on text and was fan-translated.



The remakes vastly expand and improve *Ys I* and *II*, but remain faithful to the series' simple yet iconic gameplay.

Deathlord



Al Escudero and David Wong, 1987
Apple II and C64

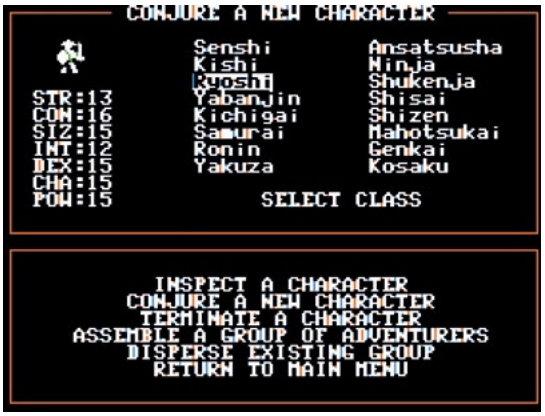
Deathlord was originally inspired by Norse mythology, but five weeks before release Electronic Arts demanded that it was changed into a Japanese setting.

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 exploration with a *Wizardry*-like combat system, *Deathlord* takes place in an Oriental fantasy world with Japanese names for everything. As a result, *Deathlord* lets you play a Toshi and an Obake, a Mahotsukai and a Ronin.



Exploration and battles are all shown in an *Ultima*-like top-down view, but the combat system is actually very similar to *Wizardry*.



Unless you're well-versed in Japanese, you'll need the manual to understand the races, classes and spells. Yabanjin, for example, is a kind of Barbarian.

There are eight races and 16 classes, including four 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. This huge world may feel too empty at times, but the locations are consistently good. They have traps, clues, and secrets to find. 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.

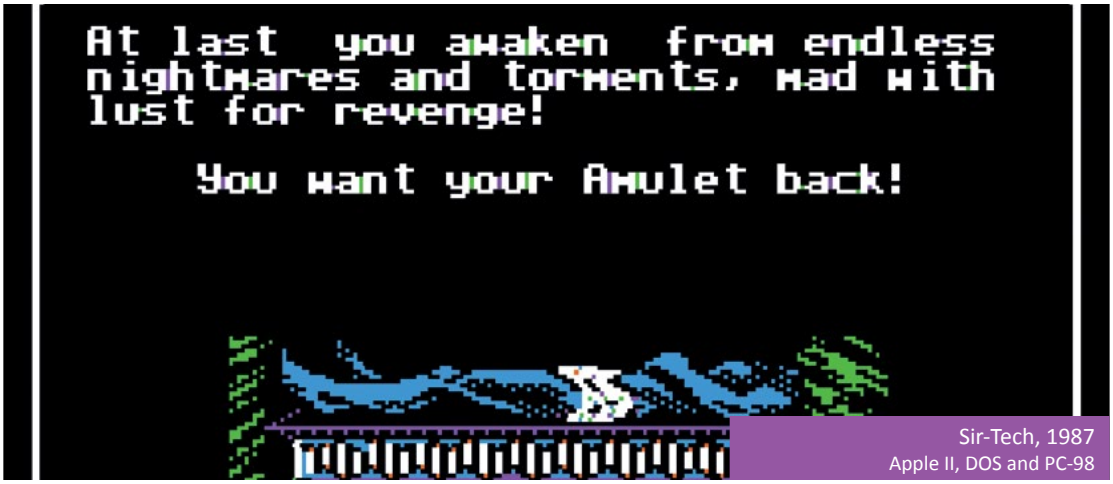
There are no quest objectives, or quests at all. There is only the starting clue that Deathlord, the game's villain, gives you. Further clues are obscure and difficult to find. There are some places, such as prisons or private residences, that you cannot simply enter; you can only break into them, with the consequence of angering on the entire town's guard.

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.

The ingenuity of *Deathlord's* design is to make its blend of *Ultima* exploration and *Wizardry* combat flow really well despite the difficulties involved in bringing traditional dungeon hazards – chutes, secret doors, teleporters, etc. – over to a top-down perspective. Most dungeons have a unique theme, and are as unforgiving as they are inventive. You will not make it far without 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**

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 RPGs.

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 magical 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.

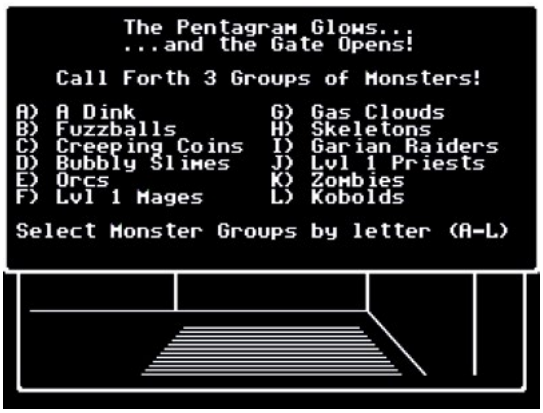
Beginning at the bottom of the dungeon, you struggle to climb up to the surface. Useful loot is minimal, being mostly limited to puzzle-related items, and there's no way of telling a plot-critical item from a fluff one beforehand. And even if by some miracle the enemies don't get you, the dungeon itself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

To that end, *Wizardry IV* features the most sadistic, and brilliant, dungeon and puzzle design that no other RPG, except maybe *Chaos Strikes Back* or *The Dark Heart of Uukrul* or can compete with, where the dungeon itself is basically one large puzzle that you must figure out to progress or at least survive.

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



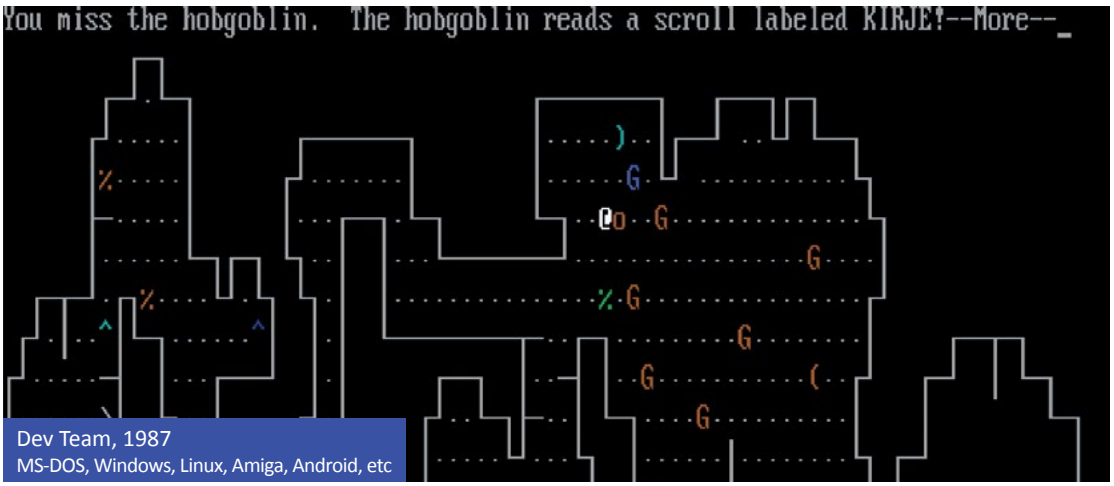
The enemies you face are actually other player's parties from previous games that were submitted to Sir-Tech by mail.



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

***Wizardry IV* was delayed for many years. During the development, Robert Woodhead and Roe Adams III began to subtitle Japanese anime as a hobby, later founding AnimEigo, an official anime distributor.**

NetHack



Dev Team, 1987
MS-DOS, Windows, Linux, Amiga, Android, etc

NetHack is one of the "major" roguelikes. Like *Rogue,* it send players into a large, randomly generated dungeon that gets tougher as they descend. Also like *Rogue*, the goal is the "Amulet of Yendor," which they must escape with once found. But the devil, as they say, is in the details.

NetHack is a game with fearsome complexity – the logic of its world defies belief: a player can take a potion, dip it into a fountain to dilute it with water, then drop it on a co-aligned altar and pray to turn it into holy water. Then he can dip another item to bless it, or instead dip a pile of other potions of water into it at once to make lots more holy water in a single go. Or he could throw it at a monster to attack it with its vapour, mix it with other potions, or dip other items into it. Rumor has it the player can even drink them.

That's just a quick overview of one of its features. Even if I wrote just one grossly vague sentence on each aspect of the game, it would require an entire book. Despite this overwhelming depth and its reputation for being extremely challenging for new players, *NetHack* is also almost always winnable.

***NetHack* is free and open-source. Download the latest version at www.nethack.org**



NetHack offers 13 classes, five races and 39 skills. However, its real depth comes not from character development, but items, monsters and their interaction with the complex sub-systems.

The path to becoming good enough to "ascend" (win the game) takes unaided players years, but with guides and heavy spoilers can be crossed in weeks. *NetHack* demands a lot from players, but it's a carefully balanced game that promotes experimentation and even has its own internal system of hints, in the form of fortune cookies and pronouncements by an Oracle.

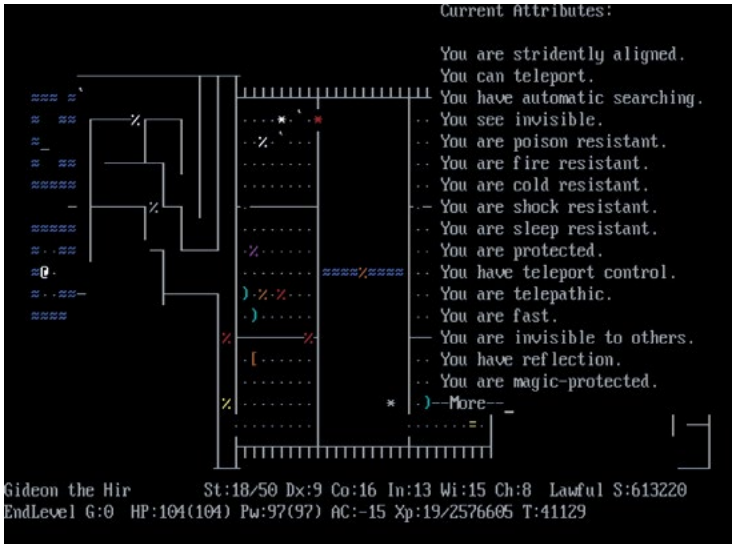
Players also write a lot about *NetHack* online. You can read about monsters and their abilities, the dungeon and its contents, the best ways of traversing levels, the many, many ways in which one can die, etc. There are also the YAAPs (Yet Another Ascension Post), where players tell of their victories, often role-playing or with optional challenges in the form of "conducts" – being vegan, atheist, pacifist or even playing the entire game with their characters wearing a blindfold.

The process of playing *NetHack* requires gaining levels like most RPGs, but even more important than that is finding the items needed to complete the quest. We might say that a player's power is item-bound – a Level 1 player with excellent equipment is more powerful than a naked Level 10 character. A good item found randomly on the dungeon floor (or provided by a lucky magical wish) can greatly change the game. This helps *NetHack* to remain interesting through many plays, even if the player doesn't get very far.

One can consider *NetHack* to have three major phases: early, mid and late game. The early game is the most challenging, as the player is low-level, doesn't know what most things are, and is preparing his "ascension kit" – the items he'll need to win. By contrast, the long mid-game period is pretty boring, both because of monotonous maze levels, and because there's little to test a knowledgeable player. The end game brings several novel situations that liven the game up, but a properly prepared player will probably be able to handle them.

"Most titles run their course because they can only be played so many times before becoming repetitive. That cannot be said about *NetHack*. People who have been playing the game for years still get excited when something good happens to them, when they ascend, when they discover something that the dev team thought of that impresses them."

– Paul Winner, *NetHack's developer*



The complexity of *NetHack* is legendary – it has hundreds of items, monsters, effects and variables, yet they all interact with each other in logical ways. This led to a popular mantra among players: "the dev team thinks of everything".

NetHack is an open-source game, and this has resulted in the creation of several variants, fan-made versions that seek to remedy some of its flaws or add new features. There are several variants: *NetHack: The Next Generation,* adds a "geek" class and many Douglas Adams references; *UnNetHack* improves the UI and ramps up randomness to increase variety; *Slash'EM Extended* adds even more stuff to the game, like new classes and races; and so on.

Most variants, as tends to be the way of fans making mods, are even harder than the original game, and are even more heavily reliant on spoilers. The most popular of these changes are sometimes adopted by the developers back into the original game.

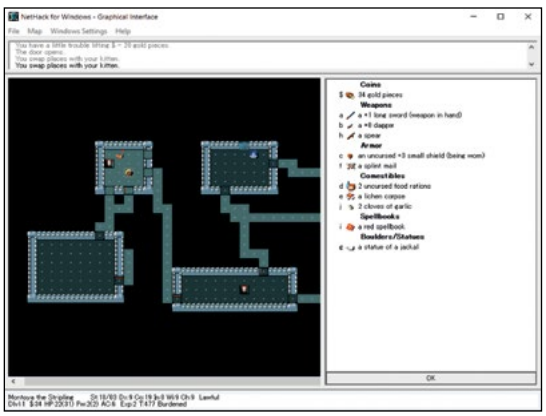
While many players prefer the efficiency of the ASCII graphics, *NetHack* comes with the option to play using a graphical tileset. There are many custom ones, and fans have also created the *Vulture's Eye* client, which provides a GUI, music and an isometric look.

NetHack is a descendant of *Hack*, a 1982 variant of *Rogue* created by Jay Fenlason during college. In 1987 the dev team re-wrote *Hack* and released it on the Usenet (an early Internet), adding the "*Net*" prefix. While updates have been irregular since then, the game is still under active development – in late 2016, they released version 3.6.0 after a hiatus of six years.

The dev team is devoted but busy, and mortality has begun to take its toll. With over thirty years of history on their backs, team members who were college students when they began working on *NetHack* are now in their fifties, or older. While its original members age, as do all human beings, the team has brought in a steady supply of new blood, some of them creators of balance variants, and so new ideas have infiltrated the game.

What will *NetHack* become under the stewardship of these newcomers? Not even the Oracle may say with certainty. **JH**

Newcomers should check the handy beginner's guide on www.nethackwiki.com. It provides important tips without going into spoilers. Having a list with the keyboard commands is also advisable.



NetHack also supports a variety of tilesets, which replace the ASCII graphics and make things easier for newcomers.



Vulture's Eye is a free tool that adds graphics, sound effects, music and a graphical interface to *NetHack* and its variants.

The Faery Tale Adventure



MicroIllusions, 1987
Amiga, MS-DOS, C64 and Genesis

David Joiner's career as a game designer began by surreptitiously writing a "space war" game on a mainframe at U.S. Strategic Air Command headquarters and ended working on *SimCity 4* and *The Sims 2* for EA-owned Maxis.

Created entirely by David Joiner in seven months, *The Faery Tale Adventure* was perhaps the first RPG original to the Amiga. In good fairytale fashion, the background story consists of a necromancer kidnapping the king's daughter while unleashing a plague of monsters upon the land of Holm.

Three brothers from the village of Tambry have taken up arms to save the realm, but the player controls only a single brother at a time, starting with Julian, the eldest. If Julian's luck should run out – dying gradually diminishes it – then the next oldest, Phillip, falls under the player's control, and finally the youngest, Kevin. Reaching the remains of a deceased brother will yield whatever treasures he had accumulated, but otherwise each brother starts afresh and plays the same, aside from minor differences in starting attributes.

Exploration is the focus of the game, which is fortunate as it is easily its strongest aspect. Most of the challenge consists in discovering what exists in which locations, and what needs to be done to accomplish other tasks and ultimately win the game by reaching and defeating the necromancer.



In true fairytale fashion, the game opens with a book-like presentation introducing the three the brothers.

Open-world before the term existed, *Faery Tale* from the beginning confronts the player with a vast land – equivalent to 17 thousand screens-worth of material – that can be explored in (nearly) any order one chooses, striding freely across open meadows, tundras, farmlands, dense and forbidding woods, desert, bogs, and volcanic wasteland. Punctuating the landscape are various buildings, caverns, or other indoor locations, sometimes named on the paper map accompanying the game. Showing the contours of the world and various sites scattered about it, the map is an essential tool and also serves as copyright protection, as when booting the game you're required to input three words from the rhyme wrapping around the map.

The immense charm of the game contributes greatly to the fun of exploration. Although the music consists of only half a dozen tracks, the game makes the most of them and of the Amiga's superior sound capabilities. Both the daytime and night-time themes are superb, and will be interrupted by a tense battle theme as enemies randomly spawn on the fringes on the map and pursue you.

If the player tires of hiking, it is possible to gain the ability to summon a sea turtle that will graciously permit the brother to ride on its back over the seas, reaching otherwise inaccessible locations. Later still, a magic lasso permits the taming of a giant swan, allowing the brother to literally "wing forth in flight" as the rhyme indicates. Logistics are present in the game, not only in a day-and-night cycle (magical green jewels provide short-lived light), but also in the need for food and sleep. Going too long without buying food from an inn results in starvation eating away at the brother's vitality, but going too long without sleep means the brother will move in a drunken fashion, unable to walk a straight line!

"I think I mostly made it up as I went along. In this, I think I was inspired by Jon Van Caneghem's approach to making *Might and Magic*, which was to start with a basic engine and then add detail like crazy. It's interesting too, because many years later in working on *SimCity 4* and *Sims 2* at Maxis, I ran into the same principle, which is this: there's really no way to measure how fun a game will be until you've built it, or at least built enough of it that you can start playing."

– David Joiner, The Faery Tale Adventure's creator



The ghost of a deceased brother will urge the next-in-line to find his remains.

Other RPG elements are relatively limited, however, contributing to the game's reputation as an "RPG lite". Each brother has only four attributes: Bravery, Luck, Kindness and Vitality. Success in combat depends on the Bravery attribute, which increases with victory in combat (as does Vitality more slowly), creating a feedback loop in which a successful brother becomes powerful enough to trivialise combat.

With few exceptions, there are only three types of enemies – skeletons, ogres, and wraiths who look suspiciously like Nazgûl – all of which appear randomly and are defeated by pointing the brother in the right direction and pressing a button to attack.

The only other progression consists of accumulating gold pieces and inventory items. The game is spiced up with several magic items: for example blue stones allow teleportation between circles of stone pillars, while bird totems reveal a map showing terrain around you, and gold rings briefly freeze time.

While it sold well, *Faery Tale Adventure* lacked substantial impact on other RPGs of the time, and a sequel didn't appear until 1997. *Halls of the Dead: Faery Tale Adventure II* kept a focus on seamless exploration but radically revised gameplay, keeping the brothers together as a party and making combat turn-based. Sadly, the overambitious, mouse-driven controls combined with faulty path-finding made it difficult to even move the brothers around. Released after the bankruptcy of its developer, The Dreamer's Guild, *Halls of the Dead* also suffers from extensive last-minute cuts to content, and it passed with little notice.

Nonetheless, the basic design of *FTA* pointed the way forward to the open-world "hiking simulators" of a later era. Those indifferent to its charms may find it monotonous, but despite its limitations *Faery Tale Adventure* will remain a sentimental favourite of those fortunate enough to have experienced it on its original platform. **ZD**

The game's manual includes a much more extensive background story, detailing the three brothers, their father, the village's talisman, and even the Red Knight, but this is entirely irrelevant to actual gameplay.



The giant swan allows you to quickly fly across the map, reaching new areas and avoiding a lot of combat.



The sequel, *Halls of the Dead*, features an isometric view, expanded character options and full voice acting.

Dungeon Master



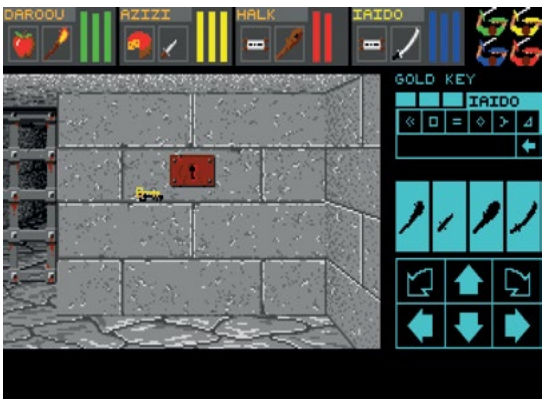
FTL Games, 1987
MS-DOS, Atari ST, Amiga, SNES, etc.*

***Dungeon Master* was a massive hit at the time, becoming the bestselling 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 has 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 sidestep enemies, attack them, and sidestep 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 for RPGs in most respects.



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

The audiovisuals were unrivalled 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 colourful and diverse lot those champions were! Who can forget characters like Hissssa, 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 backstory 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.

"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 analogue 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 customise 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 stairs 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 dungeon weren't enough, players still have to keep all their characters fed and hydrated.



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

Zeliard



Game Arts, 1987
MS-DOS, NEC PC-8801 and X1

I remember *Zeliard* 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. When I first played it, I could barely understand English, so I missed an important hint.

The game was clearly inspired by Nihon Falcom's *Xanadu* (1985) but, while that game remained in Japan, *Zeliard* was actually translated into English, being released in the West in 1990.

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.



There are special magic items you need to collect to explore, such as a cape that protects you from heat.



The hints provided by the townsfolk are vital to uncovering secrets and finishing the game. Be sure to write them down.

One of the early "metroidvania" games, it set itself apart by having a slight influx of RPG elements. It features a hidden XP system that allows you level up when sages in town deem you experienced enough, increasing hit points, damage and magic.

Zeliard also has a simplistic inventory system: one slot for a weapon, one for armour 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.

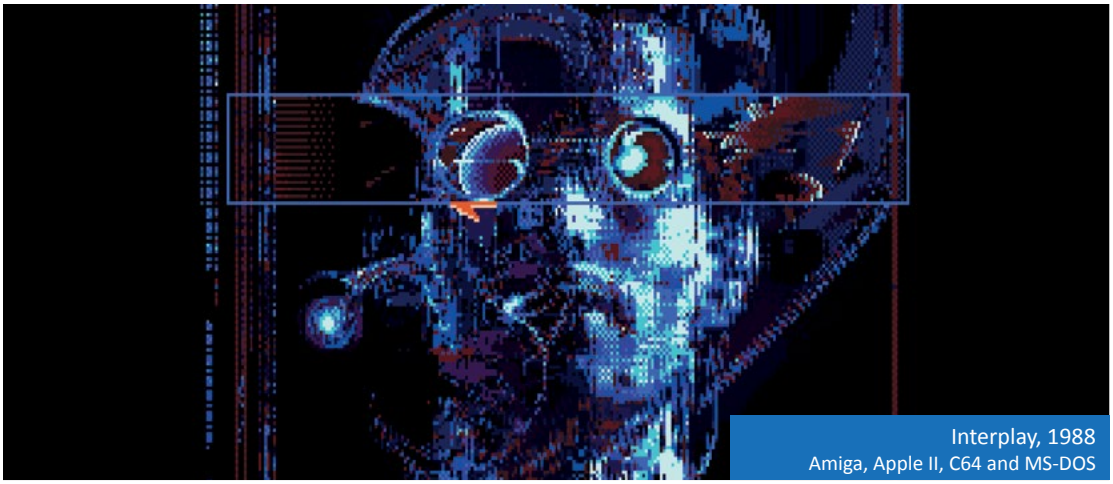
You can attack with horizontal, upwards and downwards sword slashes, and after defeating each boss monster you will also get new spells – all of them offensive in nature. As in other "metroidvania" games there are also items that grant you access to otherwise unreachable areas, such as boots to climb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

Zeliard stands out among its kind for recapturing the feeling of old-school CRPG dungeon crawlers. It cannot be mastered by just being good at the action part, you have to also map the entire game meticulously, explore every inch 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 easy to get lost even in the first level, and without a map you won't get far in the later ones.

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 MS-DOS

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*. 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 his name and who spent the last night face down in food he hasn't paid for yet, you'll be pulled into the same mystery – interrogating NPCs for leads and finding ways into places you're not wanted, then eventually hitting the matrix in search of data and the credits for upgrades and connection time.

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 watchdogs, protecting their fortress of corporate secrets.

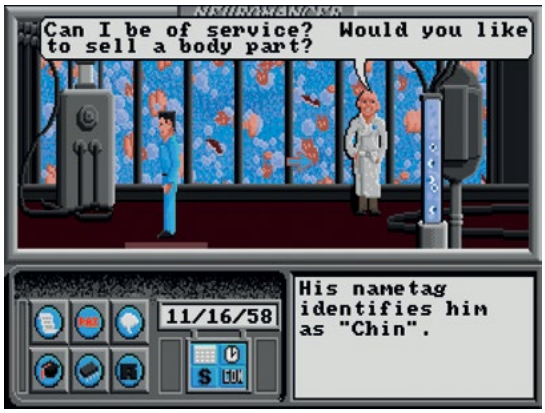
One could also sell organs, replacing them with cheap plastic, though don't expect what's left of your meat body to survive more than a minor biofeedback shock in cyberspace. While conceptually interesting, these interactions are when the tone difference stands out. While *Neuromancer* was a dark, frightening novel, the game takes a tongue-in-cheek approach. No event is more emblematic of this than meeting a sect of *Pong* worshipers. Yes, the video game.

As unique as Interplay's vision was, others had even higher aims. Timothy Leary, the LSD-advocating psychologist, was the book's licence owner and pitched a different game – a CYOA "Mind Movie" where you played as celebrities and saw cyberspace as fractals.

No matter the interpretation, *Neuromancer's* cyberpunk manifesto continues to influence dystopian futures where flesh is cheap and information can flash-fry the wetware between your ears. **RE**

"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, in any way possible.



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

Wasteland



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

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. 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 upheld Desert Ranger justice, communed with a drunken hobo who saw the future in Snake Squeezins, cloned my party members (!), repaired toasters, fired howitzers, got wasteland herpes from a three-legged hooker, and fought a menagerie of enemies from killer robots, giant garden pests and leather jerks to rad angels that glowed with a life of their own.

***_Wasteland_ was re-released in 2013 by InXile, featuring a new soundtrack and reworked art. It also included all the text in the game itself, with no need to check paragraphs in the manual anymore.**



Heavily derived from tabletop RPGs, *Wasteland* features seven attributes and over 30 skills, but not all of them are equally useful.

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

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 character creation. Loosely based on the *Mercenaries, Spies and Private Eyes* tabletop RPG, its skill-based and attribute-based system was a bit more complex than say, *Bard's Tale*, but allowed for a richer character role-playing. If I wanted to create a Russian explosives expert who liked to throw knives, I could. And that was a much richer development tree than "Fighter."

"I think the things that drew people to *Wasteland* and *Fallout* are the similarities. [...] There was this open sandbox world and we weren't preaching to you as to how to behave, in terms of a morality perspective. The 'correct' thing to do was never clear, and sometimes, there weren't clear, correct things. There was also a lot of cause and effect and a lot of subtlety; layers and layers of gameplay in a post-apocalyptic world, with an interesting combat system."

– *Brian Fargo, Wasteland's director*



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

The system 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, you can.

It is touches like this where *Wasteland* shines. Similarly, the fact the skill tree grows beyond what's in the manual adds a powerful element of mystery, driving you to explore more of the world and see what's in the next library, making the world deeper.

That said, *Wasteland* has its share of design confusion. It's difficult to see the differences in combat between Pugilism, Melee Weapons and Brawling. Some skills are largely useless, while others are critical (Doctor, for example). The same is true for stats: some attributes, such as Charisma, hold little value.

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 or, when I was older, set up copies of the game to prevent being trapped with no hope of salvation.

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 work on a sequel, and, thanks to Brian Fargo, I got the opportunity with *Wasteland 2* (2014). I hope the next generation enjoys the wasteland as much as I did. **MCA**

Due to memory limitations, most of the game's text is in the printed manual. The game then asks you to read certain paragraphs. To stop players from reading them early, fake ones were added, such as false codes or an entire storyline about a Martian invasion.



Wasteland's combat is similar to *Bard's Tale*, but it also displays the position of all foes when you press Space.



The game offers a large open world to explore at your pace, but you better equip a Geiger counter.

Pool of Radiance



Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1988
MS-DOS, Amiga, Apple II, C64 and NES

In 1987, after two console games for the Intellivision, TSR announced they would like to license *D&D* to a computer game company. Origin, EA and SSI were the final bidders. SSI won with a broad plan of various games across multiple genres.

Pool of Radiance would be the first in a series of four computer role-playing games set in the *Forgotten Realms* Moonsea region. It would also launch the acclaimed and influential "Gold Box" titles developed by SSI – so called due to the iconic golden boxes they were packaged in.

The first officially licensed *Dungeons & Dragons* computer game, it faithfully adapted the extremely popular *AD&D* pen-and-paper rules to the virtual environment for the first time, paving the way for many games to follow. A remarkable feat at the time, the game packed a meticulous implementation of the expansive ruleset, from its spell book and combat mechanics to a statistically accurate bestiary. Even the monster portraits can be traced to *AD&D*'s 1st Edition *Monster Manual,* recreated in pixelated form. Other iconic mechanics adhered to include resting and the time needed to heal or memorise spells.

From the very start *Pool of Radiance* provides the basics of the role-playing genre, requiring players to create a party of up to six characters, built from *AD&D's* multiple races and class combinations.



You can create a party of up to six characters, customising their portraits and combat icons. Then play them all the way to *Pools of Darkness*, reaching epic levels of power.

The heroes would then begin at the port city of Phlan, motivated by fortune or glory to win back the city from its monstrous overlord. A novel feature, *Pool of Radiance* is a mission-based adventure, with characters receiving assignments from the Council, or taking up tasks that are completely optional. The open nature of its structure allowed players to go about quests in any order, and most objectives could be accomplished through multiple solutions.

Exploration is done in first-person; with a 3D view port window into the fantastic world – similar to *The Bard's Tale* series. The interface is clunky and slow, but individual character sheets display all the vital information one would expect from the tabletop game. Players must learn to track hit points, THAC0, armour class, inventories and spell books, contributing to the pervasive feel of pen and paper.

When diplomacy fails and a battle begins, the player is switched to a top-down "isometric" view of a field, derived from *Wizard's Crown*. The characters are represented by icons (you can even customise yours), and movement and positioning is crucial. Staged against foes in tactical turn-based resolution, the game boasts some impressive large-scale battles, sometimes with dozens of enemies at once.

Also featured is the overland map. Upon leaving the city or one of the many dungeons in the outskirts, the party is changed to representation by a single icon in order to traverse the open land. This includes the possibility of random encounters, discovering new locations or other hidden secrets.

After finishing *Pool of Radiance*, players may transfer their heroes to the next game in the series, all the way to the fourth game. Characters can progress in a sweeping campaign, similar to ongoing play with pen and paper, reaching epic power levels.



Pool of Radiance features a vast city and its surrounding wilderness, packed with many missions and side-quests.



Curse of Azure Bonds introduced many improvements and a story set after events of the *Azure Bonds* novel.



Secret of the Silver Blade had huge areas, far bigger than the standard 16x16 maps, filled with enemies to battle.



Pools of Darkness made the jump to VGA graphics and delivered a high-level adventure across dimensions.

The sequel, *Curse of the Azure Bonds* (1989), was a more story-focused adventure, the party awakening to find their equipment stolen (a cheap balance trick) and their arms branded with mystic blue sigils, which rob them of their free will. The characters would then follow the footsteps of Alias and Finder Wyvernspur, as told in the TSR-published novel *Azure Bonds*.

The game expanded upon the Gold Box engine, introducing the Paladin and Ranger classes and adding a "fix" command to facilitate the healing process in the camp menu. The overland map now included small utility towns, which offered temple, tavern and shop services from only a menu. Also included were mini-dungeons for the party to explore, as a bonus content loosely tied to the main storyline.

The third title of the saga, *Secret of the Silver Blades* (1990), sends the party to an entirely different region, the mining town of New Verdigris – although events still tie in to a wider tapestry being weaved. Gone was the overland map portion of adventure, replaced by confinement around the mysterious Well of Knowledge, using teleporters to access areas.

Unfortunately, *Secret of the Silver Blade* might be considered not only the weakest of the series, but perhaps of all the Gold Box games. Its plot is simple and linear, with few role-playing opportunities and far too many random encounters, which can get tiresome.

Finally, in 1991, SSI released the culminating title *Pools of Darkness*, delivering an epic conclusion in the truest sense of the word. The characters would level up to dizzy heights advancing to forty, and be thrown against the very pawns of a vengeful god.

The overland map was back – but multiplied –, taking the party to different dimensions. Supremely memorable was the section taking place in the spider realm of the Marilith Kalistes, which should strike a chord with any *AD&D* fan who played the *Queen of the Demon Web Pits* module. And there was still a high-level post-game dungeon, designed by Dave Shelley.

A massive commercial and critical success, the *Pool of Radiance* games were remarkable not only for bringing an authentic *Dungeons &Dragons* experience to computers, but also for allowing players to forge a heroic story across four expertly crafted titles. **DO**

The *Gold Box Companion* is a free fan-made tool that can be used to enhance the Gold Box games, offering features such as automap, info HUDs and cheats.

Star Saga: One

Beyond the Boundary



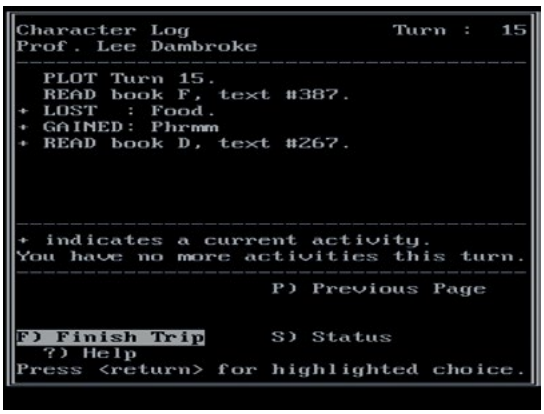
Masterplay Publishing, 1988
MS-DOS and Apple IIGS

In the early 2000s a group of fans from the Home of the Underdogs created the *Star Saga Game Kit*, which contains an interactive map and all of *Star Saga*'s text in HTML form.

The very first computer RPGs, created way back in the 70s, were born out of a simple realisation: tabletop RPGs are full of rules, numbers and percentages, and a computer is much better at keeping track of those than a human being. *Star Saga: One*, by Andrew Greenberg – one of the *Wizardry* creators – is that idea taken one step further.



Star Saga's box was huge, with a large sector map, player tokens, game disks and 20 printed booklets that added up to over 700 pages.



The software has no graphics whatsoever. After you input your actions, it calculates the outcome and directs you to one of the 888 texts in the booklets.

The game can be described as a mix of CRPG, boardgame and Choose Your Own Adventure book. It's a space opera to be played by 1-6 players on a large map, with all the rules being handled by the computer – a reliable and always available Game Master.

You start by selecting one of six pre-made characters, each with their own illustrated booklet that richly describes their background, starting resources and secret motivations – such as finding an item and taking it back home. You then open the sector map and choose a planet to visit in search of your goals.

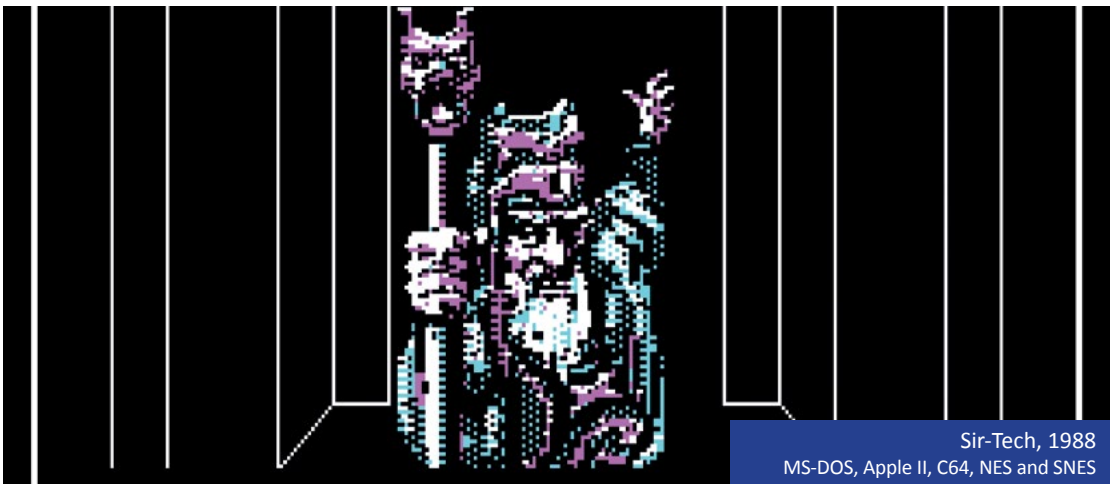
Each turn, players input their actions into the computer, which will reply with the number of a text to be read on the printed booklets, showing the outcome of their choices and the options now available. A single turn has several phases, allowing for multiple actions, such as talking to NPCs or trading fuel and resources. The computer will keep track of all these, as well as handle *Star Saga's* simple item-based combat.

It's a clever concept. Thanks to the computer, the game has a depth that no CYOA book can match, while the printed booklets allow for funny, well-written text that was miles ahead of any CRPG of the time, making every new planet and encounter feel unique. Sadly, the technology wasn't there yet. The back-and-forth from the PC to the booklets to the map is slow and awkward, while completing your objectives takes far too long – one playthrough can last weeks, or even months!

The game still had a sequel, *Star Saga: Two - The Clathran Menace* (1989), which continued the story of the six main characters. In fact, the series was planned as a trilogy, but poor sales ended it prematurely.

From today's perspective, it's almost absurd how all these booklets, maps and inputs could easily be handled by a single phone app. A bold game, *Star Saga*'s biggest flaw was to be way ahead of its time. **FE**

Wizardry V: Heart of the Maelstrom



Sir-Tech, 1988
MS-DOS, Apple II, C64, NES and SNES

Around the time the first *Wizardry* game was released, an enthusiastic programmer known as David W. Bradley started working on an ambitious RPG called *Dragon's Breath*. In 1984 he sent the game to Sir-Tech, which agreed to publish it on one condition: to remake it as the fifth *Wizardry*.

Wizardry IV, however, got stuck in development hell and would only be completed at the end of 1987, forcing Bradley's game to be postponed for years.

This tortuous story explains why *Heart of the Maelstrom* is so similar to the original *Wizardry* on the surface, despite being released seven years later.

Yet all that time wasn't wasted idling. *Maelstrom* is an iterative title that meticulously improves the most lacking aspects of previous games. The Thief, for instance, used to be a pretty useless class; now he's required to pick locked doors and search for secrets, can sneak around in combat to launch surprise attacks and is able to use a bow to fight from the back row.

Other additions include polearms with extended range, the ability to swim and friendly NPCs that roam the dungeons. There are also new spells, including creature summoning, magical barriers and monster charming, all which add new tactical elements.

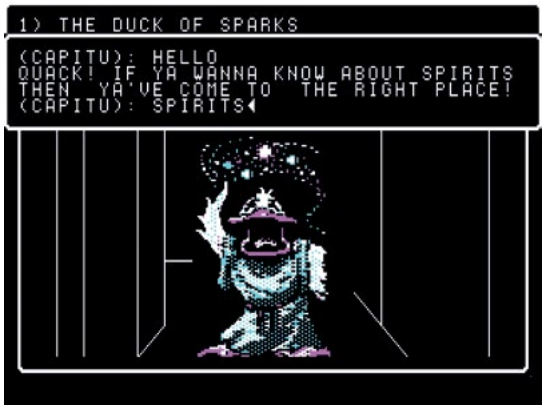
While these gameplay improvements make the game much better, what stands out in *Wizardry V* is D.W. Bradley's writing and design. Humour is ever present, making each dialogue or description feel like a reward to the player. The game allows players to interact with memorable NPCs like the annoying Pot of Gold, the pitiful Mad Stomper, the Duck of Sparks or the drunk sorcerer, and many of these characters can be bribed, pickpocketed or even attacked.

The dungeon also gained personality. With few sentences, Bradley turns wire-frame walls into dens of thieves, shady taverns or even disco ball rooms.

Their very shape comes into play; in previous games they were limited to a 20x20 grid, but now huge levels stretch in unpredictable shapes, challenging the map-making skills of any player.

Heart of the Maelstrom is, for me, the last *Wizardry* game with a child's heart. The following titles grew increasingly more advanced and became objectively "better" RPGs, yet I always felt something intangible was left behind with the series' "come of age". **DB**

Much like *Wizardry I-III*, nowadays we suggest playing the SNES remake of *Heart of the Maelstrom*, due to its superior graphics and interface.



The friendly NPCs that roam the dungeons are one of the big additions to *Wizardry V*. They are vital to solve the game's many puzzles.



Wizardry V's artist was clearly skilled, but the game's CGA graphics were terribly outdated next to games like *Dungeon Master* and *Might and Magic II*.

Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny



Origin Systems, 1988
MS-DOS, Amiga, Apple II, Atari ST, NES, etc

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-and-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.



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

On top of that, environmental objects were actually recognised 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 realised 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 *Skyrim*.

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 primary 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 grey to the moral equation of *Ultima*, creating situations where "what's right" isn't always readily apparent and keeping players on their toes.

"[...] 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 grey area. Lots of characters try convincing you that Blackthorn is doing things just right; some say he's an evil force; and others realise he's wrong but are taking advantage of the situation for personal profit and are willing to fight anyone who opposes Blackthorn."

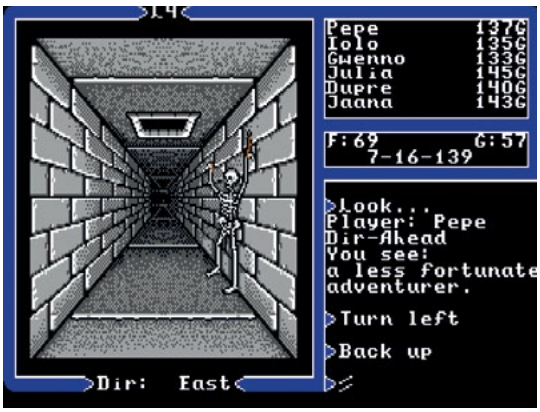
– *Richard Garriott*, *Ultima V's creator*



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.



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

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**

Mods:

Ultima V Update Patch: If you're playing the MS-DOS version of *U5*, use this mod to add the full soundtrack found only in other versions of the game.

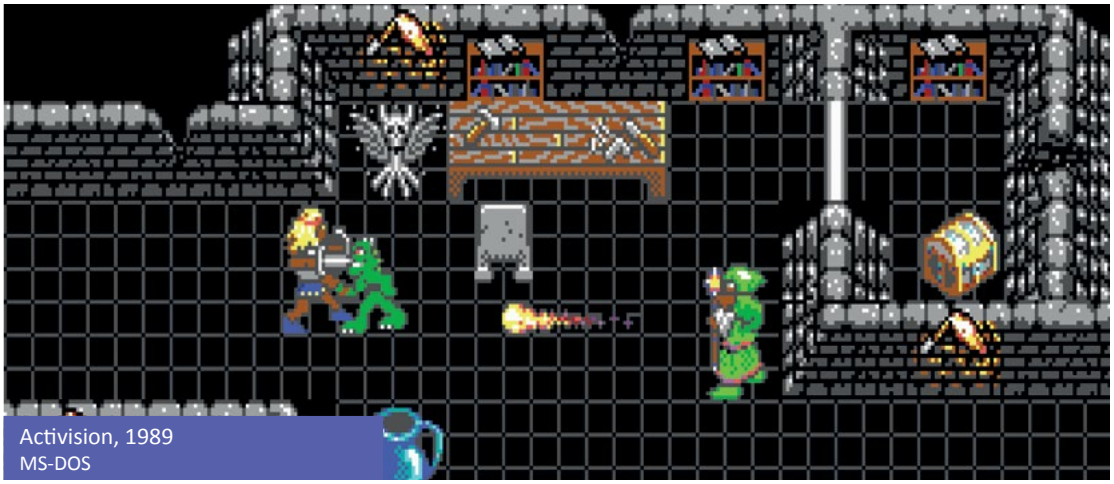
Ultima V: Lazarus: a 60+ hour *Dungeon Siege* mod that recreates *Ultima V* from the ground up, with modern 3D graphics, CD-quality music, real-time combat, richer quests and dialogues, and an optional "evil" path through the game.

You can find it here: www.u5lazarus.com



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

Prophecy I:
The Fall of Trinadon



Activision, 1989
MS-DOS

The late 80s is not what comes to mind when envisioning Action RPGs, which may be why *Prophecy I: The Fall of Trinadon* never found much of an audience and is largely forgotten today.

Its VGA graphics were not particularly beautiful, it only used PC Speaker for sound effects and music, and its interface was not terribly elegant. Yet *Prophecy* still packs a surprising amount of fun into an easy-to-play package.

The game is called *Prophecy I* because creator, Richard Seaborne, originally planned to make it into a series. He couldn't get funding from Activison, so he moved on to make *Escape from Hell* (1990) for EA.



Each area screen is accompanied by a brief but rather charming descriptive text, adding much to the overall sense of wonder.



Spells can be modified by adding prefixes: "Harlok" heals 10 HP, while "KruHarlok" heals 30 HP but costs more to cast.

The game starts in medias res, the protagonist having apparently slept through the massacre of his hometown. He rouses in time to begin his quest – to avenge his kin by finding and killing Lord Krellane.

As expected in a CRPG of the era, *Prophecy* features a full array of *Dungeons & Dragons*-descended statistics and generous expository text. But there's also plenty of unexpected elements, such as a *Zelda*-like real-time combat where hits and misses are driven entirely by player reflexes, while damage is calculated by character's stats and equipment.

There is indeed a surprising array of equipment to find in the game, and though the multiple-body-part armour system has no impact on your character's appearance, the weapon and/or shield your character has equipped does appear. This is important, as a weapon's size directly correlates with its range.

However, the game's most innovative and mechanically enjoyable feature is the ability to create spells through a rudimentary magical language. The manual presents you with a few dozen basic incantations, but spells can be further enhanced by adding prefixes to increase their strength and range, in exchange for increased energy costs.

It's difficult to envision a simpler system for allowing a basic set of spells to actually remain useful throughout the entire game.

There are of course anachronistic annoyances, including manual-based copy protection, randomly-generated-on-load treasure, mildly obtuse puzzles, processor-speed-based gameplay, and QuickBASIC-driven PC speaker sound/music (and fonts).

Still, no matter how long it has been since I first bought the game new, I still find it rewarding to return to *Prophecy* – which is high praise for an Action RPG from the 1980s. **QX**

Drakkhen



Infogrames, 1989
MS-DOS, Amiga, Atari ST and SNES

Drakkhen is a very original game, starting from its story. A glory-seeking Paladin slayed the Great Dragon – but it turns out that he was the keeper of magic, so now all the world's magic is gone, leaving humanity in chaos and unprotected.

You must create a party of four heroes (Warrior, Scout, Wizard and Priest) to explore a mystical island inhabited by eight warring dragon princes, collecting their treasures to resurrect the Great Dragon.

You explore the island through a free-roaming 3D first-person view. This was an amazing feat at the time and the island is huge, even if mostly empty. There are eight castles, a shop, a temple, some inns, houses and teleporters, plus a nice day-and-night cycle.

Once you enter one of the castles, the game switches to a 2D side-view, where you can control each of your heroes individually, fighting monsters, collecting items and solving very simple puzzles.

Unfortunately, the combat is also very simple. Battles happen in real time and automatically – once you've ordered the party to attack all you can do is change the spells the Wizard and Priest are casting.

The difficulty is rather unfair, as the game is filled with traps that instantly kill a character (or the whole party), and you'll have to grind a lot to beat the game. There's only one save slot and you can't save when inside the castles, so things can get frustrating fast.

Besides the novel 3D world map, the 2D graphics are also impressive and very original, blending detailed pixel art with more exotic styles, such as 3D wire-frame soldiers or rotoscoped human silhouettes. The interface also deserves praise – *Drakkhen* is one of the first RPGs to allow the player to control each party member individually in real time, yet it does it in a simple and intuitive way. It's just a shame that the adventure game-like actions aren't used much.

The game was ported to multiple systems, but the SNES version is by far the best. New dialogues, tips, items and a world map were added, while the difficulty was reduced, with cheap deaths removed.

Overall, *Drakkhen* is an outstanding feat of both technology and creativity – an experimental title that was way ahead of its time. The result is an original and weird title, but also an opaque and frustrating RPG. Regardless, it's definitely worth a look. **FE**

The ending of *Drakkhen* teased a sequel, but Infogrames never made it. Kemco, the Japanese company responsible for the SNES port, released *Super Drakkhen* in 1994, a loosely related side-scroller.

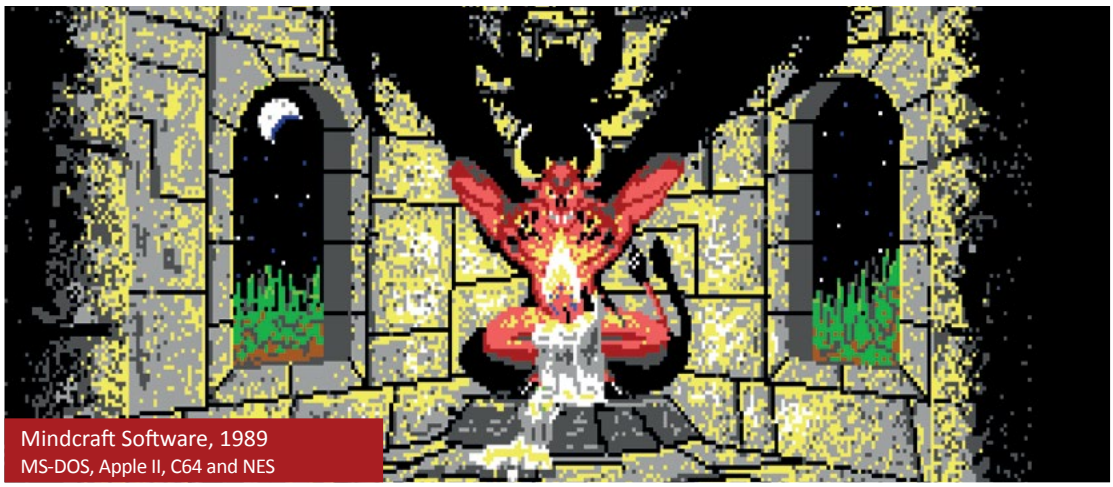


Drakkhen has exotic enemies such as giant dog heads, 3D polygons and the silhouette of a woman dancing and shouting "I love you".



While the game has an open world, your quest must be done in a specific order and manner, which isn't always clear. The dialogues don't help much either.

The Magic Candle



Mindcraft Software, 1989
MS-DOS, Apple II, C64 and NES

Mindcraft Software was founded by Ali Atabek, who previously created *Rings of Zilfin*. The company would be best known for its *Magic Candle* trilogy and for *Siege* (1992).

The Magic Candle is one of those rare CRPGs, along with *Ultima V*, *Betrayal at Krondor* and *Baldur's Gate II*, that does everything right. From background story, NPC interaction, puzzles, exploration and combat, *Magic Candle* does it all well, and the end product is a well-rounded, solid CRPG.

The background story is a variation of the tired old "evil demon/mage/warlord is threatening to conquer all the world and only YOU can stop him" plot. The twist is that, in this game, the evil demon starts imprisoned in a magic candle, but said candle is melting. The goal of the game is to prevent the candle from melting down and the demon from escaping. You have a limited number of days to do so, which is different based on the difficulty setting you choose.

So time is of the essence in *Magic Candle* - literally. The logistics of time management is one of the things that sets the game apart from so many other CRPGs. Everything takes time, from travelling to memorising spells, working for money and training skills. So while on a ship voyage that takes three days, your spell casters can memorise lots of spells, for example.



Your goal to search for a way to stop the magic candle from melting, and then collect the various items required to do so.

Which brings us to another novel thing in the game – splitting the party. It's possible to have some characters exploring a dungeon, while one character is making money in a city in another part of the world and yet another character is memorising spells at an inn in a different town. Usually you'll want all you characters present in dungeons, though, but when exploring a city, it can be a good idea to have one character (preferably one with high Charisma) do the exploring, while others make money, rest, train or memorise spells. The party splitting is also important in order to solve some of the problems in the game.

Magic Candle looks like an old *Ultima* game, where you control a party or a character on a top-down map. There are several types of maps – the overland map, the castle and town maps, and the dungeon maps. Combat either takes place directly on the dungeon map, or it switches to a separate combat map if you are on the overland.

The combat system is among the better turn-based systems. It's not very complex, but has many unique features, like different kind of mushrooms you can eat to get various combat bonuses, the ability to sidestep attacks (if not blocked on the sides), and the ability to pierce several enemies with one arrow. It's quite simple, but also quite tactical and fun. The monsters are a mix of generic types like orcs and trolls, and original, exotic ones like hraffels, zorlims and bargs.

An important part of the game is talking to NPCs to find clues on how to stop the candle from burning down. Lots and lots of note-taking (or screen-capping) is needed. NPCs also have schedules like in *Ultima 5-7*, and finding them can sometimes be a challenge in itself. Some of them won't even leave their houses and you have to knock on their doors, but they won't open unless you address them by their names.



Your party moves as a block, but you can split them into various parties to explore, solve puzzles, train and work.



Combat is turn-based and quite simple, but you'll have to manage character's ammo, food and rest to succeed.



Magic Candle II introduced mouse control and improved graphics, but also removed the ability to split your party.



Magic Candle III had nice graphics and a good story, but its gameplay felt archaic next to other RPGs at the time.

Speaking of names, you take the role of Lukas, a young Ranger, and can recruit up to five companions from around 30 NPCs of five different races and nine different professions, who have different strengths and weaknesses. The characters have most of the traditional CRPG stats and skills, but also some rare ones like hunting and armourer, to unique ones like gem-cutting, tailoring and carpentry.

There are no XP or levels; character's stats and skills increase through various methods, from practice and training to more adventurous ones, and various characters have different aptitudes in various stats and skills.

The Magic Candle feels more like a simulation than most CRPGs do. You need lots of items to survive in the wilderness, like food, arrows, ropes, and many special items that are useful in dungeons. There is also a day-and-night cycle, a need to sleep and rest, and need to repair weapons and armour. Shops open and close, and ships leave on certain days. If you like logistics, you'll like *The Magic Candle*.

If there are any negative things I can say about *The Magic Candle* it's that the weapons and armour selection is rather sparse and there are no random drops, and maybe that the game is a bit too long, with too much combat towards the end. Skills and stats maxing before the end and no random loot, makes combat too much of a chore in the end.

Speaking of the end, *The Magic Candle* has one of the most unique ways of winning a CRPG, ending not on a battle or dungeon crawl, but by asking you to perform an elaborate ritual to rebuild the candle.

The Magic Candle was followed by two sequels: *The Magic Candle II - The Four and Forty* (1991) and *Magic Candle III* (1992). While their plots remained unique, gameplay was streamlined and padded with combat, faring poorly against games like *Ultima VI*.

Mindcraft Software also produced two spin-offs set in the same world: *The Keys to Maramon* (1990), an early Action RPG, and *Bloodstone: An Epic Dwarven Tale* (1993), based on *Magic Candle III*'s engine. The company would close doors soon after. **OC**

***The Magic Candle* was chosen "RPG of the Year" by Computer Gaming World in 1989, where it also won an award for "Most Rewarding Ending" in 1996.**

Hillsfar



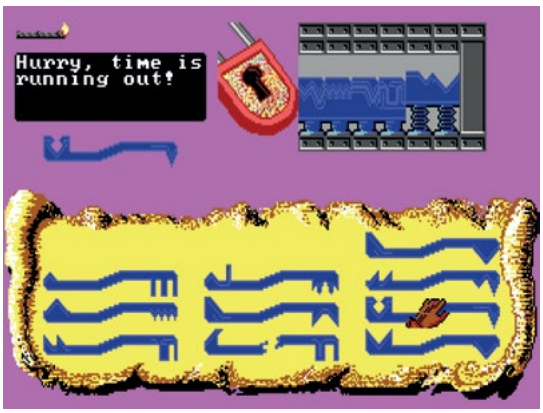
Westwood Studios, 1989
MS-DOS, Amiga, Atari ST, C64 and NES

Part of SSI'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.



You can visit guilds, stores, pubs, or you can break in, by lock-picking or using a magical Ring of Knock.



To pick locks you must find the correct pick for each tumbler. Besides the time limit, you must be careful of traps and of breaking the picks.

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.

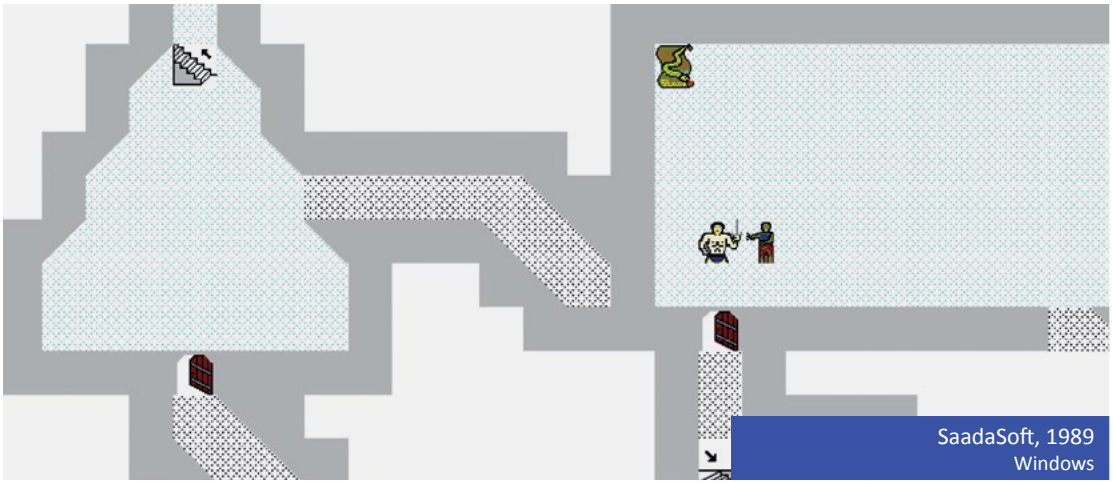
You take individual characters inside the city to quest alone. Based on their class, they find quests by visiting their respective guilds. Quests range from finding lost items to investigating a kidnapping, and may require you to fight for information in the arena or check out the latest gossip in the taverns. Three quests, with increasing rewards, are available for each class.

Most of the action takes place in the form of arcade segments. Travelling 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. **CA**

Castle of the Winds



SaadaSoft, 1989
Windows

Castle of the Winds is one of the few CRPGs I remember playing and winning as a child of the 90s, 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.

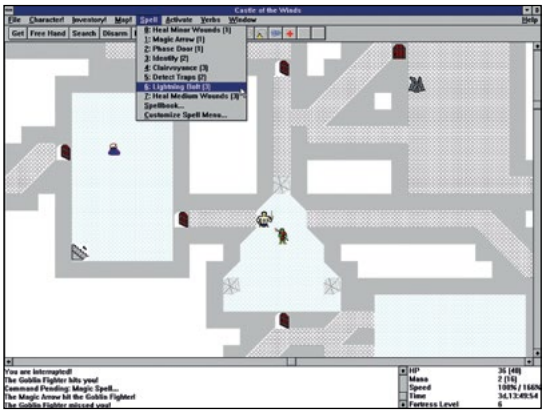
Originally produced in 1989 as an early piece of software using the Windows graphical shell in MS-DOS by Rick Saada, it was released with its sequel in 1993 by Epic MegaGames. In the first part, *A Question of Vengeance*, you are an orphan who must avenge the destruction of your hometown and retrieve 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 addictive 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 customisable spell button bar.

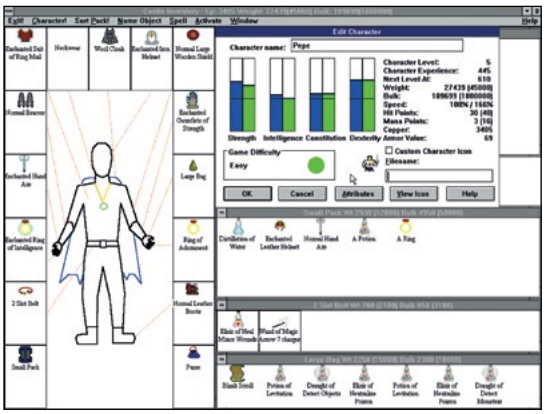
There are no classes or races, so characters can use every item and spell. A new spell is granted each level, and more can be learned from books. The game is entirely turn-based, but time passes in varying increments depending on actions taken. Inventory is measured in both bulk and weight, so packs 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 potion-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, keeping the game accessible to those new to roguelikes.

Quest for Glory:
So You Want to Be a Hero



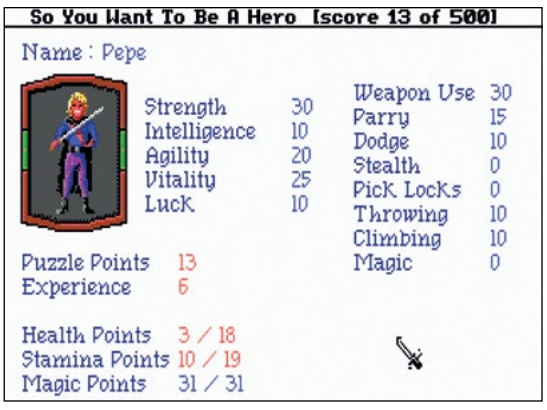
Sierra On-Line, 1989
MS-DOS, Amiga, Atari ST and PC-98

A remake of *Quest for Glory I* was released in 1992, sporting new colourful VGA graphics and a full point-and-click interface.

What's in a name? In the case of *Quest for Glory*, an unfortunate story. The series originally began as *Hero's Quest*, before Milton Bradley pointed at the board game and gave a meaningful cough. It's a shame, because while *Quest For Glory* is arguably a better title, it's really not what the series has ever been about.

For creators Lori and Corey Cole, heroism is a thing to aspire towards for its own sake – the importance of being the light in the darkness, of saving the world through simple human compassion as much as beating up whatever threatens it, and of doing the right thing not because you're thinking of the reward, but because it's the right thing to do.

Quest for Glory started its hero's journey like many others – a young man approaching a small town, hoping to make his name. (Originally there were plans for other character options, including races, but space was at a premium.) It offered a mix of classic graphic adventure gaming and RPG elements, though unsurprisingly for a Sierra game with 'Quest' in the title, it leaned heavier to the adventure side.



You can create hybrid characters, such as a fighter who can cast spells or pick locks, but some acts are locked to specific classes.

In particular, it didn't matter how good your stats were, the game was full of instant death if you annoyed characters or got caught breaking the rules. Pick a fight with a thief, for instance, and there's not even a battle. Just click, boom, comedy death message.

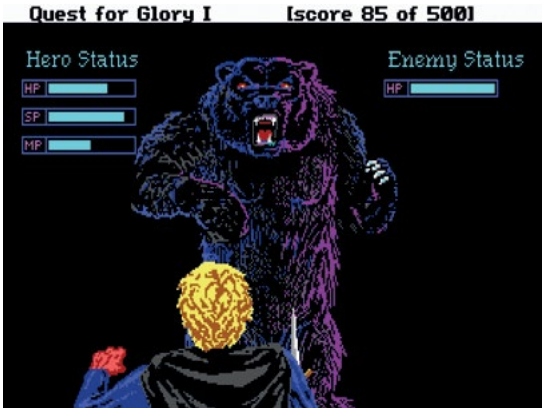
The RPG side breathed a lot of life into the world though, with your choice of character class allowing three paths through the game – Fighter, Magic User and Thief. Later games would add Paladin to this, either by importing the hero from the previous game or as a title that had to be earned through good deeds.

In the first game, that meant a Magic User could challenge local wizard Erasmus and his pet rat, Fenrus, (or local rat Fenrus and his pet wizard, Erasmus, depending on who you ask) to a magical mini-game duel, while the Thief could join the local guild and break into houses to somewhat unheroically liberate them of their loot.

They also have one of the best deaths in Sierra's murderous history – using the Lock-pick on yourself with low skill would lead to you stabbing yourself in the brain and dying instantly. With high skills? Congratulations! You successfully picked your nose. Warning: Avoid *Quest for Glory* if you don't like puns.

The adventure side of the game mostly came through in puzzles, in dialogue, and the general feel of the game, though never to the crazy lengths of most dedicated adventures. It was more about using tools at your disposal, with the games playing fair.

If you need to retrieve an item and you have a spell to do that, then said spell will either work or at least give a reason why it doesn't. If it looks like a surface can be climbed to get an item, it probably can be. It might take some stat grinding to get good enough, and there might be an easier way like casting Levitate, but it'll usually work.



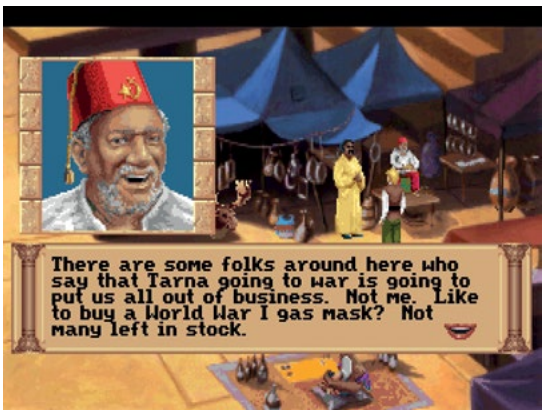
Combat is very simple. You can dodge or parry attacks with a shield, but often it's better to just keep attacking.



The game uses Sierra's SCI0 engine from *King's Quest IV,* allowing for mouse control but still requiring a text parser.



Quest for Glory II sends you to a labyrinthine Arabic city, imperiled by elementals and surrounded by a vast desert.



The third game made the transition to VGA graphics and replaced the text parser with point-and-click controls.

The downside of this is that the RPG elements are limited. Combat especially is mini-game hell from the very start to the very end of the series, only the details changing. There's very little in the way of gear too, with usually only a couple of upgrades per game.

It's best to think of these elements as seasoning rather than a major part of the meal, manifest more in elements like side-quests that you can take on, the ability to wander more or less freely around the world, day-and-night cycles where the worst monsters usually come out at night, and the need to eat and sleep.

Being based on adventures did however allow for much stronger narrative than most RPGs had back in 1989. The series made great use of this, with each game set in a different location with its own rules.

For *Quest for Glory I*, it's the European village of Spielburg, where everything is familiar. *Quest for Glory II: Trial by Fire* (1991) took the hero to Arabia, with most of the action taking place in one big city where events happened on set days and had to be dealt with before it was too late – before then leaving on a caravan to sort out the mastermind behind it all.

Quest for Glory III: Wages of War (1992) remains one of the few games to explore Africa, focusing on war and the hunt for a lost city.

Collectively, these become more than just a travelogue, with the hero constantly being exposed to both what people want, and what they really need – facing evil enemies who have to be stopped, but also learning that appearances can be deceptive.

In *QFG1* for instance, there's a group of bandits terrorising the valley. The big reveal is that their leader is the local baron's enchanted daughter, but the route to learning that makes a point of showing her to be more than just a snarling villain. She has honour. She makes a point of personally intervening when her men attack one of the villagers and getting him medical treatment. She has nuance, and while not all of the baddies are similarly redeemable, that nuance runs through every plot point and every decision made in the series.

Heroism, it repeatedly emphases, relies just as much on seeing the good in people as the bad. There are worse lessons for a game to teach, whether you want to be a hero or not. **RC**

While the second game was only released with EGA graphics, a free fan remake with VGA graphics was released in 2008, made by AGD Interactive.

Knights of Legend



Origin Systems, 1989
MS-DOS, Apple II and C64

Not only *Knights of Legend* not only had great artwork for the time, but it also came with an edit tool, allowing players to customise their character's appearance and shield design.

Knights of Legend's manual opens with a brief tale on how the game was created: in 1981 a group of four tabletop RPG players sat down in a restaurant to debate tabletop RPGs. They loved complex rulesets, but doing all the calculations they required was slow and tiring.

One of those friends, Todd Mitchell Porter, was a programmer, and upon returning home he began to design a computer RPG that could deliver all that complexity, but was quick and easy to play.

He spent eight years working on the game. When a prototype was done, he showed it to Richard Garriott, who signed him under Origin Systems and published the game in 1989 as *Knights of Legend*.

This little backstory helps to understand what kind of game we're talking about here. From the 150-page manual that describes the fantasy realm of Ashtalarea – including a timeline and an appendix on Elven language – to the fact that every single NPC has a unique portrait and personality, *Knights of Legend* is a gorgeous and extremely ambitious RPG, filled with handcrafted details and passion.



The world map is large and diverse, but there's nothing to do in it besides fighting random encounters and searching for the location of quest battles.

You start by creating a party of six characters. There are Humans, Elves and Dwarves, but also Keldens, a race of gigantic flying humanoids. Instead of classes, you choose from 33 richly described backgrounds, like Dark Guard (former guards of the evil wizard Pildar) or Usip (a small tribe of Elves in danger of extinction). These affect characters' initial stats, weapon skills and wealth, and also how NPCs react to them, as many will refuse to serve a Dark Guard or dislike Dwarves.

Magic is based on Elven words, which must be learned from wizards to create spells that target the enemy type and stats you need. For example, the spell DAYNALON is made of DAY (human), NA (body), L (moderate) and ON (nearby), and will moderately damage the body of a nearby human. Using YR instead of ON would make it a long-range spell, while using AR instead of DAY would make it target Elves.

It sounds cool on paper, but spells are expensive and ridiculously specific: a spell against Ogres is useless against Stone Ogres, making them very hard to use.

Once your party is set, you explore towns in a top-down view, talking to NPCs via *Ultima*-like keywords until you get a quest. The game contains 23 quests you must complete in order to unlock the final quest, but they are all mostly unrelated and follow the same formula: an NPC asks for an item, you ask around for clues, learn vague hints (like "search north of town") and go to the world map searching for it – which brings us to *Knights of Legend's* defining feature: combat.

Once a battle begins, you'll be overwhelmed by the amount of options available. Combat is turn-based and each turn your characters can move in three speeds (Walk, Run or Sprint), select from dozens of attack combinations – Hack at Head, Slash at Legs, Thrust at Body, Headbutt at Legs, etc –, and prepare a defensive manoeuvre, like Dodging, Jumping or Backing Up.



Character development amounts to improving weapon skills and gaining social ranks, which have little gameplay impact.



The inventory screen shows a detailed "paper doll" of your characters, something new to RPGs at the time.



Every NPC in town has a unique portrait and personality, reacting differently to the various races and backgrounds.



The enemy has a wounded arm and I can see it will target my legs, so I can avoid the attack by jumping next turn.

All these options impact damage and hit Chance, but also Fatigue – a vital stat in *Knights of Legend*. Every action causes Fatigue, based on the equipment being used, the wounds sustained and the type of action.

A heavily armoured Kelden may be tough, but he won't be able to fly (or even run) for more than a few rounds without passing out with exhaustion. As such, it's important to balance equipment load, as well as to know when to attack relentlessly and when to rest.

A key feature here is that characters with high Foresight can read enemy movements, allowing you to see what the creature will do and respond accordingly. If he'll target the head of the character in front of him, you can order that character to duck to avoid the blow.

It's one of the most complex combat systems in any RPG, but it has a huge flaw: it's excruciatingly slow. Every turn, for each of six characters, you must select where to move, how fast to move, how to attack, where to attack, how to defend and confirm each action. Not only is there a lot to do and the interface is sluggish, but enemies require several blows to be defeated. Killing a single Orc in an open field can take more than 10 minutes.

Moreover, while random encounters are always fought in small areas, quest battles take place in massive dungeons, exacerbating the issue. If repositioning your party is already a slow task, then scouting huge areas in search of quest items and surviving enemies is the CRPG equivalent of Chinese water torture – a single battle against a few enemies can last over three hours!

To make matters worse, enemies act predictably and you never face more than one enemy type at once. And not only does the formulaic quest design provide little incentive or sense of reward, but the last quest has a bug, asking you to report your victories to the wrong NPC.

Still, there's a final nail in the coffin: the only way to save your game is to go back to town, enter an inn and pay for each character to rest. Not only does this mean you can't save and quit during the hour-long battles, but you won't be able to save at all if you're out of money!

It's an ironic fate – *Knights of Legend* was born from a desire to quickly play tactical tabletop RPGs but, while the computer does handle all calculations, the game is so slow and demands so much micro-managing that it's easier to just go back to tabletop RPGs. **FE**

***Knights of Legend* was designed to support multiple expansions; the main menu even has an "Install New Region" option. However, the game sold poorly and no expansions were ever made.**

The Dark Heart of Uukrul



Brøderbund Software, 1989
MS-DOS and Apple II

"We did set out to make the game memorable, and the things the player remembers most are solving challenges, not hacking up monsters."

- *Ian Boswell, Uukrul's designer*

The Dark Heart of Uukrul is my favourite RPG of all time. I should be angry that it is so obscure and overlooked, but I realise this game caters only to a very specific kind of RPG fan.

Uukrul's achievement lies in the unorthodox ideas inherent in each of its components – it features some of the best dungeon, puzzle and character development design in the history of the genre, but also combines them into a highly memorable whole.



You explore the dungeon in first-person, following the visions and remains of a party who came before you but failed to slay the evil Uukrul.



During encounters the game switches to a top-down tactical turn-based combat, similar to the Gold Box series.

Uukrul emphasises teamwork in a way that few other RPGs do, requiring each of your characters' input for combat and puzzle-solving alike. That, however, comes at the cost of making the party composition fixed – your group inevitably consists of a Fighter, a Paladin, a Magician and a Priest.

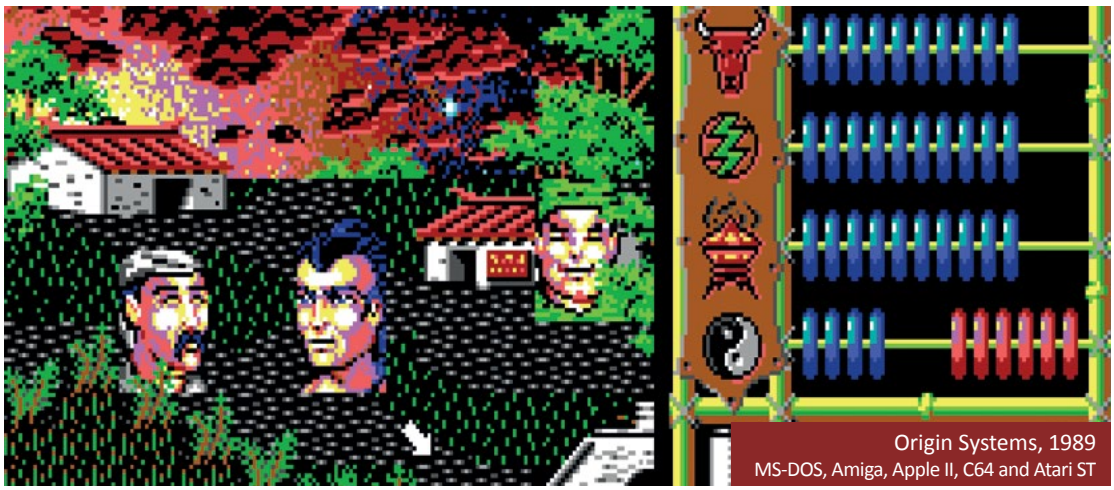
While the first two classes are fairly traditional, the magic system is where *Uukrul* shines again. Both the Priest and the Magician gain not only in levels, but also in the number and quality of rings they have equipped, each dedicated to a specific deity or magic arcana. Obtaining new rings is a separate form of character progression, unique in how tightly *DHoU* ties it to the exploration process as well as to the dungeon lore. Deciphering the Priest's prayers is also an exciting task – a puzzle that relies as much on studying the manual as it does on in-game experimentation.

What made me completely and irreversibly fall in love with the game, however, are its dungeons. The Cube, designed in "true" 3D so that the overall layout is seamless and makes sense; the oddness of the Battlefield maze with a spinner trap that haunts me still; the Palace, a "meta" role-playing area emphasising the concept of chance via the roll of a die; and, of course, the Chaos, the most unorthodox and ingenious level ever created for an RPG – encounter-free and illusion-based, yet logical and climactic, alone worth a full playthrough of the game.

I can't think of any other dungeon crawler that can top *Uukrul* when it comes to dungeon design; *Wizardry IV* and *Chaos Strikes Back* are probably the only ones that come close.

Released just a bit too late to become popular, with dated graphics and sound limitations, *The Dark Heart of Uukrul* has since been rediscovered and is now enjoying a niche cult classic status. **CB**

Windwalker



Origin Systems, 1989
MS-DOS, Amiga, Apple II, C64 and Atari ST

In 1985 Origin published *Moebius: The Orb of Celestial Harmony*, an odd RPG by Greg Malone. It was a mediocre *Ultima*-clone, but it stood out due to its Chinese-based setting, bizarre art style and, especially, its real-time martial arts combat, inspired by fighting games like *Karateka* (1984).

The sequel, *Windwalker*, went one step further. While its predecessor's combat was reflex-based, you can now battle in turn-based mode, creating a fascinating fighting system that allows you to carefully choose your next move from a menu. Moreover, a real-time replay can be seen afterwards, making it all look like a fierce martial arts duel.

So why isn't such cool game talked about more? Because combat quickly becomes one of *Windwalker*'s worst aspects. Attacks have a rock-paper-scissors logic to them – once you understand your opponent's moves, you'll know how to counter their attacks. But you can use only two fighting styles and there's only four enemy types in the game – one being the final boss! Worse yet, enemies spawn constantly, turning battles into a chore that drags the entire game down.

Regardless, there isn't much to see here anyway. There's no character creation, stats or skills – you just grow stronger as you play. The world is small, composed of tiny islands, a huge empty ocean, very few NPCs and only three quests. Thus, the frequent battles feel like lazy padding for what's otherwise a 2-3 hours game.

The Chinese-inspired setting is richly described in the manual (with a bibliography!) and there's even an NPC that will read your fortune using the *I Ching*, but otherwise it's tragically underused. You get some magic chants, a mostly irrelevant honour code, mythological creatures and that's about it. Still, the game does look very distinctive, using heads as icons and a perspective that rolls vertically, as if the world was a cylinder.

Finally, there's a clever save and permadeath system: guards will only capture you if you lose, not kill you. And you can save anywhere. But if do you die, the game autosaves – die 10 times and it's game over.

In the end, *Windwalker* is one of those games that I really wanted to like – it looks so original and creative! Sadly, what looks like its greatest strength – the combat – only drags it down instead. And the rest of the game simply isn't good enough to make up for that. **FE**

In *Moebius: The Orb of Celestial Harmony* and in *Windwalker* you're guided by Moebius, Greg Malone's alter ego. Malone would later work on *Ultima VI* and direct *Duke Nukem 3D*.

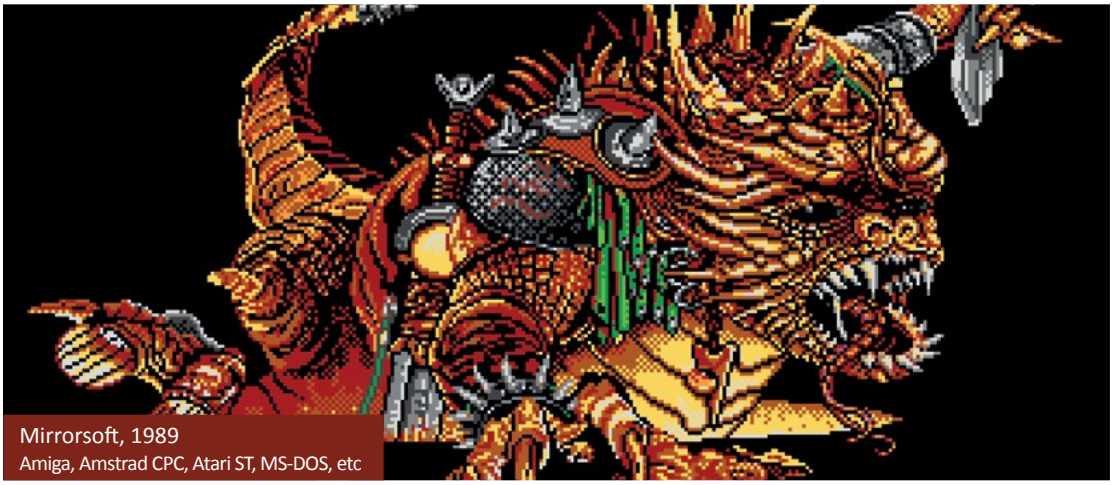


The turn-based martial arts combat feels great at first, but the frequent battles and lack of enemy variety quickly turns it into a chore.



You'll only battle human opponents. Other creatures serve as obstacles that you must avoid, usually by using magic or special items.

Bloodwych



Mirrorsoft, 1989
Amiga, Amstrad CPC, Atari ST, MS-DOS, etc

One interesting aspect of 1980s CRPGs was how they dared try out new ideas, both to be better games and adapt new technology. Sometimes it worked, sometimes not. *Bloodwych* is a great example of the latter, a game full of cool ideas but barely any praise and recognition for them, especially today. So what happened?

The screenshots show the biggest idea: split-screen. Now two players can try to save the world together.

***Bloodwych* was followed by *Hexx: Heresy of the Wizard*. Released in 1994, it was an early 3D dungeon crawler featuring the same heroes, but no multiplayer.**



One player battles a giant crab, while the other tries to bribe his way through a pair of ghost warriors.



The first player tries to figure out a locked door, while the second buys a spell from the magic fairy, which visits heroes when they sleep.

More ideas pop up in the character creation process: Pick one of 16 pre-generated champions, sorted by colours and card suits to determine their character class and school of magic. Spades are fighters, Hearts are bards, Clubs are wizards and Diamonds are rogues. With this one champion the player walks about the starting dungeon to find and recruit three more champions using a versatile keyword-based dialogue system that was years ahead of its time. The biggest problem with the two-player mode reveals itself here: the game has the same amount of resources regardless of whether a friend tags along or not, meaning that players have to compete for champions, XP, food and gear. As there's nothing stopping players from attacking each other, a friendly game can turn nasty in a heartbeat.

The dungeons themselves are basic fare; key hunts, fake walls, pressure plates and spinners, and yet the concept of a second player doesn't play into the level design. In fact, another of the game's cool ideas is that the party can be split up, which opens up many new gameplay options but they are never used. At no time are multiple parties required to complete the game.

Players can also stop and (try to) talk to monsters they encounter, but short of trade offers or using shops there's little reason to bother. So many cool ideas, so little done with them. The 8-bit versions of *Bloodwych* even cut out many of these cool ideas.

This was somewhat addressed in the game's expansion pack, *The Extended Levels*, where monsters are more chatty, offer valuable trades and can even be recruited into the party. Sadly the dungeons are no better designed this time around. As a result *Bloodwych* stands as a house full of unused ideas, ignored by history as bigger games with bigger ideas strode past it to become known classics. **ÁV**

The Immortal



Sandcastle, 1990
Amiga, Atari ST, MS-DOS, Genesis and NES*

Even for a time where there was much less hand-holding in games, *The Immortal* stands out as exceptionally unforgiving in the gory and creative ways your character – an old wizard searching for his mentor in a ruined city – can and will die.

A refreshing mix of action, adventure and RPG, the game features real-time fights, puzzles, NPCs, spells and many items – each with a purpose, even if that purpose is to kill you in a gruesome manner.

The Immortal boasts great graphics for its time, a novel save system for each level making up for the many ways you die, varied environments to explore and a short but surprisingly engaging story told through dream sequences and characters you meet during your travels.

Although the game's manual provides some hints, each level of the carefully handcrafted dungeon involves a lot of trial and error to traverse – one wrong step can mean getting immolated, crushed, drowned, spiked, webbed, swallowed whole by worms or simply attacked with few opportunities to replenish health after a fight. Fights are limited in number however, and thus always feel like a significant accomplishment once you have won or managed to bypass them.

Puzzles are diverse and mostly unique, from reflecting light with a certain item so a hidden exit appears and planting spores that will poison everyone present in a room to avoiding invisible enemies through creative use of a fireball. Though it is mostly linear, the game also incorporates some choice and consequence, with different outcomes depending on whether you chose to kill or aid certain characters.

Not a huge hit for its time, I nevertheless have very fond childhood memories of the game. It had an immersive quality to it that, in my mind, outshines many newer and bigger games.

I fought hard for the rather fragile wizard, *wanting* him to succeed and see what happened next, wanting to know who the elusive girl was and whether there was an actual dragon living down below.

If you can stomach real-time fighting and a few punishingly difficult parts, this is a forgotten gem – one that gives a real sense of accomplishment upon completion, as well as one that entertains, immerses and frustrates until then. **CH**

***The Immortal* versions are very different, some featuring extra areas and traps. The Apple IIGS is the original, but the Genesis port became famous for adding bloody death animations to each enemy.**



The wizard drinks a shrinking potion to sneak past the goblins and enter a small crack in the wall.



Fights are in real time and very arcade-like. You have two different attacks and can dodge left or right to tire your opponents.



1990-1994
The creative and technological explosion

The early 90s are often brought up as a golden age of gaming, filled with innovative and creative releases, and it's hard to disagree. In just a few years entire new genres were invented or perfected, spawning still-ongoing series and classic titles still unrivalled.

Dune II set the standard for RTS games; *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom* introduced FPS (or "*Doom*-clones", as they were known); *Civilization* popularised 4x games; *Alone in the Dark* brought in survival horror; *Street Fighter II*, *Mortal Kombat* and *The King of Fighters* dominated the arcades; platformers had *Super Mario World, Donkey Kong Country*, *Sonic*, *Megaman X, Castlevania: Rondo of Blood* and *Super Metroid;* JRPGs had *Earthbound, Final Fantasy VI, Breath of Fire, Secret of Mana*; LucasArts and Sierra released dozens of amazing adventure games; *Ultima Underworld* showed the world how to do 3D games, and the list goes on and on: *Need for Speed, Warcraft, SimCity 2000, Mario Kart, X-COM, Lemmings, F-Zero, Wing Commander, Star Fox*, etc.

With more people having dial-up conections and access to BBSs, "shareware" began to spread – games like *Epic Pinball*, *Duke Nukem* and *Doom*, as well as several applications, could all be tried for free then fully unlocked by registering them via mail. It was a way for small studios to circumvent retailers and market their games directly. Eventually many game magazines began to include CD-ROMs filled with shareware titles, as well as demos and game trailers, helping them spread even more.

The hardware side also saw a fierce competition. The Super Nintendo vs. SEGA Genesis/Mega Drive is one of the most famous rivalries in gaming history, but lesser-known consoles such as the TurboGrafx-16, Phillips CD-I, NeoGeo and 3DO were also fighting for a spot in the sun.

Deadlier yet was the battle for personal computers. Powered by new technology like VGA graphics and Intel i386 processors, PCs had proved themselves unstoppable. In 1993 Atari left the battle to focus on their Jaguar console. Commodore would soon follow, going bankrupt in 1994. Only Apple endured, struggling to keep its Macintosh relevant.

IBM wasn't the winner either. In 1994 Compaq replaced it as the biggest PC vendor in the US. IBM PC-Compatibles evolved, the industry standard became having *Windows* and an Intel chip – the "Wintel" combo.

While computers were steadily growing popular, it was still a daunting task to buy one, as technology evolved fast, competing standards appeared and several factors had to be considered – platform, processor, operational system, modem, audio card, graphics card, CD-ROM drive – all very poorly explained to consumers.

But, if you made the right choices, you had the time of your life.

Trends:

CD-ROMs & FMV: While a floppy disk could hold up to 1.4MB, the new CD-ROMs carried 650MB. This massive gain in storage allowed developers to pursue their wildest dreams: not only pre-recorded music instead of MIDI files, but pre-rendered backgrounds, cutscenes and even real actors instead of animated pixels using FMV (Full Motion Video). While it aged poorly, at the time it was hailed as the long-awaited fusion of games and cinema. But system requirements were high: expensive CD-ROM drives, sound and graphic cards.



Released in 1993, *The 7th Guest* used real actors as ghosts. It's often credited alongside *Myst* for popularising CD-ROMs.

The Entertainment Software Rating Board: While violence and sex in video games was nothing new, the use of real actors in games like *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* led to a reignited controversy and a hearing on the topic in 1993. Nintendo responded by censoring their games, while SEGA created its own rating system. Eventually several game companies partnered to form the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), which led to the creation of the self-regulatory ESRB rating system in 1994.



The ESRB rating was the industry's way to deal with demands for censorship.

Modding: Programmers have been tinkering with the code of other people's games since the dawn of video games, but id Software noticed how cumbersome it was to mod *Wolfenstein 3D* and decided to make *Doom* easily moddable – everything needed was contained in WAD ("Where's All the Data?") files. With *Doom*'s massive popularity and the dawn of the Internet, thousands of mods were created. This philosophy was carried into *Quake* and later *Half-Life*, leading to legendary mods like *Team Fortress* and *Counter-Strike*.



Aliens TC is a total conversion mod for *Doom,* based on the movie *Aliens* and released in 1994.



The **World Wide Web**, the Internet as we know it today, begins as the first web browser, HTTP, HTML and web pages are created.



The **Super Nintendo** is released. Despite arriving much later than the Genesis/Mega Drive, it "won" the 16-bit generation, selling 41M units.



Linux is first released. Created by Linus Torvalds, it led to free and open-source operational systems used by many companies and users.

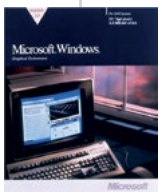


Myst uses CD-ROMs to deliver a gorgeous, well-designed and accessible Adventure game, becoming the PC's best-selling game.



The PlayStation is Sony's first console. Created after a failed partnership with Nintendo, it would dominate the market, selling over 100 million units.

1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994



Windows 3.0 is released. Microsoft partnered with many companies to sell IBM PC-Compatibles with *Windows 3.0* pre-installed, leading to it becoming extremely popular.



Sonic: The Hedgehog is SEGA's answer to Nintendo's Mario. Faster and edgier, the mascot would become an icon of gaming in the 90s, especially of the Nintendo vs. SEGA console war.



Mortal Kombat not only conquers the arcades and begins a long-standing rivalry with *Street Fighter*, but also has parents up in arms against its violence, paving way for the ESRB.

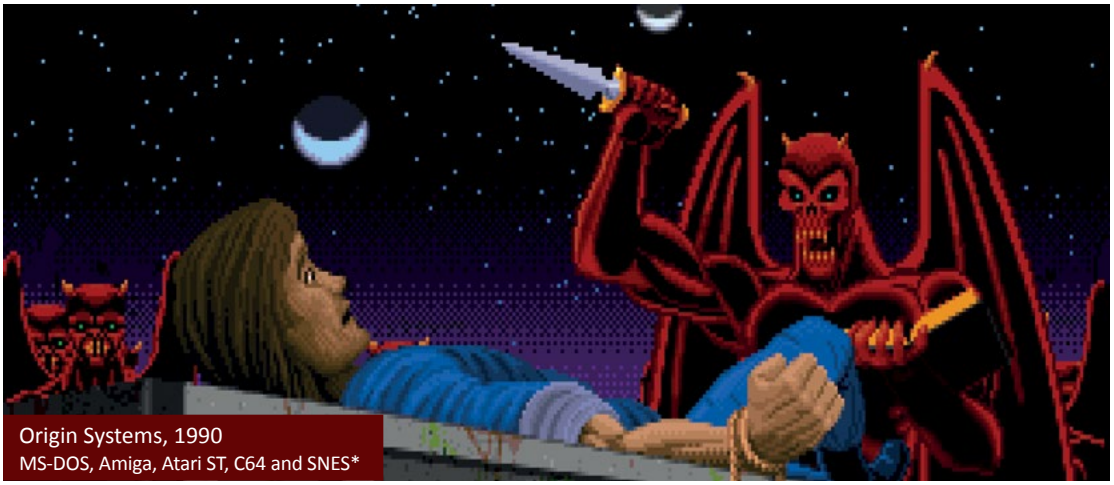


Doom arrives, reaching millions of people as shareware. One of the most important games of all time, it popularised first-person shooters, multiplayer deathmatches and modding.



The **SEGA Saturn** is released as a successor to the Genesis/Mega Drive. Expensive, poorly marketed and with many games available only in Japan, the console failed and sold only 9 million units.

Ultima VI:
The False Prophet



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

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-colour 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.



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.

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 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.

***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.**

"I began to reach into things like racism, and what I did with *Ultima VI* was I brought in a race of beings that look very demonic: they have horns, they have leathery wings, they have long claws. [...] I set you up to assume that they were evil, when in fact they have families and literature and science, and their grief with you is associated with things that the human society has been doing to them over time. In fact, the way to lose the game is to win the battle. The way to win the game is to force peace."

– *Richard Garriott, Ultima VI's designer*



Ultima VI 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". 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" for the player to be taken to another map full of buildings and NPCs. In *Ultima VI* buildings and NPCs are present alongside mountains and forests – all of Britannia can be explored in one 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. It's a classic title well worth purchasing and exploring. **KE**

Numerous utilities exist to allow players to edit the map, graphics, and dialogue of *Ultima VI*. For more details, go to: www.ultima6.ultimacodex.com

Nuvie

The New Ultima VI Engine began as an attempt to create an 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, dialogue keywords, new graphics and much more.



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

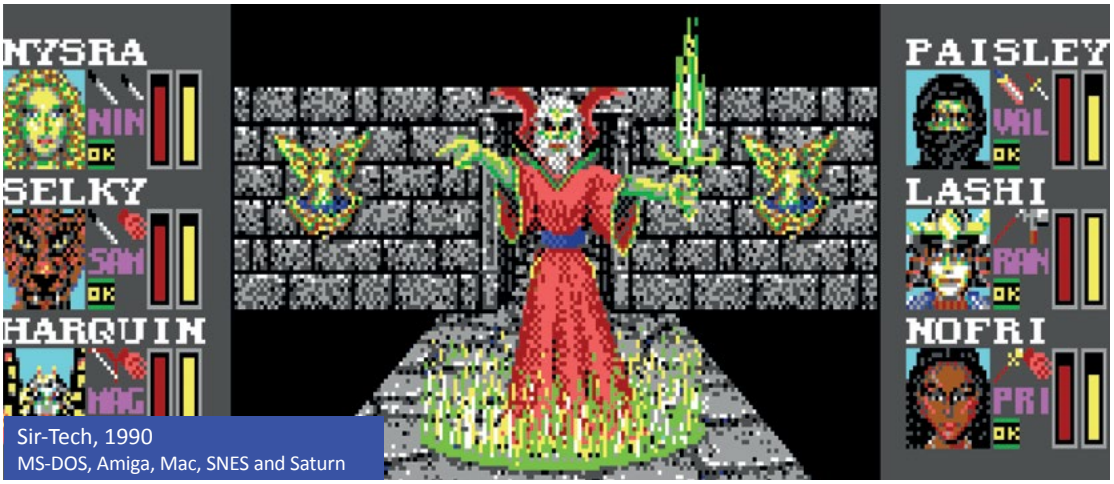
The Ultima 6 Project

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

Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge



Sir-Tech, 1990
MS-DOS, Amiga, Mac, SNES and Saturn

Wizardry VI **was remade for the SNES and Saturn, sporting much improved graphics and a handy mini-map. Sadly, these versions never left Japan.**

Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge is often overlooked as a stepping stone for the sprawling sequel *Wizardry VII*, yet in my opinion it's the best of the whole series.

There are lots of objective reasons why it's important for the evolution of the series, but for me it conveyed such an incredible sense of place without losing the gamey and addictive maze-ness of previous *Wizardry* entries that just made it hard to put down. I remember mapping the main hub of the game, the entry level of the castle, and suddenly realising that it actually resembled a castle when you looked at the map. At that time that blew my mind more than many of the more far-reaching changes to mechanics.

That said, *Wizardry VI* marked a major turning point for the series. David Bradley was now the sole designer, and he wasn't afraid to break conventions. Some changes are immediately obvious, such as the new EGA graphics, while others are more subtle.

For example, when you enter the Bane castle for the first time the gate ominously closes behind you, never to be opened again.



Wizardry VI finally replaced the wire-frame dungeons with colourful EGA graphics. But it's very limited: the game only has one tileset, so forests, mines and pyramids all look like stone dungeons.

If you didn't play any of the previous games in the series, this detail might not mean much to you. Otherwise you will immediately understand that with one swift move you have been cut off from one of the main support pillars of past games. There is no going back to the city to rest and heal, to identify or buy items, or restore or replace fallen comrades.

Where *Wizardry V* improved on mechanics of the early *Wizardry* games with small iterative steps, *Wizardry VI* boldly rips out the guts of the series and replaces them to an extent never done before or again. Instead of five races and eight classes, you get 11 races and 14 classes, all with distinct career paths and strengths and weaknesses. The typical fantasy races from previous games remain, but they are joined by new furry options like humanoid cats, dogs, lizards, dragons and others.

Moreover, an extensive skill system was added, with over 20 skills spread across three categories (Weapons, Physical and Academic), further differentiating the various classes. As with previous games, items are restricted by class and race, with most of the restrictions making at least some sense.

Quantity doesn't always translate into quality but, together with the already existing class-change feature, character development in *Wizardry VI* went into overdrive – seeing your characters go from total pushovers to killing machines is as satisfying as ever.

Magic is another area that was completely overhauled. Spells are now sorted into six schools, including Psionics and Alchemy. The more poetic spell names were replaced by functional ones (e.g. MAHALITO became Fireball), which decreased style but increased usability. More importantly, spells now cost mana and can be cast in six distinct power levels, each increasing its effectiveness and cost.

"Bane was a breakout – it was time to take the next step, time for our adventures to grow up and leave the safety of the nest, it was time that there should be no going back. *Bane* retained the full spirit of traditional *Wizardry*, braving ever deeper into the castle dungeon, but then, what happens?! At the point of climax we reach not the lowest depths, but instead ascend outside the confines of the dungeon prison, freed forever from the shackles of the past, and the end is now the prelude for what is to follow."

– David D. Bradley, *Wizardry VI's creator*



NPCs are more complex and play a much greater role than in previous *Wizardry* games. Some may even lie to you, and the game offers three different endings based on whom you chose to believe.

Another area the game improves upon are locks and traps. *Wizardry VI* introduces separate gameplay for both unlocking doors and opening treasure chests. Usually I hate mini-games in RPGs, as they often feel completely disconnected from the core gameplay of the rest of the game, but I always loved the various iterations of lock-picking and trap-disarming starting with *Wizardry VI*, as they felt like such an integral part of the game's world.

It would be easy to go on with a list of all the things Bradley changed with *Wizardry VI* (improved NPC interactions, different attack modes for weapons, increased number of status effects, etc.), but all it boils down to is that the changes pushed the series into a new era without sacrificing complexity along the way.

That isn't to say that nothing was lost in the transition. Not everyone enjoyed the verbose NPCs, the ability to rest anywhere and the removal of the "explore dungeon, return to town" gameplay loop.

Japanese developers prefer the old ways, and have polished the gameplay of earlier *Wizardry* entries to perfection, their best "dungeon RPGs" offering the same mechanical depth that *Wizardry VI* introduced. But their worlds remain constrained and limited – as awesome as they are – to abstract mazes.

Wizardry VI, on the other hand, broke free from these constraints, with maps that felt like real places yet are still maze-like enough to provide a challenge. Unlike its open-world sequels, *Wizardry VI*'s maps are tightly designed, with many paths between the various areas. Instead of a series of dungeon levels, you really had the feeling of slowly exploring a massive, densely layered castle and its surroundings.

Wizardry VI is much more than a transition piece – it managed to repackage the classic *Wizardry* experience, by both pushing forward and yet keeping the elements that have always been most appealing about the series. **JG**

You can use the *Cosmic Forge Editor* to apply bug fixes, patches that alter gameplay mechanics and edit many of the game files.



Wizardry VI finally adds mouse support, but its interface is unwieldy and works much better with the keyboard.



Magic plays very differently from previous *Wizardry* games, as spells now cost mana and have multiple power levels.

Tunnels & Trolls:
Crusaders of Khazan



New World Computing, 1990
MS-DOS, PC-98, PC-88 and FM-Towns

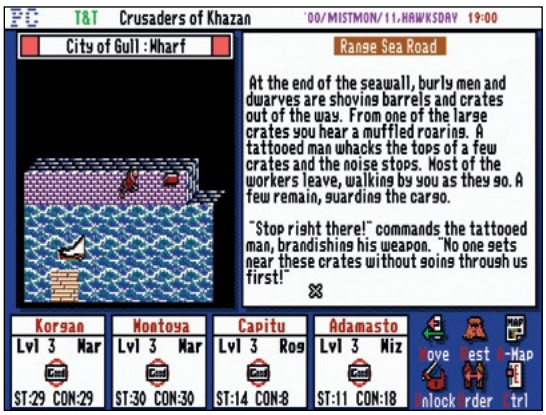
***Tunnels & Trolls* was first released in Japan, and then almost entirely re-written by Neal Hallford (writer of *Betrayal at Krondor*) to be released in English.**

Tunnels & Trolls is based on the tabletop RPG of the same name, designed by Ken St. Andre in 1975 as a light-hearted and accessible alternative to the recently released *Dungeons & Dragons*.

When *Tunnels & Trolls* was released in Japan in 1987, it became extremely popular. And so Starcraft, the company who published the Japanese versions of *Wizardry* and *Might and Magic*, asked New World Computing to co-design a licensed *T&T* CRPG.



Combat is turn-based and can be automatically fought by the AI. While most battles are simple, some are practically unwinnable.



Events are spread all over the maps, but are invisible. You never know when you'll come across a life-and-death choice, so save often!

As such, *Tunnel & Trolls: Crusaders of Khazan's* design was done in the US, then sent to Japan, where the game was programmed. This can be immediately noticed in the unusual mouse-driven interface, similar to early Japanese graphical operational systems.

Overall the game plays mostly like an *Ultima* clone, with various cities, a large overworld, turn-based combat and a customisable four-character party. What truly sets it apart is the presence of countless Choose Your Own Adventure-like events, most taken directly from *T&T*'s solo adventure game books.

Instead of having interactive NPCs, the game is filled with countless text-heavy encounters and events where you can pick one of many options, leading to vastly different outcomes; from a nice reward to instant death – some may even change depending on your race, class, stats and/or known languages!

However, while events are well-written and offer many role-playing opportunities, far too often a blind choice will wipe your party – for example, ignoring a castaway's plea for help can lead to an impossible battle against a horde of angry water elementals.

To make matters worse, enemies scale to your level in an unfair way. If there's a dragon blocking your way and you decide to grind a few more levels, chances are next time you'll face three dragons instead.

To survive you'll have to save after almost every step, because any harmless-looking empty square nearby may actually contain a deadly trap, ambush or event that can take you to the Game Over screen.

It's a shame, but these annoying issues ended up dooming what's otherwise an intriguing game. The excellent CYOA-like events set it apart from any other CRPG of the time (and even of today), but only those willing to endure a frustrating difficulty and many, many reloads will get to enjoy them. **FE**

Circuit's Edge



Westwood Associates, 1990
MS-DOS

Circuit's Edge is an interesting Adventure/RPG hybrid, based on George Alec Effinger's 1987 book *When Gravity Fails*. It takes place in a dystopic cyberpunk future which, like most of the sort, owes a tremendous debt to William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. The major difference is that, instead of the world being overtaken by the Japanese, it's instead been influenced by Islamic culture.

You control Marîd Audran who, per usual pulp standards, is a down-on-his-luck detective that has resorted to running goods for his pals. During a seemingly innocuous delivery, you find your client dead, presumably murdered. A mafia boss saves you from being arrested, but now you must help him investigate the murder, exploring the seedy underground of a city known only as The Budayeen.

The gameplay leans more towards the RPG end of the spectrum, as real puzzles are sparse and most of the time is simply spent running to different cafes and bars, talking to people, and finding leads. You'll also end up gambling, beating up punks and selling junk to get enough money to buy cybernetic modifications, which can be equipped to improve various skills, such as combat and hacking.

Not all of the events are linear, making it relatively free-form compared to a standard adventure game. The game runs in real time, meaning certain people are at certain places during certain times and it is entirely possible to miss stuff if you take too long.

While the story is standard and the interface is a pain, *Circuit's Edge* really nails the atmosphere. The 16-colour graphics are perfect to depict the city's grittiness, and the music, while sparse, is appropriately moody. There's quite a bit of nudity, many of the females are "sexchanges", and you can sleep with practically anything or even light up.

There are over 60 locations in The Budayeen, and you can easily spend the first few hours trawling the bars, trying to pick up hookers, gambling and watching holo peep shows, just taking in the game world. While the interaction is somewhat limited, there's enough depth to the hellhole that is the Budayeen to make the trip worthwhile, even decades later. As a whole, *Circuit's Edge* flounders as an RPG but succeeds as a work of interactive fiction. **KK**

***Circuit's Edge* had the help of *When Gravity Fails* author George Alec Effinger, who claimed to have written "about 75% of everything on screen".**



You explore the city in first-person view, like an urban dungeon, using a drop-down menu or typing keywords to interact with items and NPCs.



You can be randomly attacked by muggers, but winning these fights usually just requires that you've installed the proper cybernetic mods.

J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, Vol. I



Interplay, 1990
MS-DOS and Amiga

In 1994 Interplay released another game called *J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings Vol. I*, this time for the SNES. Despite having the exact same title, it was an entirely new game, made by a different team.

I remember exactly why I bought *Lord of the Rings Vol. 1*. The box art was cool. The title had quite the catchy name. And since this was the CD-ROM version, it featured lots of animated cutscenes from a movie I had no idea was animated by Ralph Bakshi nor that it was adapted from apparently quite the famous book. I was a 10-year-old kid, OK?

Yet this was a game that changed my life: you can explore a huge game world however you like? And you can do things in the order you want? And there are several solutions to problems, some the developers have not actually thought about?

While mostly forgotten today, *LOTR Vol. 1* has many of the features that defined the great RPGs of its time, presented in a colourful and acessible game that still remains rewarding and highly replayable.

You start alone with a band of three weak hobbits, grow nearly invincible as the full Fellowship is formed, explore dungeons, talk to characters with a system of keywords very much akin to *Ultima*, get side-quests, fight in many turn-based battles, and eventually, prevail (at least until the sequel).



While the graphics where good for the time, they lack variety and fail to convey a sense of wonder. This screenshot shows the gates of Moria and its tentacle guardian, but they look like many other areas.

The game uses an overhead view similar to *Ultima VI*, with a mouse-driven interface and graphics that are colourful but lack in variety. The soundtrack, however, is memorable and features tunes that feel both adventurous and peaceful.

The player controls a large party of up to ten adventurers at once, but there's actually many more characters available to be recruited. There's no character creation and levelling up is pratically meaningless, so customisation comes from selecting who will join your Fellowship and equipping them.

The game world, fully fleshed out from the Shire to Lothlorien, is lengthily described on-screen (or in the game's manual, if you were playing the floppy disk version) – a similarity it shares with *Wasteland*, another Interplay game. And not the only one: skills are to be used often outside of combat. Your characters can climb a hill, jump over pits, pick locks, or even use their knowledge to display additional text that gives important clues or just interesting lore.

The reader of *Lord of the Rings* often wished she could explore Middle-Earth at her own pace, and this is a game that pretty much allows this; walking off tracks, entering every house, talking to everyone and inspecting every cranny is the most rewarding aspect of this game. And it is quite a big game.

Combat, on the other hand, is the game's main weakness. It's turn-based but allows for very few strategies, with the large party being more of a burden than a tactical advantage – the walk order of your party, for example, is of utmost importance to avoid getting strong characters stuck behind weaker ones. Overall, it boils down to having the highest strength and being lucky. Magic is scarce and used mostly for puzzle-solving, but it's disappointing that not even enemy spellcasters will use magic against you.

"I had obsessed over the books when I was little, had the calendar and everything. And inside the front cover of *The Fellowship of the Ring* was a computer program I'd written down by hand when I was in seventh grade. I brought it to them [the Tolkien Estate] and showed them: 'This was my first computer program, written inside the cover of this book.' I don't know if that's what got them to agree, but they did. I think they knew they were dealing with people that were passionate about the licence."

– Brian Fargo, *Interplay's founder*



Combat is turn-based and very simple; the most important thing is the marching order of your party, as characters need to get close to attack and might get stuck behind weaker party members.

Lord of the Rings, Vol. 1 had another controversial feature. Anyone who read the book will be confused at seeing references to Sharkey quite early in the game, at meeting the wizard Radagast in such circumstances, and even being able to recruit another very special character so early in the story.

This is because *LOTR Vol. 1* doesn't follow the plot of the novel entirely. It says this straight away in the manual: "The reason we did this was not to 'improve' Tolkien's work, but to challenge the computer gamer who is familiar with Tolkien's work. Expect to be surprised."

As such, there are many plot elements, quests, and even main story events that didn't appear in the books. A huge betrayal and blasphemy to some, a fair bit of fresh air to others – especially as it allowed for events and quests to have multiple solutions.

The game also played loose with its cast, as you can "win" even if characters like Frodo, Gimli, Legolas and Aragorn are dead or were never recruited.

Despite this, some moments in the game can be very confusing if players aren't familiar with the books. There are no hints on how to deal with the Balrog in Moria, for example. It's also easy to miss important events and characters, as some of them will only appear if you walk over the exact tile that triggers them.

The game was followed by a *Volume 2* in 1992, based on *The Two Towers*. The engine and gameplay were mostly similar, but one could tell the developers were struggling with a source material featuring vast, open fields and a less linear story. The sequel erraticaly moved you from one party to the other and featured rather dull environments. And how to show the massive Helm's Deep battle with 1990 technology?

Volume 3 was never made; poor sales sealed its fate. It could be just as well, as *Return of the King*'s story is hardly fit for this kind of game. Thus ends this first attempt at a *Lord of the Rings* CRPG; not a major title, but a small curiosity that can be easily enjoyed. **MI**

The game was re-released for CD-ROM in 1992, adding an automap, an extended soundtrack, scenes from Ralph Bakshi's *Lord of the Rings* movie and removing the need to look up paragraphs in the manual.

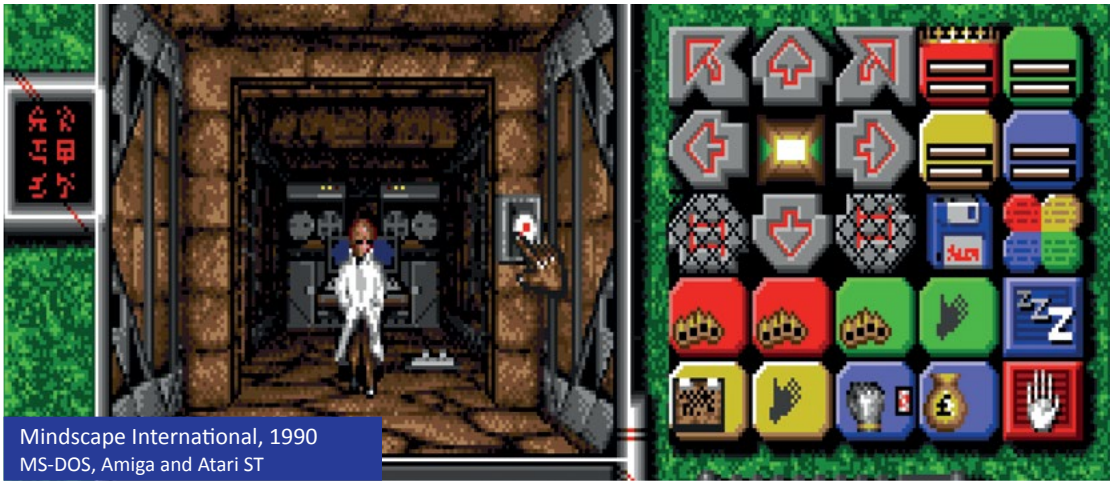


The CD-ROM version replaced its cutscenes with clips from the 1978 *Lord of the Rings* movie directed by Ralph Bakshi.



There's a great degree of narrative freedom; events have multiple paths and you can win without key characters.

Captive



Mindscape International, 1990
MS-DOS, Amiga and Atari ST

Captive is a real-time sci-fi blobber where your character wakes up imprisoned somewhere unknown. Your only hope now is to remotely control four droids, who must find and liberate you.

The droids are highly customisable, as they have detachable individual parts (hands, arms, legs, feet, chest and head), each with its own stats, energy cost and utility. For example, a droid with a damaged head will display distorted graphics to the player.

The Ultimate Captive Guide is an excellent fan-site entirely dedicated to *Captive*, filled with trivia, useful tools, tips and stats.



You can replace the droids' parts, upgrade your equipment and install shields, scanners, mini-maps and other useful features directly to the UI.



Captive 2 is a very exotic and ambitious game, with a massive scope and some very unusual design choices.

Captive relies heavily on procedural generation. When you start the game, you first have to fly with a spaceship to one of the planets on your star map, land, locate an enemy base, enter, locate a space probe inside the base, destroy the generators and then run like hell. If you don't manage to get out in time, you'll die when the base explodes. The goal of the game is to do this ten more times, allowing you to free yourself.

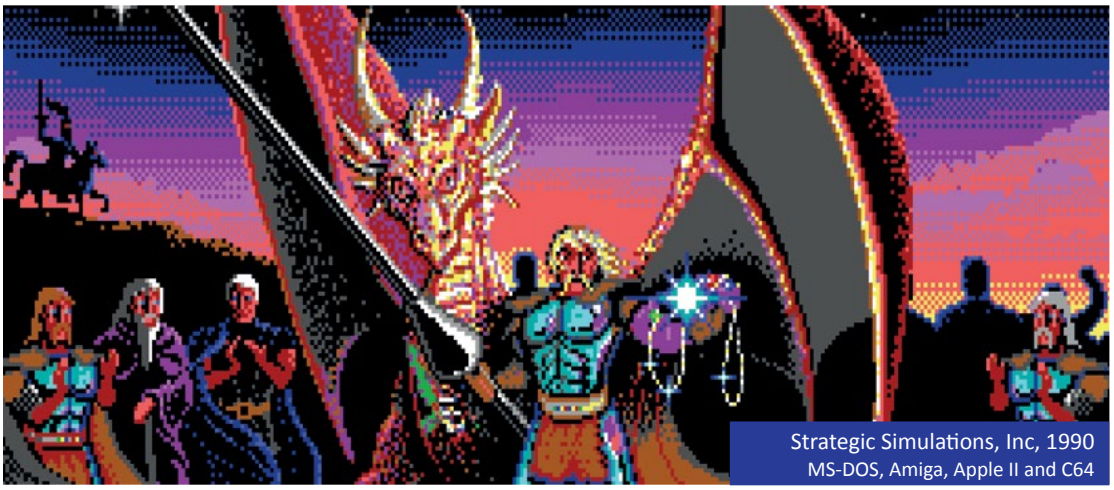
If you succeed, you get the chance to start over again, and again and again. Hundreds of bases with countless procedurally generated levels, all sprung from the same seed to make sure every player sees the same sets of levels. This is both the game's greatest strength and weakness. Once you understand how the game constructs levels and even puzzles, you'll realise just how bare-bones and repetitive it is.

Playing *Captive* as a kid, that didn't bother me. What kept me going was seeing something new every base. New monsters, different tile graphics, more weapons, body parts and ingenious tech upgrades. That first run with 11 bases is quite fun and has enough to offer to overcome the simplistic gameplay. But after that it gets tedious.

The sequel, *Liberation: Captive 2* (1994), was truly ambitious. Once again in charge of the four droids, you have to investigate a murder cover-up in a futuristic, hostile city. The city is massive – a sprawling open world with shops, libraries, offices, houses, etc. The game also featured fully 3D graphics, a customisable UI and introduced the ability to talk to NPCs, pursuing more peaceful approaches.

Still, just as with the first game, most of it was procedurally generated and, combined with the insanely large city, made for a game easy to admire for its ambition but hard to finish due to sheer size and lack of compelling, handcrafted content. **JG**

Champions of Krynn



Strategic Simulations, Inc, 1990
MS-DOS, Amiga, Apple II and C64

Champions of Krynn is the first entry in the second of SSI's "Gold Box" series, this time set on the then-popular Dragonlance setting. I bought it when I was 14 years old, attracted by the box art and the back of the box description. I had only just discovered Tolkien and entered my first fantasy phase, I guess. ("It's not a phase, mum!")

When I bought the game, I had never played *D&D* and I didn't really know what it was. I thought it was something very American, probably expensive, and surely I wouldn't find anyone to play it with anyway. (I did have *Hero Quest* and it was already tough finding friends who wanted to play that.) A computer game was the ideal solution to my fantasy role-playing needs.

The manual first describes how to play the game, then explains the A*D&D* rules (often in great detail), followed by several journal-like entries to which the game refers to once in a while in order to advance the story. It was all quite overwhelming. Just by reading these, I understood that *Krynn* was something real, complex and detailed. I knew it was made for me.

I think you remember your first computer RPG because it draws you in. You are absorbed by it and you care about your characters so much, you dream about them. In hindsight, the story wasn't exactly the strong point of the *Krynn* series, but the stories you come up with yourself, these live forever.

Now that I know Dragonlance, I appreciate the attention to details. How a lot of iconic characters make their appearance in these games. How magical items are rare and mages aren't trusted. How they made the gods, and even the three moons and their cycles a gameplay feature, boosting certain magic depending on their phase. How you could create a Kender or a Solamnic Knight, and how there were already quests that only a certain class could solve.

A lot later, when I traded my Commodore 64 for a PC, I could finally play the rest of this epic trilogy: *Death Knights of Krynn*, released in 1991, and *Dark Queen of Krynn* (1992). And so I restarted *Champions* (probably for the fifth time), in order to import my party into the sequels. And even though I was almost 10 years older, and it was the ugliest game at that time, it was still my favourite RPG.

Now I'm almost 30 years older, and it still is. **DW**

The Dragonlance setting by Tracy & Laura Hickman grew extremely popular in the 90s, with a dedicated *D&D* line and a shared universe spanning over 190 novels.



The Gold Box games are known for their challenging tactical combat, and *Krynn* adds new threats like Draconians that explode after being killed.



The *Krynn* series is filled with iconic characters and set pieces from the books, such as Death Knights, flying islands and dragon battles, remaining a fan favourite.

MegaTraveller:
The Zhodani Conspiracy



Paragon Software, 1990
MS-DOS, Amiga and Atari ST

The *Traveller* tabletop RPG was first published in 1977 and became quite popular in the 80s. It had several versions, like *MegaTraveller*, *T4*, *T5*, *Mongoose* and adaptations for *Hero System*, *GURPS* and d20.

Based on the *MegaTraveller pen-and-paper* RPG, *The Zhodani Conspiracy* brings one of the most complex rulesets in any video game. However, complexity doesn't equate to quality, and much of the game is overshadowed by pointless rules, a cliché plot and a combat system that turns duels with laser rifles into a chore – a sin for any sci-fi game.

Upon starting the game (and passing the multiple-choice copy protection test), players have the option of creating five characters from scratch or quick-starting with a pre-generated party.

MegaTraveller offered one of the most extensive character generation process ever made. Hours can be spent here. After rolling (and most likely re-rolling) your attributes, your character can attempt to sign up for one of the five major services (Marines, Army, Navy, Merchant, and Scout), or enter the draft.

Signing up for a branch is by no means assured: the Marines, for example, are quite difficult to enter and, even if you're successfully accepted, there's no guarantee that you won't be pulling kitchen duty and peeling potatoes for a term – literally.



Character creation is faithful to the *MegaTraveller* tabletop ruleset and almost a game by itself; you can even die to injuries! It would later by mimicked by *System Shock 2*.

Each term you'll learn new skills but, instead of manually selecting them, you choose a category and the game randomly gives you one of its skills, e.g., Personal Development might give you Physical, +1 Dexterity, Vice, Hand Combat or Blade Combat. Yet some of these can still have sub-options! For example, Vice can have you learning Bribery, Forgery and other types of skulduggery.

After each term, you can choose to re-enlist or retire and become a mercenary. The longer you serve, the better trained your character, but serve too long and your stats begin to decrease due to old age – you might be expelled or even have an accident and die during character creation! Once you retire, you get one random benefit for each term served – bonus attributes, weapons, armour or simply some cash.

With your party finished, a mysterious woman barges into a bar and hires you to deliver a disc with information that can end the ongoing war. You then leave the bar and get ambushed, starting under enemy fire with no time to prepare or learn the controls.

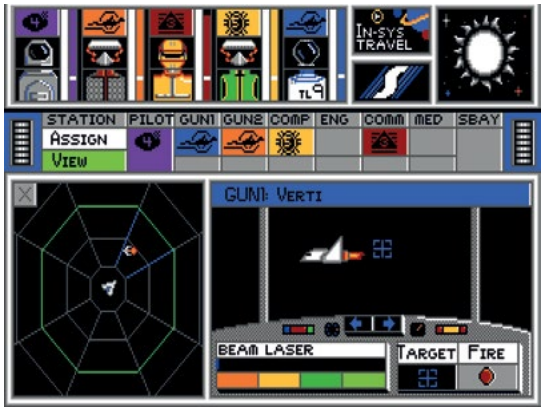
To make matters worse, the combat is atrocious. Battles play in real time, but the interface is slow and only one character can be controlled at a time. This means your party will stand still while you awkwardly try to order one character to fire at the enemies.

This was such an issue that Paragon Software made a patch for the game, changing the combat to allow players to pause and issue orders. Still, battles remain the worst part of the game – there are no tactics or useful feedback, you just shoot until someone dies. Moreover, hearing about a patch in a pre-Internet era was a challenge, so many players never saw the fixes.

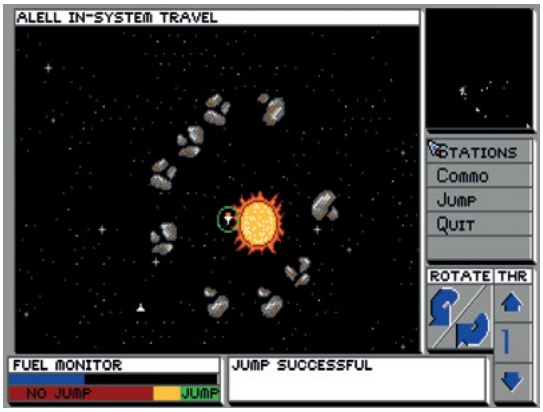
If you manage to survive – or flee – the ambush, the game finally starts properly and you're free to explore the planet's tiny city in a top-down view.



Walking out of the starport without using a vacuum suit is a recipe for instant death in planets with no oxygen.



Your ship has eight stations that must be manned. During combat, for example, you need someone firing the guns.



Space flight was originally too hard, with variables like gravitational fields, and was patched to be more arcade-y.



The sequel expands upon the first game, but doesn't fix glaring flaws like the terrible combat and useless skills.

MegaTraveller's main quest is really just an excuse to gather money to upgrade your characters and ship for the endgame. In this regard, the game can be overwhelming, as every aspect is filled with options. Shops are packed with several types of weapons, armour, items and upgrades. You can enter buildings and talk to a few NPCs (though they won't say much), rent one of three unique vehicles to explore the planet's surface or just travel to other planets and systems.

The spaceport allows you to board your ship – or buy a new one. Also available are computer programs that increase your chance of evading attacks or allow you to jump between solar systems – yes, not only does your ship need to have a Jump Drive to travel, but it also needs the software to operate it! The computers themselves can also be upgraded to allow for more programs to run simultaneously.

The spaceport also allows you to buy and sell commodities. Different planets have different prices, so it's possible to start by playing as a trader. Another valid option is attacking other spaceships, destroying them and tractor-beaming their cargo.

Where *MegaTraveller* falls flat is that most of this is wasted. The game's quests, battles and exploration are bare-bones, with nothing that justifies having all these systems, e.g. why have over 30 weapon types but only a few enemies that all behave the same way?

The game bolsters 85 skills, but the manual itself states that 25 are useless, left there for those who wish to use their characters to play the pen-and-paper version of *MegaTraveller*. Still, the remaining 57 skills are just as meaningless and can be mostly ignored.

The sequel, *MegaTraveller 2: Quest for the Ancients* (1991), features a non-linear story that's slightly better, but still has terrible combat and doubles down on the pointless complexity – now there are 125 skills!

In the end, enjoying the *MegaTraveller* CRPGs is all about the illusion – if you ignore (or don't realise) how pointless its systems are, you can dive into them and create your own enjoyment – trading, pirating, learning which weapons can be legally carried in each city, managing air tanks while exploring toxic atmospheres, etc. Whether they are meaningful or not, few games offer so many systems to play with. **FE**

The Zhodani Conspiracy **had an unusually high amount of patches for a 1990 title. First they added a pause feature to combat, and a second patch improved the interface and the space controls. These changes were included in the Amiga and Atari ST ports.**

Spirit of Excalibur



Synergistic Software, 1990
MS-DOS, Amiga, Apple IIGS, Atari ST and Mac

In 1989 Synergistic Software released *J.R.R. Tolkien's War in Middle Earth*, a very similar game to *Spirit of Excalibur*, but set in Middle-Earth and focused on large-scale battles.

In *Spirit of Excalibur* you play as the mythical Knights of the Round Table, in a time after Arthur's death where the realm is in turmoil and needs saving.

Harking back to a time where developers often mixed and matched genres, the game contains a bit of everything – exploration, strategy, adventure and RPG elements. You control armies in (simple) tactical battles, direct your multiple parties of knights around the campaign map in search of clues, quests and items you need to overcome obstacles. On the way you will meet many colourful characters to interact with, trading with some, getting information from others, helping the local populace and working to create alliances and get new knights to join.

All this is done within a narrative divided into several episodes, with each containing an overarching objective, new NPCs and armies on the map and several side-quests you can choose to engage in or not.

The amount of knights you can move out into the world, saving damsels and slaying dragons, is limited at first but as you conquer territory and solve quests, more and more knights and parts of Britain join you, giving you more manpower and leading to your ultimate goal of reuniting the land.



You can send multiple parties to explore the world and choose how to react to the various events and challenges they come across.

Some knights have old rivalries and should be kept apart, others are of questionable moral fibre and may join the enemy, but mostly you'll come to rely on only a few key knights, sorcerers and monks. Some will have an army under their command, which you'll need to counter Saxon armies and robbers on the campaign map, but most knights you'll employ in RPG fashion, facing opponents in single combat, supported by magic, potions and other helpful items.

Spirit of Excalibur is divided into five parts, each containing a challenge to the realm that must be dealt with – in many cases swiftly and under severe opposition. Navigating through this in the most effective manner requires a lot of experimentation and a lot of restarts for each chapter. This is both part of the charm and the frustration of the game – it will make you work for its perfect ending and you will feel quite some accomplishment if you ever get it.

Battles are relatively few in number, and many can be avoided. A nice touch is that you can mix and match multiple parties, directing each of them around the map as you please, completing multiple objectives such as countering enemy armies in several places at once or having quicker knights scout ahead, buying things from peddlers and gathering information, while your best party focuses on the storyline.

I remember originally filing the game under 'adventure', because while it has progressing stats and several ways to solve (some) situations, at its heart, the game is about exploration, puzzle-solving and above all, even for its time, trial and error. In its hardest parts you be under time constraints and need to do everything just right.



Like in adventure games, you can explore locations and use a list of verbs to interact with characters and items.



Sir Ector duels Morwick to rescue a maiden. Combat is real-time and mostly automatic, but you can give orders.



During army battles you can order individual troops to perform tactical actions or use special items and spells.



Vengeance of Excalibur sends your knights to Spain, where they'll meet Gypsies, Basques, Saracens and even Djinns.

Losing certain characters or using key items before their 'right' time might get you through one episode, but make the game unsolvable because you needed those characters/items later. Needless to say, maintaining a save from both start and end of each episode is recommended.

While the game has a problematic interface, horrid pathfinding and at times frustrating gameplay, I nonetheless remember my elation at finally 'solving' it, figuring out the puzzles and completing battles with strong knights equipped with the right items. The story is well-done, the world was beautiful for its time and the exploration, the curiosity to see what the next sleepy hamlet or gloomy ruin held, was captivating.

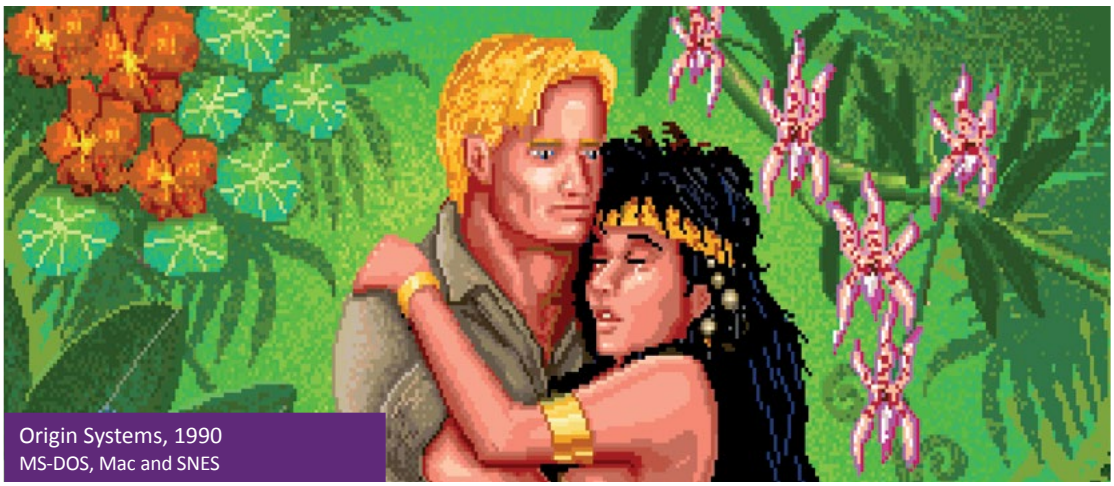
The sequel, *Vengeance of Excalibur* (1991) largely reuses the same engine and gameplay mechanics as *Spirit*. It moves the action to Spain, as a band of knights chase after a traitor who stole the artefacts of the realm. The game has improved path-finding and interface, making it potentially less frustrating, as well as markedly easier gameplay due to more linearity in the story and less trial and error.

Locales are evocative however, and the game retains the attractiveness of its predecessor in exploring and fighting your way across a detailed and changing map, though you only control four knights and hardly need to split your party this time around. One new, nice feature of the sequel is the ability to import your knights from *Spirit*, complete with gear and stats.

In summary, *Vengeance* is a smoother, more streamlined and linear experience, with a completely fresh setting, retaining most of what was good about *Spirit,* although failing to evoke quite the same level of fondness. Still, if you like the first, you will like the second as well – it is a charming game in its own right and certainly more forgiving than its elder brother.

Both games are quite forgotten by now, but I see them as rough gems with lots of enjoyment to be had for the right aficionado looking for both challenge and atmosphere. As a child I stayed up many long nights playing, admiring the graphics and making up Arthurian lore of my own – as such, this series definitely sparked my imagination and still shines clearly in my memory decades later. **CH**

Worlds of Ultima:
The Savage Empire



Origin Systems, 1990
MS-DOS, Mac and SNES

The game's manual was stylised as a 50s' pulp magazine, covering its plot, items, tribes and enemies, as well as a fake expedition by the developers.

After developing an expensive 16-bit engine for *Ultima VI*, Origin decided to use this new engine to produce a series of smaller scaled *Ultima* spin-offs, titled *Worlds of Ultima*.

The Savage Empire was the first of said series, sending the Avatar to the Lost Valley of Eodon, a *Land of the Lost*-like world populated by primitive tribes and pre-historic dinosaurs, heavily inspired by pulp magazines and the Allan Quatermain novels.



Savage Empire features cut-scenes at key moments of the game, moving beyond the usual beginning and ending cutscenes.



Getting around the huge valley can be tricky, as you'll have to pack food, fend off dinosaurs and navigate a maze-like landscape.

The valley's numerous tribes all resemble various different ethnic groups from Earth's past, including stereotypical African, Polynesian, Neanderthal and Asian cultures. Along with these human tribes and the aforementioned dinosaurs, *The Savage Empire* also features more fantastical creatures, such as a lizard-like tribe, Aztecan automatons and evil giant ant-people called Myrmidex – the game's main antagonists.

Your goal as the Avatar is to bring all the different warring tribes together to defeat the Myrmidex and bring peace to Eodon. In typical *Ultima* fashion each tribe expects you to accomplish some tasks in order for them to pledge their support. These tasks range from rescuing a chief's daughter and blocking a lava flow to drugging a T-Rex and hanging a bell on its neck.

The gameplay is very similar to Ultima VI – those familiar with it will feel right at home with the clunky UI, turn-based combat system and day-and-night NPC schedules. The new crafting system is robust, allowing you to skin animals, use ovens to bake clay pots and even grind sulfur, charcoal and potassium nitrate to make gunpowder. Another big difference is the magic system: the Avatar must make spirit offerings to cast a rather limited amount of spells (only nine in total).

In *The Savage Empire* the Avatar won't meet his traditional companions from the main *Ultima* series, like Iolo, Dupre or Shamino. However, he'll be joined by rather familiar-looking natives who just so happen to closely resemble his friends, such as Triolo, Dokray and Shamuru. He'll also have the choice to romance the brave warrior Aiela or her adopted sister, Tristia – the first interaction of this kind in CRPGs.

While *Savage Empire* is much smaller in scope than the main *Ultima* games, it still manages to retain the exploration, quest structure and semi-open world aspects of *Ultima VI*, offering a solid experience. **M2**

Escape from Hell



Electronic Arts, 1990
MS-DOS

Your girlfriend has disappeared, along with your best friend? Your life has gone to Hell? A lot of us have been there, I am sure, but Richard Seaborne's *Escape from Hell* takes those moments literally, turning them into a unique RPG premise – a cross between Dante's *Inferno* and *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*.

You are Richard, and due to a powerful magic incantation, or perhaps for your unexplained sins, you suddenly find yourself alive in Hell. Your girlfriend and your best friend are somewhere around, too, so you need to find them – and escape. Not without taking revenge on Satan for playing such a trick on you first, though. Which means it is time to grab an anti-tank rifle, team up with Stalin and Hamlet, and show Satan what you are made of, the way RPG heroes do!

Exploring Hell's wasted landscape and banding together with (in)famous historical and literary individuals is, in fact, what *Escape from Hell* is all about. Indeed, seeing as the game's difficulty is fairly low, the main challenge lies precisely in deciding who will join or leave Richard's side. Mechanically, *Escape from Hell* is a simpler version of *Wasteland*: a top-down, turn-based RPG, with stats, skills (mostly combat-oriented, but sometimes not), and first-person fights featuring animated enemy portraits.

Like many older CRPGs, *Escape from Hell*'s tone can get really wacky. (Remember *Might and Magic*'s roasted peasants or *Wasteland*'s bunny master?) It stays tongue-in-cheek throughout and never gives a damn about setting consistency. If that sounds fun to you, then you will enjoy the game's humorous design and often clever writing, and the way it thematises Hell's bureaucracy and dynamics of power, among other things. It's the kind of off-the-rails creativity that, in these days of post-Kickstarter nostalgia and the AAA RPG crisis, the genre seems to sorely lack.

Sadly, due to EA's all-too-familiar shenanigans, the game was downscaled and rushed out. Alternative endings, six further circles of Hell, a lot of individual quest chains, and an alignment system, all had to be cut. That often leads to loose ends, and ultimately prevents it from reaching true RPG greatness. And yet, even in the state that it shipped in, *Escape from Hell* remains an unorthodox and one-of-a-kind RPG, bound to remain in your memory long after you have beaten it. **CB**

You can read an extensive interview with the game's developer at the RPG Codex.



One of the game's unique mechanics involves using golden tridents to alter the environment or even travel in time. This helps compensate for the game's small world and present new challenges.



Being set in Hell, the game offers an unusual variety of recruitable NPCs, such as Dante, Stalin, Genghis Khan, Hamlet, Spartacus, Juliet and Mozart, among other real and fictional characters.

Eye of the Beholder



Westwood Studios, 1991
MS-DOS, Amiga, SEGA CD and SNES

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

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 *Dungeons & Dragons* before this, and in hindsight *Eye of the Beholder* served as a wonderful entry point into that realm, not to mention other games like it.

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 mesmerised 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.

Eye of the Beholder's character creation appeared both simple and complex at the same time, but it wasn't until much later that I realised 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.



The character system is presented as a full *AD&D* adaptation, but some stats and even classes are borderline useless.

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 four characters that could deal with whatever dangers lay ahead, knowing that I could recruit two 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 small kobold with a vicious glint in his eyes. I was familiar with 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 the game is real-time, after all.

The game's design firmly suggests that players figure things out for themselves. Except for a crude map of the starting levels, a compass in the UI and a few vague clues gleamed from the (mostly useless) manual, I was utterly on my own and trapped in a sewer. Even when I accidentally discovered that the game has hidden "Special Quests" I was mostly clueless as to how I found 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 I was quickly proven wrong after I cleared the sewers. NPC interactions are just walls of exposition text, but sometimes I was given a choice like slaying an injured dwarf or sparing the drow leader's life... not that any choices mattered in the long run.



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



Combat is real-time, inspired by *Dungeon Master*, but magic follows the *AD&D* rules and must be prepared.



Eye of the Beholder 2 was an improvement in every regard, including much high-quality NPC artwork.



Not even the large outdoor areas and fancy monsters could save *EotB3* from being the weakest in the trilogy.

Death was never far away, and while characters could be raised from the dead, there were few opportunities to do so. The early monsters didn't pose much of a threat, but then I stumbled upon spiders that wiped out my party several times due to their poison. And that was just the start of my adventure...

Around the time I first played *EotB*, the sequel *Eye of the Beholder 2: Legend of Darkmoon* (1991) was already out. The sequel improved on the original in every way, and I could even import my *EotB1* party to *EotB2*! What a joy I felt!

When *Eye of the Beholder 3: Assault on Myth Drannor* was released in 1993, I snapped it up immediately, hoping for an epic conclusion to my adventures. What I got was a game that lacked the magic touch of its prequels. Turns out that the developer had parted ways with the publisher, which then had to finish the game in-house in a hurry.

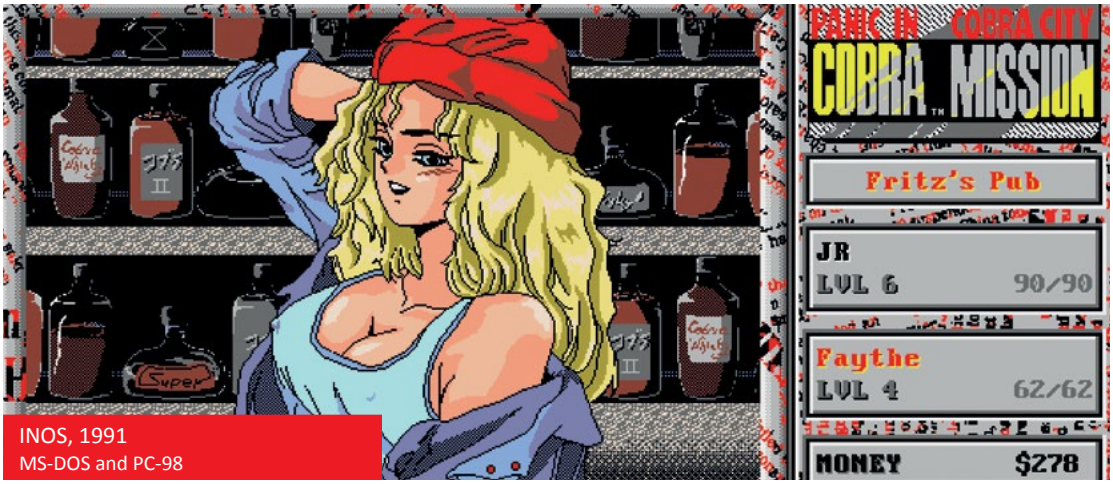
The result was a game more in tune with the *AD&D* rules, but not in a good way. Despite the poor third entry, the *Eye of the Beholder* series still stands tall, even after all these years. **ÁV**

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 famous composer Yuzo Koshiro. Curiously, a new remake for the Game Boy 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.



Cobra Mission:
Panic in Cobra City



INOS, 1991
MS-DOS and PC-98

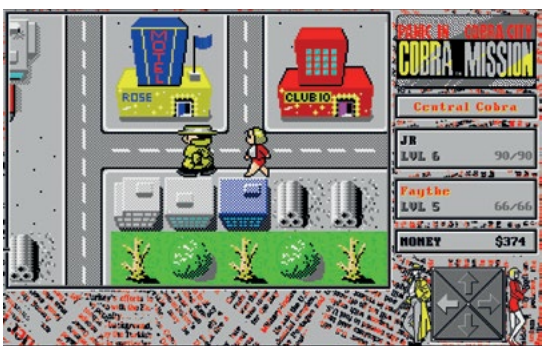
Cobra Mission was released in Japan in 1991, then localised into English by Megatech Software in 1992.

Erotic Japanese RPGs date back to the early 80s, before even *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* existed. Titles such as 団地妻の誘惑 (roughly "Housewife Temptation") had players be a salesman, visiting apartment blocks, fighting gangsters and trying to "score" with the ladies, way back in 1983.

Cobra Mission's claim to fame is being the first erotic Japanese game to be fully translated into English and released in the US, courtesy of Megatech Software. This was before the violence and sex controversies surrounding *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* which led to the ESRB being formed, when game publishing was still a wild, new frontier.



Battles require you to drag your weapon into the body part you want to attack, as many times as you can while the enemy attack charges.



Cobra City is divided into six main areas you can explore. You'll spend a lot of time aimlessly walking around and fighting random battles.

You play as JR, a hotshot private eye visiting Cobra City. You meet with Faythe, a childhood friend, and must help her to solve a kidnapping. The game is divided into six city areas, which you must unlock one by one, investigating the crimes in the area and defeating the local gang leaders.

Cobra Mission is a rather crude Adventure/RPG hybrid. You explore the city in a top-down perspective, visiting locations, talking to people, doing simple side-quests for money and searching for opportunities to ogle at naked ladies (such as peaking at a nude beach through a telescope).

The problem is that most of the time you'll be walking around aimlessly, with no clues whatsoever. And every few steps you'll be thrown into a random encounter. Moreover, some events must be done in an specific order or manner (including the sex scenes!), forcing retries and more aimless walking.

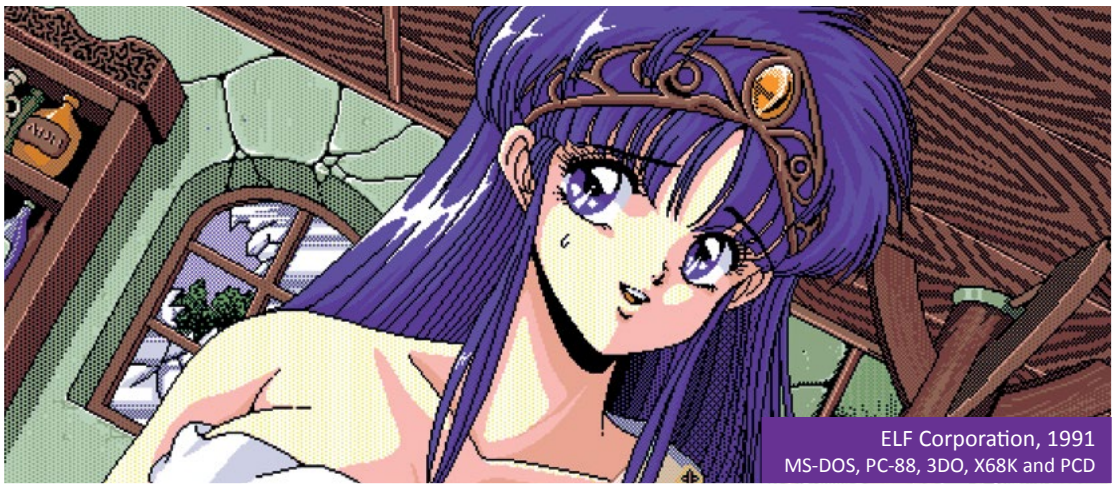
Combat is easy, but unique. To attack, you drag your cursor into the enemy part you want to hit – each enemy has different weak points. You must do this repeatably and as fast as you can, while the enemy charges a power bar to execute his attack.

Oddly, the Japanese version has a standard JRPG turn-based combat. It was the team at Megatech who overhauled the combat and other parts of the game, adding more enemies, side-quests, sexy scenes and re-drawing many of the characters.

Still, *Cobra Mission* is very mediocre. Its appeal came from novelty – an erotic game drawn in anime style made in distant Japan. For a teenager in 1992, it was a new, exotic and slightly off-limits treat.

While standards are a bit higher today, it's still a style of game Western audiences aren't used to, and *Cobra Mission*'s "so-bad-that-it-is-good" charm might just be enough to warrant a look. **FE**

Knights of Xentar



ELF Corporation, 1991
MS-DOS, PC-88, 3DO, X68K and PCD

The second (and last) erotic RPG to be localised by Megatech, *Knights of Xentar* was originally called *Dragon Knight III*. The first two games in the series were simplistic first-person dungeon crawlers, but *DK3* draws its inspirations from early *Final Fantasy* games, sporting a top-down perspective and a full party instead of a lone adventurer.

The game continues right off where the previous ones left off. Having rescued a group of maidens from an evil witch, our hero Takeru (localised to "Desmond") wakes up from his celebration festivities suffering from a horrible hangover. And to add insult to injury, a group of local thugs robs our hero blind. Takeru starts the game literally stark naked. A simple innocent quest to recover our hero's stolen jewels and his magical sword soon turns into an epic endeavour involving high Heavens and lowest depths of Hell.

You spend the majority of the time in a top-down 2D mode, exploring locales, talking to citizens and performing simple quests – with the game's lewd humour keeping things interesting. While you can freely travel between locations, the game is relatively linear, with artificial roadblocks limiting progress.

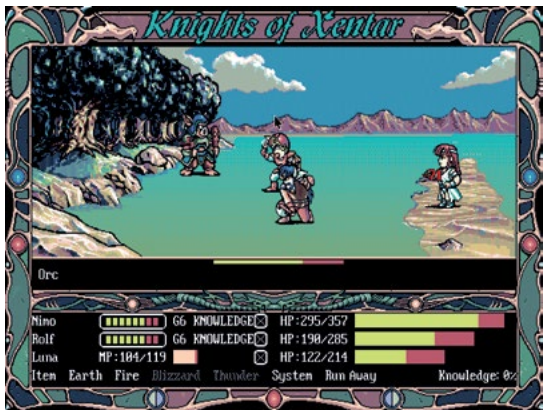
Combat itself is automatically resolved in real time, allowing you to occasionally interject using items and magic at the opportune moments. As in most JRPGs, itemisation is extremely simplistic, being limited to armour and weapon upgrades, while level-ups automatically increase your base stats.

Overall, *Xentar* isn't very challenging. Some stronger enemies may pose as temporary roadblocks, but most of the challenge can be eliminated by simply grinding random encounters until you match your foes. Throughout the game Takeru will also be meeting some familiar characters from the two previous games that will permanently join the party.

While the game features explicit (and bizarre) sex scenes, including rape, its US release was barely noticed and Megatech soon folded. Critics were more concerned with the dated visuals and the "archaic gameplay mechanics" than the kinky contents.

Despite the lukewarm reception, *Knights of Xentar* remains as something of an achievement. For many adolescents, it was their first introduction to the depraved world of Japanese adult gaming. **HB**

***Knights of Xentar* was localised into English by Megatech Software in 1995. Both a censored and an uncensored version were released.**

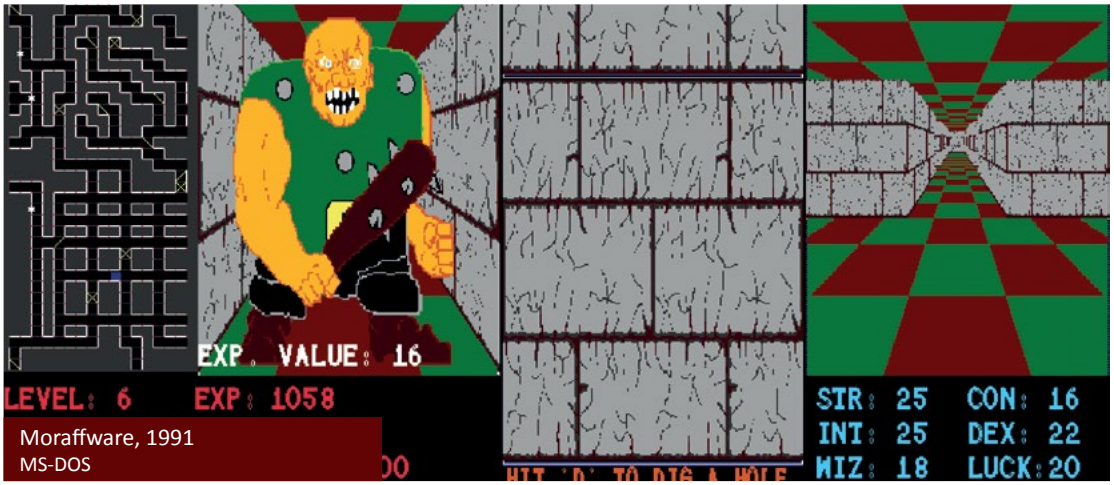


Combat is in real time and mostly automatic; you can only select character's behaviours and order them to use items and spells.



Xentar's humour is its first noticeable aspect, as you are immediately robbed and forced to run around naked.

Moraff's World



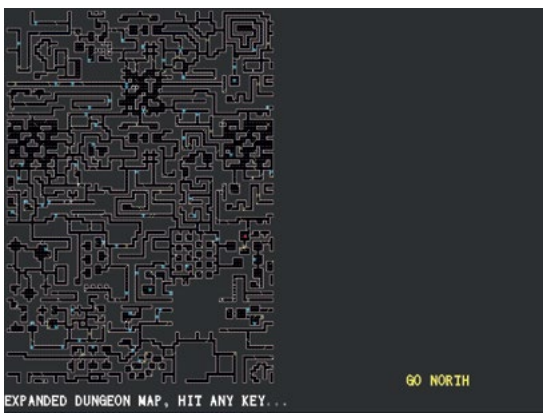
Moraff's World has a rare trait: it supports 12 different video modes, from 4 colour CGA all the way to 256 colour SVGA, which made it easy to run in any computer.

CRPG fans that had access to the Internet in the 90s might have seen one of Steve Moraff's games: *Moraff's Revenge* (1988), *Moraff's World* (1991) and *Moraff's Dungeons of the Unforgiven* (1993), a trio of widely distributed shareware dungeon crawlers.

Moraff's World is the best-known, but they all offer basically the same gameplay, with incremental graphical upgrades. Regardless, the series never goes beyond a crude *Microsoft Paint*-like art style.



Combat is turn-based and very simple. Fighters can only attack, but magic users have over 100 spells at their disposal.



Dungeon floors are random and massive. The game gives tips on the location of special enemies, but navigating towards them is a big challenge.

What really stands out in Moraff's games is the four-way first-person view: you constantly see what's North, South, East and West of you. There's no "facing" – you can attack in any direction, and pressing the left arrow key moves you left, instead of turning.

Gameplay is a blend of roguelikes and *Wizardry*. You create a character, choosing from eight races and seven classes, then delve into an enormous, randomly generated dungeon. You battle, gather XP and return to town to heal, level up and buy better equipment.

There's little variety in items or monsters, but it still makes for a surprisingly addictive loop, as you try to go as deep as possible, balancing risk and reward. There's no real story or goal either, but there are floors where you can hunt a monster that holds a treasure, following simple hints like "Go East" or "Go North".

These floors are the game at its best. The sheer size of each floor and the countless hidden pits that drop you a few floors make navigation very tricky. You'll have to think three-dimensionally, using the floors above and below to move towards your goal. The shareware version of *Moraff's World* offers four of these hunts, on the 4th, 8th, 12th and 16th floors.

The registered version, however, has 200 floors! Not only does this become insanely repetitive, but it breaks parts of the game. Character progression stagnates and Fighters becomes useless, as spells are mandatory to quickly ascend and descent floors, teleport, heal, enchant and protect yourself from level-draining monsters.

In an age when computers were still novel and retail RPGs like *Ultima* were expensive, Moraff's games were accessible and seemingly endless. Perhaps the best way to understand them (and many 90s sharewares) is to compare them with mobile or browser-based games – some discard them as not "real" games, yet they are widely played, often more than acclaimed classics. **FE**

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 four different parties with up to seven 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.

To do so, you're able to recruit almost every (friendly) NPC you meet. 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 being angered and attacking, or to starting to like you and wanting to join your quest.

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.

The world itself is one of the largest in old-school games, brought to life by wandering NPCs and day-and-night cycles. 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 full of things for you to discover.

Then there are the dungeons, which are enormous too. There are several carefully crafted lairs, crypts and castles, riddled with complex puzzles, deadly traps and combat encounters that will all make you curse at the screen – but are very rewarding to complete.

Fate also has nudity, which was censored in the English release. This version is rare, as few copies were made, but the game has since become freeware.

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 eight save slots – there are multiple ways to completely screw up your game. **SR**

Olaf Patzenhauer, *Fate's* creator, passed away in 2011. He had created a sequel named *Fate 2* as a private project and freely gave custom versions of it to a few fans.



Perhaps due to German humour, there are some odd options in combat, such as closing your eyes, groping, mocking, or asking party members to kiss.



Fate has a "cavetrain" that runs across its massive world, connecting the major cities.

Disciples of Steel



MegaSoft Entertainment, 1991
MS-DOS and Atari ST

Disciples of Steel was the only game from Texas-based MegaSoft. A sequel was planned, with greater focus on army battles, but piracy, poor sales and fierce reviews ended the series.

If an RPG is announced today, no matter its form or setting, one can assume it will have certain elements: meaningful character development; a rich backstory; combat that offers a variety of tactical options; a full inventory of weapons, armour, and accessories; dialogue and role-playing encounters; a large explorable game world; a variety of quests and, side-quests; etc. These elements have become so codified in what we understand as a "role-playing game" that even its sub-genres, such as roguelikes, have found ways to incorporate them.

There were no such assurances in the 1980s and early 1990s. The decade was full of games that excelled in one area or another but rarely presented a complete "package" of role-playing elements the way that the players of today might understand them. *Ultima*, for all its strengths, never had an excellent combat system, while *Dungeon Master* and its clones could never tell a coherent story.

Disciples of Steel offers such a complete package. It's a bold game, ambitious beyond the capabilities of its year. It does so many things that, even though it gets a lot of them wrong, there's still an awful lot that it does right.



You explore the world map and its various towns in a top-town view, but the towns are huge and mostly empty, with no real NPCs besides stores, inns and temples.

A fully voiced intro with animated graphics sets up the backstory. Twelve years ago, a horde of orcs appeared and, to counter the threat, the kingdoms of Lanathor united under the banner of warchief Ustfa Nelor and his elite Disciples of Steel. Although they drove off the hordes, it was a Pyrrhic victory, as few Disciples survived, and they all disappeared on the return journey. The game casts the player as Nelor's step-son, encouraged by a mysterious sorceress to reform the Disciples and destroy evil for good.

You start by creating a party of eight characters. For most of its mechanics, the developers were heavily inspired by SSI's *Wizard's Crown* (1985). The similarities exist in the types of races (human, dwarf, elf, half-elf, gnome, halfling, ogre, and troll) and classes (Warrior, Knight, Priest, Mage, Illusionist, Rogue, Monk, Ranger, and Blacksmith), their associated skills and the basic mechanisms of magic and combat.

Thus, combat is wonderfully tactical. It takes place on a top-down grid full of enemies and obstacles, with characters acting in order of initiative and possessing a huge number of actions – moving, attacking, casting, scanning the battlefield, equipping items, hiding, picking up items, performing first aid, aiming to improve the chance of hitting the next round, etc. The several dozen spells divided among the game's three spell-casting classes – all of which give you the ability to adjust the number of points channelled into them – only add to the tactical options.

Then there's a myriad of other nuances – weapons and armour can take damage and break; weight and encumbrance greatly affect combat ability; individual body parts can be injured and must be treated separately from hit points, etc. Moreover, buying and selling items is governed by a complex bargaining system, and the economy itself is far more advanced than other RPGs.



Characters in *Disciples of Steel* have eight stats and 22 skills, which are increased by directly spending experience points.



Combat occurs on a tactical map with terrain and obstacle considerations, e.g. you can lock a door to divide the enemy.



Dungeons are explored in first-person mode, with a handy automap and room descriptions that set the atmosphere.



Once you gather allies (or subdue them), the game reveals strategy battles inspired by SSI's *Sword of Aragon* (1989).

Understanding these systems is vital, as *Disciples* is a very hard game. You start with little direction in a hostile environment. All areas and dungeons are open at the outset, so it's easy to stumble somewhere you're not ready to be—and that's just about everywhere. A new player might lose four out of five beginner battles, and it takes about a dozen hours to stabilise the party.

Once you're feeling ready, you should visit each of the nine kingdoms and solve a series of quests for each king. The quests vary considerably in length and difficulty, and many intertwine. Reaching the end of a king's quest line results in the king either agreeing to ally with the Disciples when the Big Battle comes or actually turning over the kingdom to the Disciples, letting them set tax rates and raise and equip armies.

At this point, an entirely different side to an already complex game becomes available: the ability to field large armies and attack other kingdoms on a strategic map. You move stacks of troops against their opponents, observing equipment, morale, and terrain. That such a complex system is basically optional is one of the amazing things about *Disciples of Steel*.

The game even offers the ability to skip the quest threads entirely and just assassinate the various kings and queens and take over their kingdoms. This involves storming their castles and slaying their guards – an extremely hard battle, but absolutely winnable.

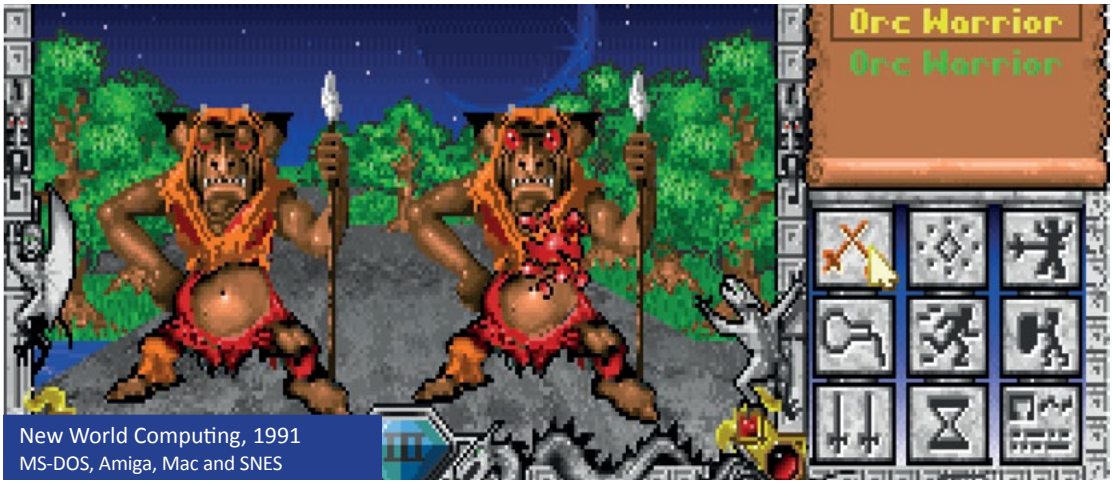
You can win the game in three ways: kill the evil wizard Variz in his dungeon with your party (a traditional RPG path); wait until the "Armageddon" date when Variz leads his forces against Lanathor and defeat him with your armies (a strategy path); or conquer each of the enemy cities before the deadline.

However, to be a fan of *Disciples of Steel* – and I am an unequivocal fan – is to forgive an awful lot of things. There's a food and water metre that never budges, useless conversation options, a "search" function that never finds anything, skills and spells that have no use, a poor manual, many bugs, an unsatisfying ending, etc.

And yet, despite failing in so many things, *Disciples of Steel* performs excellently in the core areas that make a good RPG – tactical combat, magic, equipment, character development, and quests – and is thus enormously fun to play even today. **CHB**

***Disciples of Steel* was heavily criticised for its initial difficulty, so developers released an update in which characters start with 1,000 experience points to spend.**

Might and Magic III: Isles of Terra



New World Computing, 1991
MS-DOS, Amiga, Mac and SNES

Scorpia, the renowned video game journalist, wrote a harsh review of *M&M II*. As revenge, New World Computing added a poisonous monster named after her to *M&M III*.

One of the most remarkable things about the *Might and Magic* series is how New World Computing kept innovating on each title. *Might and Magic III: Isles of Terra* is a good example of this, with several changes from its predecessor.

As soon as you start, you're greeted by colourful VGA graphics, rich sound, a fantastic mouse-based interface and several quality-of-life improvements, such as the ability to save the game anywhere.



Enemies, traps and points of interest are now visible in the distance, allowing for ranged combat and a more engaging exploration.



Instead of the classical name list, *M&M III* displays portraits of your party members at the bottom of the screen. Their expressions change as they take damage or suffer conditions.

Gameplay-wise, the most important addition is that now enemies are now actual entities roaming the map, rather than just being random encounters that spawn out of nowhere. You can see them from a distance and even engage in ranged combat; sometimes this is essential to defeat certain enemies with the ability to kill party members in one blow, but it can prove to be deadly against enemies such as dragons.

You start your adventure by creating a party of six characters, choosing between five races and ten classes. You can also hire two NPCs, who will ask for daily wages to accompany you. *Isles of Terra* features many new skills and equipment pieces (which now have durability), plus a new realm of Nature magic, expanding upon the series' character system.

Once ready, your party sets off to fight against Sheltem, your antagonist in previous titles, who must now be defeated in his own homeworld of Terra. The quest is very open and can be completed in different ways, which gives you a chance to leisurely explore a huge world full with secrets, riddles, tough challenges and good humour, plus the rapid and explosive power growth the series traditionally offers.

Exploration is another of the signature marks of the *Might and Magic* series, and one of the strongest points of *Isles of Terra*. Each location feels unique, monsters are extremely varied and constantly present different challenges that you can't just defeat by brute force. Despite the massive power inflation there seems to always be a good item upgrade to be found that makes you smile greedily – which you'll certainly need, because the game is very tough.

This balance between rewarding your curiosity and punishing your carelessness is where *Isles of Terra* excels, maybe offering the most satisfying exploration in the whole series. **DB**



Origin Systems, 1991
MS-DOS and Mac

It's 1893. Percival Lovell builds a space cannon to fire a team of trained volunteers to Mars. Instead, sabotage sees it fire during the World's Columbian Exposition, while half the Victorian era's greatest minds are aboard. Jump to 1991. The Avatar receives a mysterious book, explaining how the Orb of the Moons can also be used to travel through time, and a desperate plea to join the other half of the Victorian era's greatest minds on a rescue mission.

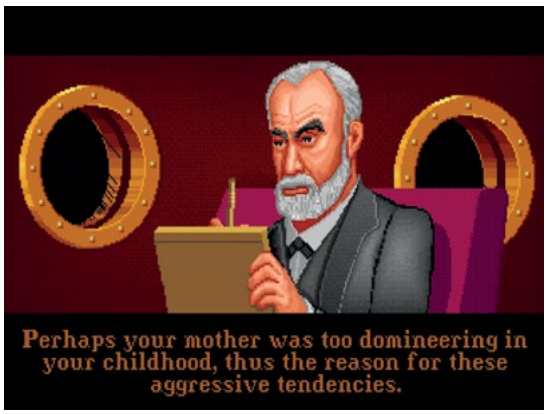
Martian Dreams has many problems, many of them the fault of the already clunky and ugly *Ultima VI* engine, and for most of the rest the fact that Mars isn't the most visually exciting of locations. It's easily one of Origin's best ideas though, and full of ideas deserving a remake. The combination of real history and classic sci-fi, with several drops of *Ultima* for good measure worked in superbly, even before the amusement of elements like the Gypsy character creation system replaced with psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud. ("Ja, ja, I am thinking you are sounding like great mage…")

Aside from its regular combat sequences, *Martian Dreams* is as much an adventure as it is an RPG, with a very linear path. Much of the plot revolves around the fate of the Martians, ignoring the fact that the Avatar actually went there already back in *Ultima II*, and it's a decent story, spoiled only by the fact that the limited dialogue system doesn't allow for working alongside the likes of Tesla and Roosevelt and Nelly Bly to have the character it really needed.

When it hits its peaks though, it offers some great moments. A definite highlight is when the game's villain declares that even with the Avatar's new ability to summon items from dreams – essentially, the Martians are in a dream version of *The Matrix* – humanity won't be able to imagine a weapon capable of stopping him for a hundred years or more!

Being a time-traveller and a time-traveller from Texas at that, the Avatar wastes little time before casually whipping up an M60 machine gun out of thin air.

To some extent, this kind of moment almost makes trying to play *Martian Dreams* more frustrating. It was a good game in its time, but now it's hard to see past the gulf between what it is and what its ideas deserved. They're all there for the stealing though, and well worth a second outing. **RC**



Instead of creating your character with the Gypsy and her cards/potions, you answer questions from Sigmund Freud.



The Avatar will be joined by many great personalities from the Victorian Era, as well as the alter ego of a certain game developer.

The Bard's Tale Construction Set

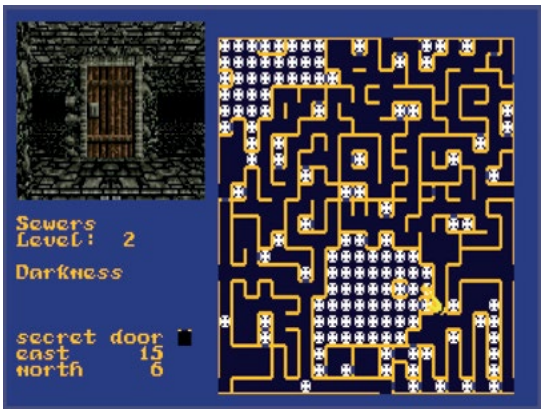


Interplay, 1991
MS-DOS and Amiga

The *Bard's Tale* series was a hit back in the mid-80s, adding colourful graphics and a light-hearted atmosphere to the classic *Wizardry* formula. But was a short-lived one, as the series ended in 1988 due to a legal dispute between interplay and EA.

Meanwhile, the genre kept moving forward, with titles like *Dragon Wars*, *Might and Magic III*, *Wizardry VI*, the Gold Box series, etc. Yet, in 1991 Interplay returned to *Bard's Tale* – this time with an editor!

***Bt Builder* is an open-source implementation of the *Bard's Tale Construction Set*. A build under development is available at www.identicalsoftware.com/btbuilder**



The map editor is the game's best feature, with four tilesets, a powerful tool for creating events and the option to quickly test it while you build. the maze.



You can edit the stats of items, monsters and spells to create new ones, but you can't edit the rules behind them or add new ones, limiting your options.

Unfortunately, it's a rather sad return. The goal was to allow players to make their own RPGs – they can even export them as stand-alone games – but the editor suffers from severe limitations. Races, classes and stats can't be changed at all – you're stuck with the *Bard's Tale* rules. And while you can create custom items, spells and monsters, the variables are so limited that even recreating the original *Bard's Tale I* would be impossible. The graphics, while good-looking, lack variety, allowing for few interesting encounters. Overall, there just isn't enough flexibility to create anything other than a lesser *Bard's Tale* clone.

In fact, the *Construction Set* came with its own sample scenario, *Star Light Festival*, which was just that – an inferior *Bard's Tale* game. Slow, grinding and with none of the series' original creators or charm, it felt out of place next to the great RPGs of the era.

The killing blow came with the arrival of SSI's *Forgotten Realms: Unlimited Adventures* (1993), a much more powerful editor for the popular Gold Box series. From that point on, anyone still interested in creating their own RPG had no reason whatsoever to choose *The Bard's Tale Construction Set*. This is particularly noticeable in how rare fan-made modules are.

Searching online, the only surviving modules are *The Bard's Lore 1* and *2*, created by John H. Wigforss in the late 90s, and *The Bard's Quest: Dungeons of the Unknown* (1994), by Visionsoft. The former are simple games full of jokes and pop culture references, while the latter is nothing more than Interplay's *Star Light Festival* module repacked with a new name – possibly to be shamelessly resold as a stand-alone game.

As such, while there are still communities for *Unlimited Adventures* and even for older games like *Eamon*, the *Bard's Tale Construction Set* never took off, and now lies completely forgotten. **FE**

Gateway to the Savage Frontier



Stormfront Studios, 1991
MS-DOS, Amiga and C64

The *Savage Frontier* duology is another entry in SSI's fabled Gold Box series, usually one people play only after they've gone through every other Gold Box game. This is kind of backwards, as the first game, *Gateway to the Savage Frontier*, is probably the best entry point to them overall.

Difficulty is pretty low at first, but after that you get an epic scavenger hunt that offers a lot of content and just hits all the right *AD&D* adventure buttons.

The game is basically a grand tour of the Savage Frontier, a region of the *Forgotten Realms*, with each of the cities you visit acting as a mini-adventure, until you reach the big and satisfying finale. For me, that was the biggest draw of the game. It's not overly ambitious in terms of complex mechanics or storytelling, but it really captures the fun of a long-running RPG campaign that starts small and slowly ups the ante.

While *Gateway* showed that Stormfront Studios had a good grasp of the Gold Box engine, it's really the second game, *Treasures of the Savage Frontier* (1992), where they came into their own. It's where they really stretched their coding muscles and improved a lot of the series' various gameplay elements.

Treasures enhances the overworld map with weather effects (conveyed by text messages), different movement speeds and increased encounter rates based on the terrain type. Only roads and waterways are safe. The further along you get in the game, seasons change, with graphical changes to the overland map and inside cities. There are rudimentary side quests, while some of battles become more dynamic, with enemies getting reinforcements if you don't beat the main force fast enough.

Still, the most famous "improvement" to the gameplay is that, like *Worlds of Ultima: The Savage Empire* before it, *Treasures* contains a romance plot.

More than just titillation, if one of the smitten partners gets killed, the other goes into a rage until the end of the fight. And later on, if the party doesn't support the romance, you lose the NPC and your main character has decreased combat effectiveness.

While often overlooked, the two *Savage Frontier* games offer the chance of following your adventurers through a long and varied campaign, with a big climax that makes it all the more fun to play. **JG**

Stormfront Studios made three Gold Box games for SSI: the two *Savage Frontier* games and the original *Neverwinter Nights* (1991), the world's first multiplayer online RPG with graphics.



The large overworld map is one of *Gateway*'s defining features, and was expanded in *Treasures*, with weather effects such as snow slowing your characters down.



Treasures of the Savage Frontier has two romanceable NPCs. Which one you gets depends on your lead character's gender, and they can directly impact gameplay.

Realms of Arkania: Blade of Destiny



Attic Entertainment, 1992
MS-DOS, Amiga and Mac

Das Schwarze Auge was first released in Germany in 1984, but it was only translated into English in 2001. _Blade of Destiny_ was translated by Sir-Tech and published in the US in 1993, but they renamed the setting to _Realms of Arkania_.

To understand the effect the *Realms of Arkania* trilogy had on the German market, one has to look back at the state of tabletop role-playing games in the early 90s in Germany.

Back then, *Das Schwarze Auge (The Dark Eye)* – the German answer to *Dungeons & Dragons* – was deep in its prime. Huge shelves of *TDE* books lined not only specialist hobby stores, but every toy store in Germany. Even today it remains the country's most successful RPG franchise by a great margin.

After cutting their teeth with a few small CRPGs, Attic Entertainment got the *TDE* licence and created a game that was as faithful to the tabletop game as possible – exactly what fans at the time wanted.

In *Blade of Destiny*, players are pitted against the threat of an invasion of orcs into medieval Scandinavia-lookalike Thorwal. To repel them, the heroes have to find the titular Blade of Destiny. Of course, this being a video game, there is a map leading to the sword; a map that has been split into many parts and strewn across the land. You get your first rough directions, then off you go.



You should prepare carefully. Carry water, food, ropes, tools, herbs and torches, take care of your weapons and bring blankets and warm clothes for cold areas – or you'll get sick.

After the intro, you're free to do whatever you like. Exploring is split between towns and dungeons, seen in a first-person view, and a 2D overworld map where you choose your travel destinations.

Travelling is a big part of the game. Your journey is shown by an Indiana Jones-style red line on the map and occasionally interrupted by events presented in CYOA fashion – "Do you help the injured Elf?" –, as well as ambushes and random encounters.

For the turn-based battles, the game switches to an isometric view. Characters receive action points, based on their individual speed and how much armour they carry. These points can be used for everything from various types of attacks, to spell-casting, to movement and inventory management.

How faithfully the game adhered to the tabletop game's background and ruleset is still impressive after more than twenty years. The developers worked closely with the designers of *TDE* and everything – from the dice-based character generation to the skill set and the huge spell list – was lifted directly from the tabletop game, with only a few concessions and adjustments (for better or worse).

Thus, you'll deal with an overwhelming amount of stats: 14 attributes, 52 skills and 48 spells, plus derived stats. Each spell has its own proficiency level, and skills cover everything from herb-collecting to haggling to ancient tongues. Creating the six members of your party can take a long time – and yes, it's very easy to waste points on things you'll never need.

The game also demands a lot of micromanaging, from food and drink to carrying suitable clothing for a northern climate if you don't want your heroes to be struck down with illness. And every time you camp on the road you'll have to assign who will hunt, heal the injured, the guard shifts, hours of sleep, etc.

"The area where these games truly excelled, in my opinion, was the micromanagement of characters. I know, it sounds bad, but for many players this is what they were looking forward to. We wanted to make the most hardcore RPG out there, and I think we succeeded, all the way down to making sure players were feeding their characters on a regular schedule. Naturally, this kind of level of detail did not sit well with everyone."

– *Guido Henkel, Blade of Destiny's producer*



Each turn your characters have a limited amount of movement points available, which dictates how far they can walk and what actions they can perform.

Unfortunately, what was a huge selling point for tabletop veterans made things difficult for new players. As a *TDE* player, you knew all the tricks and exploits. As a newcomer, you were often left to your own devices, constantly flipping through the manual.

Still, the strength of the game has always been the setting. Digital Thorwal is dripping with atmosphere, with detailed text descriptions, small illustrations and countless Choose Your Own Adventure segments. Some of the texts are simply nonsensical jokes, but most of them are well-written pieces that immerse you in the setting. And the intricate (and often unforgiving) rules help ground you in this land.

And boy, it's a huge land. The main story is not too interesting, but there's just so much to explore! You can travel through forests, climb mountains, delve deep into various dungeons, eradicate a pirate village, set sail with a ghost ship, etc. Wherever you go, there's always something interesting to find.

After the success of the first game, came the sequels. *Star Trail* (1994) is commonly held as the high point of the series and adhered closely to the concept of its predecessor, while also adding a better dialogue system, fully 3D towns and dungeons and other upgrades that made the experience more satisfying.

The third game, *Shadows over Riva* (1996), removed the overland travel altogether and took place in a single, well-realised and fully fleshed-out city, with a more elaborate plot. It also used its CD-ROM format to add pre-rendered backgrounds and voiced cutscenes. Moreover, a party created in *Blade of Destiny* could be carried over the entire trilogy, in a truly epic journey.

After that, the Northlands fell into silence. There have been ill-fated attempts to revive it, but the boom of tabletop role-playing games had already passed. Still, from time to time, I can feel the temptation to return to Thorwal, to meet its people and explore its lands. If only I could remember the rules. **TI**

In 2013 a remake of *Blade of Destiny* was developed by Crafty Studios, but it was incomplete on release, with severe bugs and translation issues. It has been heavily patched since, but it's still a crude and poorly-made title. Stick to the original trilogy.



Towns and dungeons in the original game are explored in a step-based first-person mode – but the sequels are fully 3D.



The third game has great art and many UI improvements, but arrived in the US only in 1997 and was seen as outdated.

Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss



Blue Sky Productions, 1992
MS-DOS (and PS1)*

Known as the first "true" 3D commercial RPG, *Ultima Underworld* and its sequel were ahead of their time in many ways, full of stand-out ideas and innovations. So much attention is devoted to the pioneering technology, long ago rendered obsolete, that the other exceptional features of this classic PC game series are often ignored.

Of course, the free-moving 3D was ground-breaking even when compared with *Wolfenstein 3D*, released later in 1992. Where the precursor to *Doom* offered only flat, featureless floors and 90-degree angles in exchange for fast gameplay, *Underworld* featured fully texture-mapped environments with angled walls, slopes, cliffs, rivers of swimmable, flowing water and dangerous lava – all governed by a physics system that influenced all moveable objects.

In spite of the 3D graphics being confined to a limited window size for rendering speed on early systems, the environments in *Underworld* are immersive and complex. The floors and walls are littered with interactive elements, from pull-chains and levers to edible plants and hallucinatory mushrooms.



The icons on the left allow you to talk, grab, look, fight and use. There are also several types of attacks depending on your mouse movement.

The story is a paint-by-numbers affair that starts with the player's character – unrecognised as the Avatar of Virtue – being locked into the Stygian Abyss to prove his or her innocence by rescuing the Baron's daughter. The titular Stygian Abyss is only eight levels deep, but the sprawling, detailed levels traversed at methodical pace represent hours of play each.

For me, the real story is the environment and the dialogues about the history of the Stygian Abyss – a noble attempt to build a peaceful utopia turned into a hellish nightmare of bickering, isolated factions scraping a minimal survival. Throughout the dungeon are the remains of past battles and events. Combined with the stories of the denizens and scrawled notes, the player's own imagination builds a history and a new story with the player's character as interloper.

There's something about this claustrophobic environment that remains compelling even today. The confines of the dungeon and the limited resources within define the player's entire world. The details are important: the quality and ownership of equipment, the freshness of the food, the composition of the floor, the apparent flaws in the wall texture indicating a secret passage, the apparent mood of the creature down the hall, and much more. Like the core *Ultima* games of the era, the interactivity with the world was far beyond that of most RPGs before and even since.

No shops or merchants exist within the depths of this dungeon. There are several creatures inclined to trade, but within the Abyss the barter system rules. The creature type, disposition, and hints about their preferences dictate the value of trades, not an arbitrary gold-piece value. Not only does this make sense and feed the narrative, but it also makes the other characters more interesting. Simple as it was, their likes and dislikes impacted the player's world.

***A port of *Ultima Underworld* was released for the PS1 in 1997, which replaces enemies' sprites with 3D models. Oddly, this version was only released in Japan.**

"We had a huge advantage in that even though we were trying to make a hybrid game and we were trying to figure out what a dungeon simulator was, we had all the *Ultima*-ness of it to fall back on. Sure, we were inventing how to move and how to swing your sword and all that stuff, but at the end of the day it was an *Ultima*. You talk, you get, you drop, you combine reagents, you use runes."

– Doug Church, *Ultima Underworld's programmer*



You can talk, bribe and barter with various creatures in the Abyss. The Lizardmen, however, require you to first learn their language, word by word.

Perhaps because the team was, as a whole, fairly inexperienced in game development, the puzzles and challenges possess a raw, rule-of-cool wildness that, to me, feels like the sort of thing a human game master in a tabletop RPG might come up with just because it sounds like fun. One section of a level is mapped like a *Pac-Man* maze, requiring the player to pick up blue nuggets pursued by a ghost. To communicate with the Lizardmen, the player must learn their language a bit at a time. Many challenges are open-ended, allowing the player several methods to accomplish their goals using the rules systems and 3D environment.

More innovations and improvements to the genre are sprinkled liberally throughout the game, including a beautiful automap that allowed free-form note-taking, an early faction system, and even some limited crafting. While limited by the technology of the day, its design would still be considered ambitious for anyone but a major AAA studio.

Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds (1993) appeared shortly afterwards, providing a number of incremental improvements. The story was more carefully crafted and integrated as a follow-up to *Ultima VII*. Characters had more to say, and what they said and did would change as events transpired. The game offered a cleaner interface, better balance and technology. And, in spite of the extremely tight development schedule, it still retained the fundamental gameplay, feel, and creativity of the original.

Together, these games provide some of the best dungeon-crawling experiences to be found on the PC, something too often forgotten in their chief claims to fame of being the first "true" 3D RPGs. Pioneering and primitive they may be, but, not far beneath the VGA graphics and clunky interfaces, the games conceal wonderfully visceral dungeon exploration still well worth playing today. Come prepared to kiss the sunlight and outdoor air goodbye for a while. **JB**

In the *Masters of Doom* book, it's revealed that John Romero and Carmack were inspired by an *Ultima Underworld* demo to make *Catacomb 3-D*, which later led to *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom*.



The game features 48 spells like Levitate, Telekinesis and Stealth, cast by combining runes you find across the Abyss.



Ultima Underworld II sends the Avatar to multiple worlds. They are all underground, but offer some graphical variety.

Might and Magic: World of Xeen



New World Computing, 1992
MS-DOS, Mac and PC-98

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

ight and Magic: World of Xeen is actually an adventure composed of two distinct games: *Might and Magic IV: Clouds of Xeen* (1992) and *Might and Magic V: Darkside of Xeen* (1993). Played separately, these games are typical *Might and 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 across 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 and 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.



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

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 cutscenes 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 and 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 add to character power.

Power inflation is the hallmark of the *Might and 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's 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 endgame.

Movement and fighting are the usual grid- and turn-based affairs of first-person RPGs at the time. Characters with ranged weapons and spellcasters 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.

"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 is very appealing. [...] Although I have a special fondness for *Might and Magic I* since I did the entire game myself, I would still have to say *World of Xeen* was my favourite 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 and 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**

In 1995 a group of fans created a mod of *Might and Magic V* named *Swords of Xeen*. New World Computing then endorsed and released the mod as an official bonus scenario.



The game has a unique visual style, using an iconic colour palette, a few digitised photos and a light-hearted tone.



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

Legend



Mindscape Ltd., 1992
Amiga, MS-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 favourite RPGs, because of the fascinating magic system and isometric view - two features that were new to me as well.

A sequel was released in 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 in 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. On the map, the group can travel to towns, villages, forts and special locations – including enemy armies in the field. They can visit blacksmiths, apothecaries, 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 an offensive spell that first hits an enemy, then all adjacent foes around, inflicting damage and paralysis, the Runemaster needs the runes Missile (for the flight characteristics), Surround (for the environmental effect), Damage (for harm) and Paralyse (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**

The Summoning



Event Horizon, 1992
MS-DOS

The best way to describe *The Summoning* is "*Dungeon Master* meets *Ultima*", which is little wonder given the track record of its developer. Event Horizon's first game, *DarkSpyre* (1990) was basically a single-character *Dungeon Master* clone infused with roguelike elements. Their second title, *Dusk of the Gods* (1991), was an open-world Action RPG based on a very thorough recreation of Norse mythology, with *Ultima*-like gameplay.

The Summoning meshes these influences and past experiences into a solid single-character dungeon crawler. Your character can be fully generated or chosen from a couple dozen premade ones. Character development is somewhat innovative, featuring both combat and magic skills that improve with use and the more traditional experience levels.

The gameplay is very similar to *Dungeon Master*, focusing less on combat and more on resource management and puzzle-solving. Most of the puzzles boil down to a traditional mix of pressure plates, teleporters, rolling balls, pits and key hunts. However, they are expertly designed and never grow stale – no small feat given the game's impressive length.

The game is completely set within a single dungeon, divided into several regions that are unlocked in a linear progression. Within these regions there's a lot of interconnectivity between the levels, as well as a few alternative paths and optional areas.

But where *The Summoning* shines is in its story. On your way through the dungeon, you'll meet many characters and learn a lot about both your enemies and your benefactors, as well as the world in general. The game features not one, but two shocking twists – that is, in the best-case scenario.

There are three basic endings and one hidden true ending. Which one you get is entirely determined by one or two choices made directly before the end. However, those are presented not as dialogue options, but as puzzles, which you can only solve successfully if you paid careful attention to the lore.

The Summoning does not shy away from its roots, at times blatantly copying gameplay elements. However the result of combining two vastly different styles is a unique and very entertaining game, more than deserving of being placed among the classics. **VK**

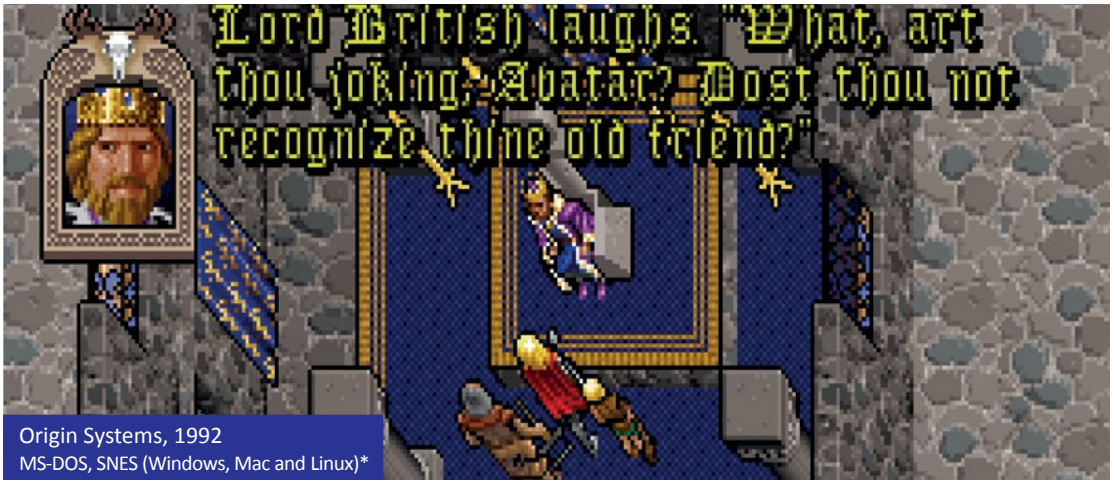


Combat is in real time, and positioning is key. Weapons have different attacks, but break often, so use them carefully.



You learn spells by collecting scrolls that contain the combination of hand gestures necessary to cast them, like in *Dungeon Master*.

Ultima VII:
The Black Gate



Origin Systems, 1992
MS-DOS, SNES (Windows, Mac and Linux)*

"Avatar! Know that Britannia has entered into a new age of enlightenment. Know that the time has come for the one true Lord of Britannia to take his place at the head of his people! Under my guidance, Britannia will flourish. And all the people shall rejoice and pay homage to their new Guardian!

Know that you, too, shall kneel before me, Avatar. You too, shall soon acknowledge my authority, for I shall be your companion, your provider – and your master!"

As the red face mocked me with a menacing laugh and began to sink back into the blue static background, I was shocked. In most games, the antagonist just sits on the sidelines, but in *Ultima VII* the Guardian shows up right at the start, tells you his intent and then taunts you throughout the entire game.

Anyone who has played through *Ultima VII* can tell you what an immersive, amazing journey it is. Quite a few things set it apart, including its story. As the Avatar, you return to Britannia, meet your friend Iolo and learn of the brutal murder of a blacksmith and his gargoyle companion. Your first objective then is to solve the mystery behind this tragedy.



The Guardian speaks directly to you, then constantly taunts you during the game – pointing out you're going in the wrong direction or that a party member just died.

It's a very different experience from RPGs where you just need to out-kill monsters to get a shiny new weapon. In the *Ultima* series people matter. Their dialogue is not something to be skipped so you can just get on with the game. The text is something to be savoured, like a compelling book.

Eventually, the trail leads you out of the starting city of Trinsic, to Paws, then Britain, and from there you can head wherever you want. However, Britannia has become a much darker place since your last visit, so adultery, drug abuse and class struggles are just a few of the more mature themes you will find.

Adding to the immersion is the clean and fully mouse-driven interface. Gone are the list of keyboard commands needed to play – walking, talking, picking up items, opening your inventory, moving objects around, etc... it's all done with a click of the mouse. Also gone are the stiff dialogues based on typing "name", "job", "bye" and other keywords. Now you just have to click on the dialogue options that appear on-screen.

Another aspect is the sheer amount of detail that went into *Ultima VII*'s world. Not only in the dialogues and secrets, but in the simulation of the world itself. Want to make bread? Cut the grain, grind it into flour, add water to make dough, then pop it into the oven. Now you have bread. You can also shear sheep and make cloth, forge your own sword, go fishing, pile up crates to climb, get a job as farmer, etc.

I obviously enjoy *Ultima VII* immensely, but it does have its flaws though. One of them is the combat. It's real-time and mostly automatic – you basically just toggle in between a "peace" or "combat" mode. The frustration sets in when you go into combat mode and everyone in your party runs off-screen. In a dungeon this usually means at least someone will die, no matter how high their level.

***Modders created the *Exult* project, which allows you to play *Ultima VII* on modern PCs, with several new features like higher resolution, status bar and using *Serpents Isle's* inventory in *The Black Gate*.**

"In many ways, *The Black Gate* was one of the very first SIMS! That was the genius behind the engine that was created by Richard [Garriott] and Ken Demarest (lead programmer) and his team. That was the idea – to create a world you could run around in and live in. The other writers and I took great care to make each individual NPC a whole person, as much as we could."

– *Raymond Benson, Ultima VII's lead writer*



Double-clicking on your character shows you his "paper doll". From there you can drag items into him to equip, or drop them into the bags to store.

Another flaw is that there's no auto-eating. Use of resources is the mark of a good RPG, but when Shamino says he's hungry I have to open up my paper doll, then his paper doll, then his backpack, click on some food and feed him – and then when I walk two steps and Iolo complains he is hungry as well.

Ultima VII had a expansion, *Forge of Virtue*, which sends the Avatar to investigate the Isle of Fire. Relatively short, the game's backstory is well-written, although it's not on par with the main quest.

In 1993 came *Ultima VII - Part 2: Serpent Isle*. A full-length stand-alone release, it continues the events told in *Ultima VII* and *Ultima Underworld II*. The Avatar follows a villain to the eponymous Serpent Isles, which are actually the "Lands of Danger and Despair" from *Ultima I*. Shortly after leaving your ship, a magic storm switches your items and companions with other things. For example, your spell book switches place with a piece of pumice.

Part of the game's premise is you need to hunt down all of your old equipment, as well as your now-missing companions. As you explore the Isle, you will also come across three towns which have rejected the Three Principles of Truth, Love and Courage, core of the Virtues which you defined in *Ultima IV*.

Serpent Isle has a very different tone from other *Ultima* games, having a more linear and event-based story, with a heavy emphasis on dialogues. This displeased some old fans, but inspired many developers later.

It eventually also got its own mini-expansion, *The Silver Seed* – which oddly came with a complete walkthrough in the box! Sadly, EA had already begun to meddle too much, and this expansion was a rushed release, with poor puzzles and a disconnected plot.

True masterpieces, both *Ultima VII* parts are well worth playing, not only to see where modern RPGs truly found their footing, but also for an incredible story that has yet to be surpassed. **DK**

***Serpent Isle* was first planned as a pirate-themed game for the *Worlds of Ultima* series. Later it became a main *Ultima* game, but, since Garriott had declared that no two *Ultima* games should use the same engine, it was released as *Ultima VII - Part 2*.**



You can give orders to your party in combat, but they work more like suggestions that will be kindly ignored.



Serpent Isle brought improvements to the interface and a more linear story, with a very different tone.

Ishar: Legend of the Fortress



Silmarils, 1992
Amiga, Atari ST and MS-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 micromanagement 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 spellcasters 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* does 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 creating beautiful lush nature that make 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. Civilisation 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 rumours. Additionally to the main plot, various side-quests are available through specific NPCs. 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 on key decisions. Here they refused my request to dismiss one of the party members.



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



The second game has you travelling through various islands, in search of artefacts for your quest.



Ishar 3 features exotic settings and some really impressive artwork, based on digitised 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 predetermined 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 a 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 travelling 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 indicates 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 travelling back and 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 digitised actors, like a bearded Mel Gibson or Dustin Hoffman. **TR**

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

Wizardry VII:

Crusaders of the Dark Savant



Sir-Tech, 1992
MS-DOS, Windows, Mac, Saturn and PS1

I didn't finish *Wizardry VII* on my first try, or my second a few years later. That first attempt was right after it was published in 1992, when I was still relatively wet behind the ears when it came to computer games, having not played anything really big. *Wizardry VII* was a revelation, a massive, sprawling behemoth of a game that made it easy to get lost in, both in terms of its geography as well as its more opaque mysteries.

Wizardry Gold, a new version of _Wizardry VII_ for Windows and Mac was released in 1996. This version is widely considered to be inferior, due to its inconsistent graphics, poor music and frequent bugs.

The second try was an attempt to brute-force the game by sheer will, even though I wasn't enjoying myself all that much. I just wanted to beat the damn game. As the Internet (and its easily available guides) were still a year or so away, I was stopped by some of the more obstructionist puzzles. As they say, third time's the charm.

Almost entirely the brainchild of D.W. Bradley, *Wizardry VII* continued the transformation Bradley had started with its predecessor. The roots of the Greenberg/Woodhead *Wizardry* can still be seen: movement is by discrete steps from square to square – the building blocks of the world and its dungeons.



Characters can change classes at any time if they have the required stats, and skills are now divided into three categories – Weaponry, Physical and Academia.

Battles are still phase-based and mostly randomly triggered, apart from a few fixed ones. A few new spells and skills were added, lock-picking and trap-disarming were overhauled but, overall, the core system remained the same.

What Bradley ingeniously did was to transpose this refined dungeon-crawling formula to a huge, handcrafted open world, long before this was a thing.

In *Wizardry VII,* you have an entire planet to explore. And, unlike most games, you're not alone on your quest. Various other factions have joined the fray, including the eponymous Dark Savant and his robot legions, in a wild scavenger hunt for the Astral Dominae – a powerful ancient artefact.

Your objective is to find various map pieces spread all over the planet that, in theory, should help you solve various puzzles and reach your final goal. Though, in practice, some of these puzzles are almost impossible to solve without the help of a guide. This is not helped by a keyword-based dialogue system that makes it easy to miss crucial hints. And there's no journal, so expect to make a copious amount of notes.

The game has six major factions you can ally with, but much more interesting are rival parties made up of individuals from those factions. Like you, they roam the planet, collecting map pieces, befriending, antagonising and fighting each other – or you – giving an overall sense of urgency and of a living game world.

To facilitate this new mechanic, the game introduced a Diplomacy skill and expanded NPC interaction options, allowing you befriend them and trade items and information. That said, while I love the concept of rival parties and expanded interactions, their implementations are far too insubstantial and fickle to be more than an illusion of world reactivity.

"Alas, *Crusaders* was my last *Wizardry* title. On its heels came the advent of 3D, *Doom* and real-time, and as video games went mainstream, recognisable brand names and blowing people up commanded massive profits, while with rare exception innovation in game paradigms were costly, and all too often ended in failed titles."

– *David W. Bradley, Wizardry VII's creator*



Some NPCs require specific words to be said, puzzles can be very complex and there's no journal system, so be prepared to take lots of notes.

Yet, while it may not have been great, the game tried something new that remains novel to this day, and it improved the experience most of the time.

Wizardry VII also adds automapping, though it's skill-based and nearly useless without training. A more subtle addition are the new ground tiles for paved roads. There is only one road in the game and it connects all major locations. Together with the map, it makes orientation easy and yet feels much less condescending than modern quests compasses, mostly because it still was possible to get temporarily lost or have that feeling of exploration and true discovery so often lacking in modern games.

Since *Wizardry VII* takes place on a different world than the first six games, another change comes in the new races you meet and the more-or-less creative monsters (two-headed tigers, walking octopi, etc.). Where the previous games were pure fantasy, the seventh part has a strong science fiction influence.

The sum of all these things is an experience that feels both familiar and novel at the same time. I loved discovering and learning all these new elements on my first try, and yet at the same time I loved the familiarity of playing an old-school *Wizardry* with a large and extensive overworld.

On my third attempt to play it, armed with a better understanding of the game mechanics and a way to get around the more annoying puzzles due to the availability of solutions on the Internet, I plowed through the game and enjoyed every second of it.

Wizardry VII is a game that invites exploration. It wants you to map its world exhaustively and look into every nook and cranny. Like all the games in the series, it expects you to know how to build a strong party, but accommodates a lot of different builds and approaches. It contains an endless number of battles that can sap your energy, and yet it always makes you come back for more. **JG**

The *Automap Mod* can be used to move the game's map to a convenient secondary window, while the *Cosmic Forge* is a pack of tools that allows much of the game to be edited.



Battles are challenging and require a well-made party, but the few monsters sprites can grow repetitive after a while.



The roaming NPC parties may find clues before you do, forcing you seek them and try to trade, steal or kill them.

Star Control 2



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

When I am asked what my favourite CRPG is, people are often surprised when I answer it's *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 analogue 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 similar to *Asteroid*, but each of the various ships plays differently.

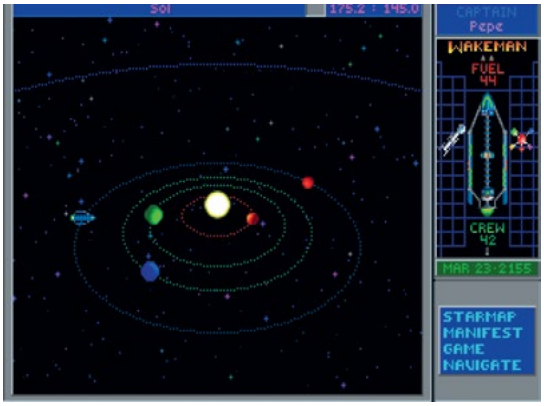
To me, one of the most amazing things about *Star Control 2* is that the explorable area is entirely open and free-form. True, you are limited in your exploration radius by your fuel reserves, but within that restriction you can go anywhere. The dialogue you have with main characters often gives you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

***In 2002 the source code of *SC2* was released. Fans then started *The Ur-Quan Masters* project, to port the game to modern PCs.**



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 up 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 dozen 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.

Each race also had its own music that played during its dialogue, and this music was based in MOD format, which using digitised 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% digitised 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 favourite 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. The *Star Control* license was brought by Stardock, who released *Star Control: Origins* in 2018.

Darklands



MicroProse, 1992
MS-DOS

Ominously opening with a warning that "in Medieval Germany, reality is more horrifying that 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.

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.

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, and 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.



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

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.

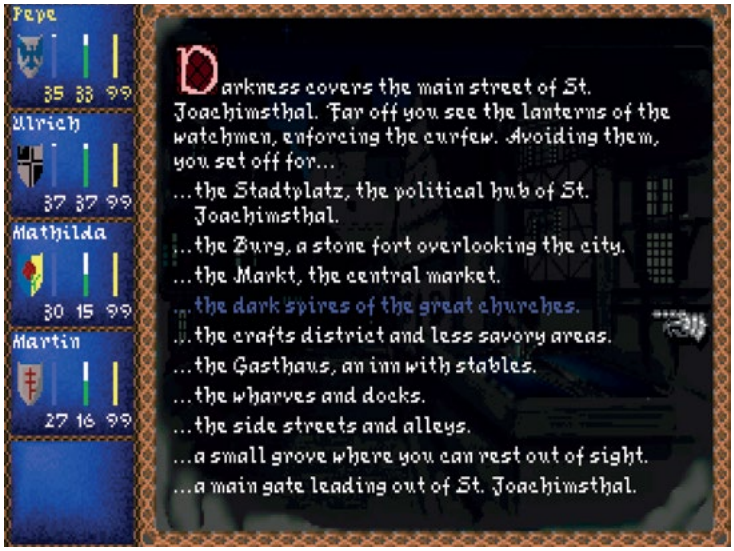
In *Darklands* you'll never gain experience points or level up. Progression is the result of your actions, successes and failures, increasing and decreasing your attributes in small increments. With a massive variety of skills and stats based on your chosen background, the game creates an interesting 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 predefined 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.

"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' feeling. When searching for tactical trade-offs 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, dialogues 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, dialogues 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 to undesirable scenarios such as crawling through sewers to escape a landscape of horrors, or surrendering to 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 labelled 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 realised.



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



Domark, 1992
Atari ST, Amiga and MS-DOS

Shadowlands. The mere name inspires sweet and dark memories. For most people, it's the title of an Anthony Hopkins movie about the life 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 favourite 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 were 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 characterised by four basic attributes: Combat, Magic, Strength and Health.



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

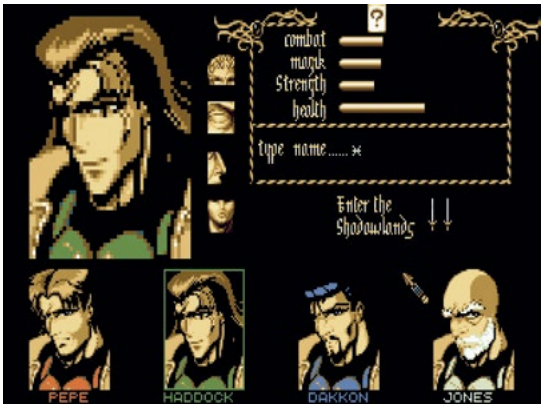
Although these stats are important at the start of the game, you'll also be able to further define your heroes as the game advances, since they gain Magic and Combat points with practice. So, the more spells they cast, the better they become at casting. This is the same system used in the classic *Dungeon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

Expanding upon *Drakkhen* (1989), *Shadowlands* was created in a way to allow players to control the four heroes either individually or as a group. Today this may sound trivial, but at the time it was a real revolution in RPGs. 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.

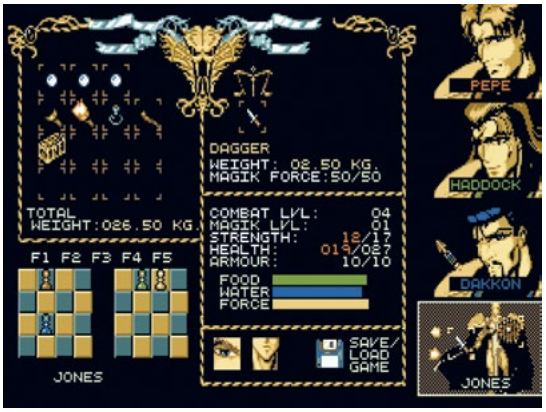
The ability to spread the members of your party and control them individually opened countless combat and puzzle possibilities. In fact, in certain moments of the game advances is of vital importance: the formation in which the group advances: walking in a line isn't the same as advancing as a block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

But, without a doubt, the most challenging and fun aspect of the game is its 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.



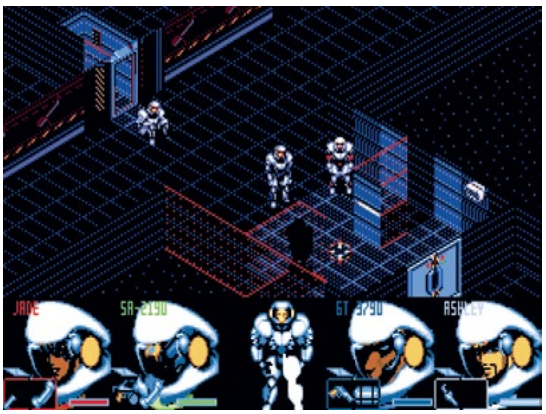
When creating your party, the game allows you to roll their stats and also to customise their appearance.



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



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



The sequel, *Shadoworlds,* was also released in 1992. It has a sci-fi setting and an updated UI, but feels uninspired.

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 say 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 labyrinthine 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.

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 effects. 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 *Shadoworlds*, set in space and using the same engine, but without the same attractiveness of the original. **FHG**

Amberstar



Thalion Software, 1992
Amiga, Atari ST and MS-DOS

Amberstar came with a 180-page manual containing a short novel with the setting's backstory, as well as a world map.

First in a planned "Amber trilogy" of games set in the fantasy world of Lyramion, *Amberstar* starts out with the protagonist alone before the grave of his parents, trying to decide what to do next.

Soon the story leads into the city sewers for the usual rat-slaying to save a cat but, tellingly, even this is a special event with a twist, leading to a unique reward. *Amberstar* might seem conventional on the surface, but it manages tropes with its own flair.



Inside dungeons and towns you play in a 2D first-person mode, while encounters moves the party and its enemies to a tactical grid.



Amberstar doesn't have any random encounters, but while you'll fight way less than in other RPGs, its battles and ambushes are much harder.

Right from the moment you exit the starting city, you can go (almost) everywhere, easily getting lost in swamps and forests, unless knowing where to go. On your way, you'll recruit others into your party to search for missing pieces of the titular Amberstar.

With an evocative soundtrack, a clever dialogue system based on keywords and quirky characters to meet, recruit or help out, *Amberstar* oozes charm. As you explore the land, your sense of accomplishment grows each time you find a way to reach to new places (riding horses, rafts, boats or even your own giant eagle), figure out a clue or win a difficult battle.

Combat is turn-based on a grid, with orders being given for all characters and then acted out all at once. It's an intuitive, albeit simple system, where your level and gear have a huge impact. Who you recruit for your party also makes for quite different strategies.

Amberstar doesn't hold your hand and features both subtle hints and infuriatingly hard riddles. There is no quest log – you are supposed to pay attention yourself (it's advised to write everything down) and act upon hints found in dialogue, deciphered runes and journals, searching for the mentioned places and solving elaborate enigmas to open up new areas.

At its core, *Amberstar* is all about exploration, wondering what lies over the next mountain range or behind the door inside the old ruin – though there are no branching stories, side-quests, random encounters or hundreds of items to collect, the world is sprawling and contains many cities and dungeons waiting to be found, all fitting into the main story.

While the sequel *Ambermoon* is even better, and while many might not have the focus and patience needed to enjoy this game in the modern age, for me it's a gem as enjoyable now as then – a game with unique wit and charm. **C**

Ambermoon



Thalion Software, 1993
Amiga

Ambermoon is the second game in the never completed "Amber trilogy". Unfortunately, the game was a huge flop sales-wise, closing the doors of German developer Thalion even before they could port the game or finish translating it.

Luckily, an official English version was later leaked and made freely available, as all of Thalion's games became public domain after its demise.

That said, let's look at the actual game. Taking place decades after *Amberstar*, system-wise the game is roughly identical – the same turn- and grid-based combat, inventory and dialogue system. The two exploration view modes remain: isometric for houses and wilderness, plus a first-person view for towns and dungeons – though now in 3D. As such, *Ambermoon*'s design is similar to *Albion* (1995), a better-known game later developed by former Thalion employees.

Ambermoon is huge, sprawling with locations to explore, though these are done in a somewhat linear fashion, with gates between areas – as opposed to the mostly free overland map of *Amberstar*. However, the charm, wit and storytelling of that game are still present. We play as the grandson of the earlier protagonist, who receives a quest from his dying grandfather. From there, the game is about travelling, finding companions for your party, solving quests, puzzles and fighting a diverse range of opponents.

It's standard RPG fare, but done with a certain warmth and elegance, competent gameplay systems and with lots of opportunities for exploration and immersion – even if the game's combat is somewhat slow and challenging in the first few hours. Returning players can also witness how the lands and its people fared since *Amberstar*, when a moon crashed into the planet, changing it into a fragmented post-apocalyptic fantasy world.

Ambermoon, like *Amberstar,* is about the story of a boy who is all alone in the world, and during his journey he finds new friends, helps villagers and kings but never loses his innocence. As such, it's simple and old-fashioned, but also endearing. *Ambermoon* might be the most hidden game gem you'll (n)ever come across, but if you liked *Albion* and/or *Amberstar*, this is a must-play. It's well-made, has a clear direction as well as engaging puzzles and story. **CH**

Thalion was a German studio, founded in 1988 and closed in 1994. Fans later created a "web shrine" to it, with its history and games: www.thalion.exotica.org.uk



Dungeons and towns are now shown in a free-movement early 3D view, with roaming enemies and an excellent automap.



The game doesn't hold your hand in any way. UI elements such as compass, clock and coordinates will only show if you find or buy them first.

Quest for Glory:
Shadows of Darkness



Sierra On-Line, 1993
MS-DOS

The first release of *Shadow of Darkness* was a rushed out floppy version, full of bugs and lacking the game's excellent voice acting. Avoid it at all costs.

The fourth Q*uest for Glory* game takes place in Mordavia, a haunted valley fit for a Universal horror film. Strange magic has summoned you to this land, and your only hope of escape is to find out why. But it won't be easy: the locals don't take kindly to strangers.

Here vampires, werewolves, and gravediggers cavort before tainted churches and squirming elder-gods. This is an autumn world, ever on the brink of Halloween. Or, perhaps, its invention. But that's not to say the game takes itself too seriously. *QfG4* is a perfect blend of comedy and gothic horror.

Like most great games, there's a bit of a learning curve. Part RPG, part adventure game, it's also very much its own thing. You create a character, fight battles, and raise stats by repeatedly using them. But the highest priced item isn't a sword, it's a hand broom (don't worry, I'm sure it will come in handy). And to get health potions you must beat a musical memory game, win a round of twenty questions, trap a Tribble-like creature and guide the bouncy little sucker through a rotating rat maze.



The character system remains very similar to previous games in the series, with three core classes plus the possibility of making hybrids.

Seasoned adventurers will try to combine every inventory item with everything in sight. But the world is so vast and there are so many items (you can get over-encumbered!) that brute-force puzzle-solving will get you nowhere. Progress is less about raising stats or combining items than talking to the right person, in the right place, at the right time.

You can play a Fighter, Thief, Magic-User, or import a Paladin from the last game. Problems have multiple solutions, ranging from casting the right spell to picking the right lock to punching the right face. I always picked the Fighter, much to the sarcastic narrator's delight: "You read the book, written entirely in one-syllable words, obviously intended for Fighters. It's absolutely fascinating."

Combat is a war of attrition. Fought in an arcade-like manner (or set to auto-battle), individual encounters aren't overly challenging, but eventually you'll find yourself lost, poisoned and down to your last potion. Flee in terror and you'll be chased, screen after screen, until you find sanctuary or eternal rest – whichever comes first. Resting is only possible in a few locations, and the feeling of relief when you step into the warm safety of the inn should be familiar to anyone who played the original *Resident Evil*.

Few games have such atmosphere. As you leave town, the excellent soundtrack slowly fades, as if afraid to follow you into the woods. Darkness doesn't fall in Mordavia, it slowly suffocates the light. And as the gnarled trees look more and more like grasping hands, you might catch yourself wondering: Waitaminute... was that thing there before?

QfG4 was also one of the first "talkie" games, using CD-ROM technology to store thousands of spoken lines. Back then, actually being able to hear people talk was something of a revelation.



The point-and-click controls are very accessible, with verbs, items and spells placed in a hidden bar atop of the screen.



The game delivers a brilliant blend of horror and deadly situations with silly gags and a charming sense of humour.



Combat is somewhat arcade-like, and enemies range from poisonous wyverns to *Monthy Python*-esque killer bunnies.



Quest for Glory V is huge, but also a radical departure, featuring 3D graphics and a heavy focus on combat.

The narrator (voiced by John Rhys-Davies, who played Gimli in *Lord of the Rings)* acts like a skilled Game Master, describing sights, smells and sounds. Characters have pages of dialogue, ranging from dire warnings to throwaway gags. The most memorable is a trio of townsfolk who sound suspiciously like Jack Nicholson, Rodney Dangerfield, and, er, Jack Nicholson (the voice actors were asked which celebrities they could impersonate, and when two answered Nicholson, they went with it).

The story really comes together when you meet the Domovoi, a house spirit who reveals just how much the town has suffered. Usually NPCs can't wait to burden total strangers with their problems: step into town and you'll be mobbed by locals waving tales of woe like street urchins thrusting baubles at tourists.

But Mordavians are too guarded, too devoid of hope to even bother. It's the Domovoi who helps you realise these are more than one-joke characters. They're good people who've lived so long in darkness they've forgotten about the light. The goal isn't really to escape Mordavia, the goal is to set it free.

On the surface, *QfG4* seems like a light-hearted comedy, the RPG equivalent of *Young Frankenstein*. But this is a tale of love, sacrifice, and redemption. It just happens to feature duelling Jack Nicholson impersonators and enough puns to send the narrator into a giggle fit. And trust me, you haven't lived until you've heard John Rhys-Davies giggle.

The first four *Quest for Glory* games were released from 1989 to 1993, in a golden era of adventure games but, sadly, the genre declined heavily in the following years, and *Quest for Glory V: Dragon Fire* (1998) feels torn between moving on with the world and pleasing old fans. Troubled by a nightmarish development cycle, it's a huge game that offers an epic ending to the series, but also features blocky early 3D graphics and a heavy focus on combat, leading to a mixed reception.

After its release, the team was laid off by Sierra, and the series' distinctive gameplay was followed only by a handful of fan-games – until 2012, when Kickstarter brought a wave of spiritual successors, including one from the series' original creators, Lori and Corey Cole, titled *Hero-U: Rogue to Redemption*. **JRA**

There are three popular fan-made games based on the series: *Quest for Yrolg, Quest for Glory 4 ½* (both parodies) and the excellent *Heroine's Quest: The Herald of Ragnarok*.

ShadowCaster



Raven Software, 1993
MS-DOS

ShadowCaster was re-released in CD-ROM in 1994, adding voice acting, FMV sequences and two challenging levels after you finish the game.

Raven Software is known today as an Activision subsidiary working on the *Call of Duty* series; in the mid-90s they were know as developers of *Heretic* and *Hexen*; but they really began in 1992 with *Black Crypt,* a real-time blobber for the Amiga.

Sensing the death of the Amiga, they licensed a new engine id's John Carmack was working on after *Wolfenstein 3D (*but before *Doom)*, and made what's arguably the first FPS/RPG hybrid: *ShadowCaster.*



While most of your time will be spent fighting, combat isn't fun. It's slow, easy and lacks both the complexity of an RPG and the action of *Doom.*



Each form has unique advantages, cons and powers. The Caun is small and weak, but can heal himself, sneak, cast light, telekinesis and other spells.

You play as Kirt, a guy who (very) suddenly finds out that he is a shape-shifter from another dimension who must defeat Malkor, an evil outcast god.

As a shape-shifter, Kirt will learn to assume various forms during his adventures. He begins only with the Maorin form – a huge werewolf with four arms. In this form you're stronger, tougher, faster and can see invisible traps, but drown in water.

Later on, Kirk will also learn to transform into Caun, – a small and fragile spellcaster that can sneak around; Opsis, a floating eyeball that can scout the map and scare enemies; Kahpa, a frog-like creature that can breath underwater and perform elemental attacks; Ssair, a red salamander that can breath fire; and Grost, a nearly invincible stone giant that can punch through walls and cause earthquakes.

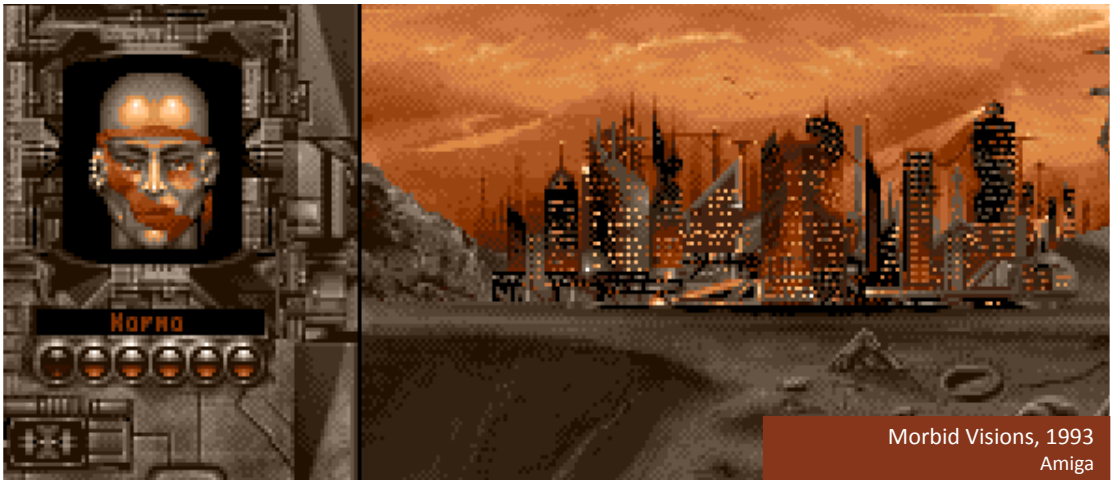
However, taking the form of a creature and using its abilities drains Kirk's magical power. Once it runs out, he'll revert to his human form, which naturally regenerates magic power but is much weaker.

While exploring the dungeons you'll come across (very) simple puzzles, weapons, armour, potions, keys and magic items you can collect, plus gain XP and eventually level up (thought all stats are hidden).

While all this sounds cool, *ShadowCaster* never lives up to its potential. Kirk has all these interesting abilities, yet they are used sparingly and in predictable ways. Combat is the real focus, but it's dull and slow (especially for a *Doom*-like), with small, crude maps, weak enemy design and over-reliance on melee.

A real-time blobber inside an (early) *Doom* engine, *ShadowCaster* was a promising concept powered by an impressive technology, but its parts never clicked together. It's not surprising that Raven Software would next create *Heretic,* streamlining the RPG elements to deliver a *Doom*-like fast-paced FPS. **FE**

Perihelion: The Prophecy



Released only in Europe and exclusive to the then-declining Amiga, this obscure sci-fi RPG oozes atmosphere with its audacious two-tone palette, ominous soundtrack and exotic setting.

Inspired by *Dune* rather than *Lord of the Rings* (why so few games do this?), *Perihelion* is set in a planet ravaged by ancient wars, inhabited by cyborgs, psionic cultists and genetically engineered mutants, all ruled by a long line of Imperial clones.

The stylised intro sequence tells of a powerful psionic god named "The Unborn" trying to breach into this reality, causing chaos all across the planet. To stop it, the Emperor summons six prophesied heroes kept in stasis for centuries just for this moment: your party.

You start the game by creating said party from several races and classes, in a complex but poorly explained ruleset – you can do things like customise the DNA composition of hybrid races, but the manual won't even tell you what each class stands for! That finished (somehow), you start your quest.

Perihelion is a first-person dungeon crawler with tactical turn-based combat, similar to the Gold Box games. A core difference is that it's much shorter – about 8-10 hours long – and focus is more on its story. Combat occurs sparingly and there are no random encounters, which is welcome given how slow and underwhelming the game's battles are.

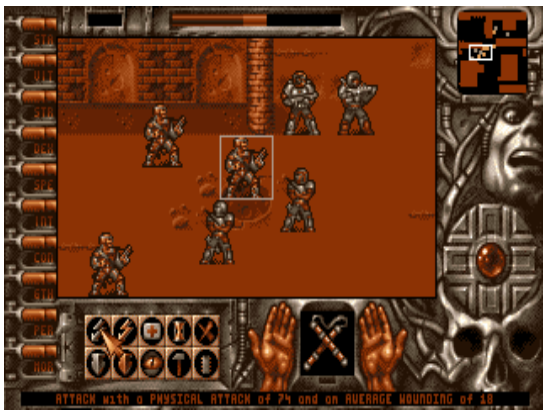
That, unfortunately, can also be said for most of the game itself. The atmosphere is great, and the story tries very hard to be interesting, but you'll spend most of your time roaming across empty cities and dungeons, trying to figure what to do next.

There's also the issue of the interface – while it looks impressive, it's cumbersome and unintuitive. Simple actions such as examining an item or talking to NPCs are way harder than they ever needed to be.

In fact, the entire game has this strong "form over function" feeling. Features such as using computer terminals for investigative work (you need to actually type in commands like "read" or "login") or crafting your own spells via runes are all great in concept, but become busy work due to their poor execution.

It's a shame that such unique presentation and setting are tied to such a weak RPG. In the end, it's better to just look at, rather than actually play *Perihelion*. **FE**

***Perihelion* was declared abandonware by its designer, Edvard Toth, who put together a game + emulator pack for anyone to download.**

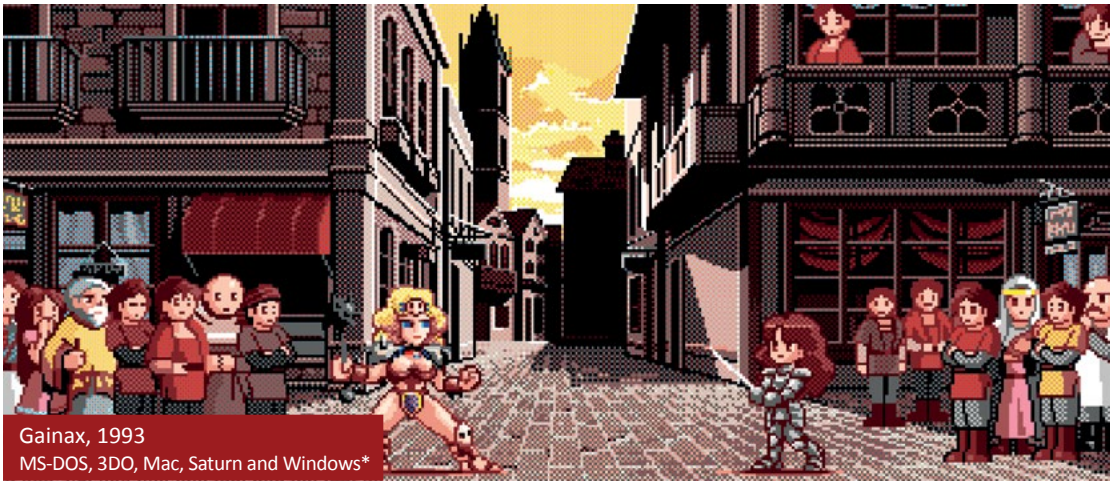


The tactical turn-based combat looks similar to the Gold Box games, but uses action points and psionic spells.



To examine an item you must select it on the inventory screen, move to the network screen and then type "ANALYSE". It gets tiresome fast.

Princess Maker 2



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

*In 2004 a new version called *Princess Maker 2: Refine* was issued in Japan for PS2 and Windows, featuring updated art and full voice acting. This is the version released on Steam in 2016, thought some fans still prefer the original leaked MS-DOS beta.

Princess Maker 2 is a Japanese RPG, but its US release was an adventure by itself. In 1995 Soft-Egg Enterprises began to localise the game into English, but ran into countless delays. By the time things were sorted out, no one cared anymore for an MS-DOS game. Without an official English release, the game became a cult hit after a beta version of the translation was leaked and started to circulate in the early 2000s. It was only in 2016 that the game finally was officially released in English, via the Steam store.

The series is worthy of a closer examination, as *Princess Maker* (1990) pioneered the sim-raising 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 dive into this often overlooked gem!

Princess Maker 2 takes place in a 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, training and adventures.



Each job has its own pros and cons. Working as a farmer helps to raise stats that are important for a fighter, but it's frowned upon by the nobles.

Each of those activities takes 10 days of a monthly schedule you must plan for your 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 through, 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 game's 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 depend on her sign and blood type and she'll face various hidden checks during the game.

Depending on players' goals 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 the face of ever-decreasing funds, especially since developers have foreseen that 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; only investing in social skills can take her up in the social ladder.

"Mr. Okada [Gainax's President] told me that, because he was born a man, he often failed to understand women. He wanted a game where he could experience how it would be to live and die as a woman. [...] I also had a game I wanted to make. I loved *Nobunaga's Ambition*, but didn't enjoy the battle scenes. I wanted a game that was *Nobunaga's Ambition*, but only the parts where you train subordinates. [...] The next week I returned with a smile in my face, saying 'let's make a game about raising a girl'."

– *Takami Akai, Princess Maker 2's director*



The game overflows with stats, skills and numbers, but not all of them are under your control, e.g. 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 arts 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 at 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 slay many monsters? 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 players who enjoy those aspects of role-playing games.

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. **JMR**

There are nine *Princess Maker* games, most 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.

Veil of Darkness



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

After releasing *Veil of Darkness*, Event Horizon changed the company's name to DreamForge Intertainment.

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 realise 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, nominating you as the "chosen one".



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.

Your task in the game is to fulfil 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 attempt to mix both genres, as they went back to make more orthodox CRPGs and the excellent point-and-click *Sanitarium*. Still, I would recommend it for the nice story and the *Ravenloft* vibes. **TR**

BloodNet



MicroProse, 1993
MS-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's flirting with a cute girl ends up going 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 fully 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 colourful 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 are point-and-clicks with gigantic environments and very tiny pixelated characters evolving through them. It's not very good-looking and some cutscenes 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 stats don't make sense and others are useless. For example, initiative never works and damage ratings seem completely random.

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

BloodNet starts with an interesting premise, develops it halfway but never truly succeeds in turning it into a fun game. The ending is also a cop-out and feels like a sequel-hook. Unfortunately for MicroProse, the planned sequel – *BloodNet 2000* – was quickly cancelled. **TR**

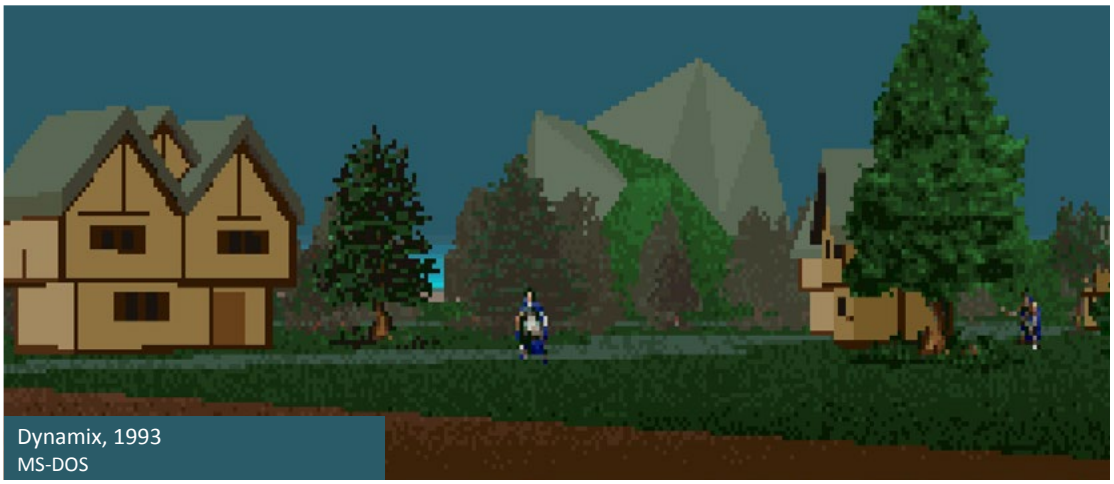


One of the characters,Benny Puzzle, speaks in crossword puzzles. Here, he's offering to buy you a drink.



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

Betrayal at Krondor



Dynamix, 1993
MS-DOS

Betrayal at Krondor **had quite the interesting development history, and it has been described in detail by lead writer Neal Hallford on his website in a series titled "Krondor Confidential".**

Betrayal at Krondor was released in 1993 and still remains one of the best games the CRPG genre has to show. The reasons for this are many, but they all, ultimately, come down to the same thing – *BaK* offers all the "major" RPG design aspects (combat, exploration, narrative), and it does so splendidly.

The combat might appear basic on paper. You control 2-3 characters on a small semi-isometric grid, taking turns smacking down enemies that usually outnumber you. The real deal, however, lies in the details, as the combat in *Krondor* is very fiddly.

Taking damage lowers combat efficiency, spells are interesting and plentiful, but cost health to cast, and some enemies may come back from the dead or run away when low on HP. Preparation is also vital, since foes not only outnumber you, but also employ dirty tricks such as poisoned or blessed weapons (and contrary to many other games, poison in *Krondor* is serious business). Thus, it's always good to keep a large supply of consumables of your own to boost your gear and even the odds. Especially if you're about to face five angry Moredhel warlocks.



You'll face several kinds of enemies in combat, as well as puzzle-like trap encounters that require you to navigate the area in a certain way.

While the combat in *Betrayal at Krondor* might not be particularly groundbreaking, it has one major job that it accomplishes exactly as it should – to burn through your supplies and put blocks in your way as you explore.

Exploration is a key part of the game. Not only is the gameworld huge and full of content, it also opens nearly all of its landmass to you from the get-go and encourages you to uncover it. The shortest way towards your goal might be the most perilous one, while side-paths, hidden dungeons and seemingly unimportant villages may hold hints necessary to understand the events that play out in the game.

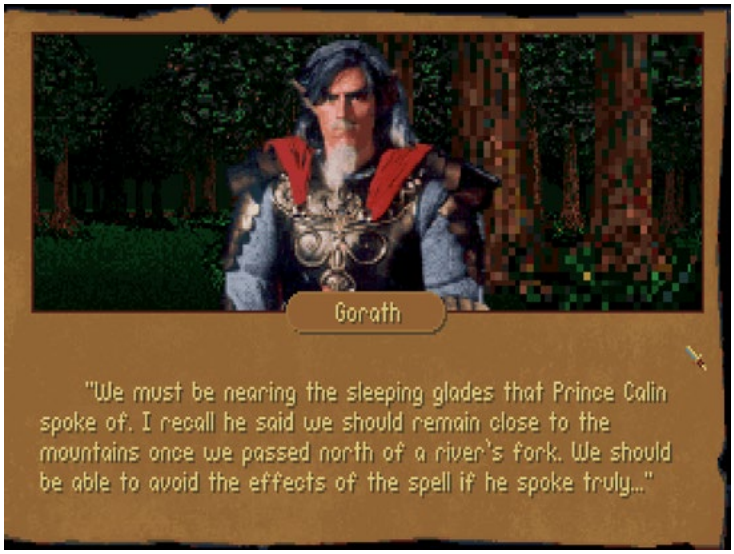
Another great aspect of *Krondor*'s exploration is how involved it is. Your party needs food rations to keep going, and you have to watch out for rations that are poisoned or spoiled. You can use various spells to light your way in the night or hide yourself from enemies. You can go anywhere you want, dig up cemeteries, catch diseases and die on the way to the temple because you forgot to pack the necessary medication, or get exploded in a naphtha mine after you try to use a torch.

There are also plenty of puzzles along the way, including the famous Wordlock chests that open only when you give the right answer to their riddles. The only thing that could be said to spoil the exploration a bit are the game's graphics, which haven't aged all that well. Or, at least, the ones showing the regular outside world because underground sections and general artwork (and the glorious live actors in goofy costumes) are all top-notch. Not to mention the terrific music that accompanies you everywhere.

Finally, the area where *Krondor* probably shines the most, and which no game to this day has managed to topple, is its writing and narrative.

"Unlike other games whose progression mechanic largely revolved around 'clearing out' levels and always moving forward, we made a radical decision. Our game world would be persistent. It would exist – and change – whether or not the player showed up to see what was going on. In answer to the classic zen koan, our answer was yes, the tree would definitely make a sound when it fell in the forest, but it would be up to the player to decide whether or not they were going to be there to hear it fall."

– Neal Hallford, Betrayal at Krondor's writer



Like a book, *Krondor*'s story is divided into several chapters, each following a set group of characters pursuing a certain objective.

The game is loosely based on Raymond E. Feist's *Riftwar* saga, a high-fantasy book series from the 80s, although it doesn't share that many common elements with the books (which is probably for the best, to be frank). If you're familiar with *Riftwar*, you'll probably recognise many of the characters and past events described in-game, but that's it, really.

Still, this grounding in literature lends itself well to *Krondor*'s general writing format. That is, everything here resembles a book. The story is divided into chapters, each switching between different characters and locations. Messages show up on paper pages, descriptions are detailed and robust, and there are very few "functional" texts to find here, such as "this doesn't work" or "wrong item" – no, the game always presents you an intricate picture of something, such as a character trying something nonsensical and saying he has to stay focused or he'll be putting jam on his sword and poison in his sandwich the next time.

But the style is not all, for the story in *Krondor* is also one of the best around. The game presents you a political intrigue with a hundred million billion twists, turns and hidden layers, and it's up to your party, caught in the middle of this maelstrom, to make sense of it. Plus, as said before, simply going from plot point A to B is never enough. To really connect the dots you have to investigate the whole world and gather clues, or you'll just keep stumbling around.

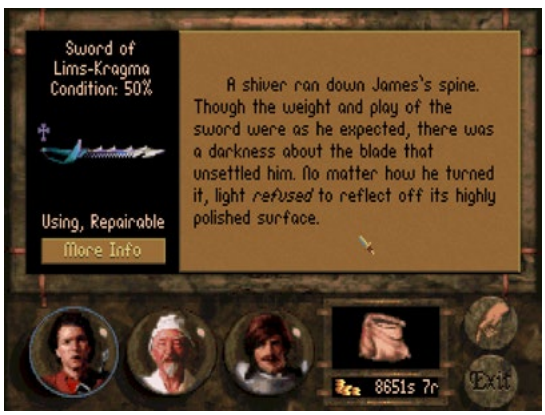
Betrayal at Krondor is, suffice to say, quite possibly my favourite RPG of all time. When you think of most other role-playing games, you'll always find yourself saying, "it's a great one, but…". In *Krondor*, there are no "buts". This game is great through and through. It has no underdeveloped or bad sides, nor does it fall apart as it keeps going.

It's the closest we've ever got to a perfect entry in the CRPG genre, and I'll be willing to fight you to the death to defend this statement. **DR**

While *Betrayal at Krondor* was based on Raymond E. Feist's books, it's actually a whole new story. It was later adapted by Feist into a novel called *Krondor: The Betrayal*.



Exploration is in first-person, and you'll venture through caves and dungeons besides the large overworld map.



Items, spells, weapons and actions are all presented in a book-like fashion, instead of the usual descriptive texts.

The Legacy: Realm of Terror



Magnetic Scrolls, 1993
MS-DOS

Magnetic Scrolls was a British company that developed many text adventure games during the 80s, such as *The Pawn* (1985) and *The Guild of Thieves* (1987). *The Legacy* was their last game.

The Legacy casts you as the heir of a mansion. As soon as you enter it, the door locks itself, zombies infest the hallways and you begin to find disturbing notes detailing occult rituals.

If this sounds similar to *Alone in the Dark* (1992), released in the same year, that's because it is. A lot. They even share a heavy Lovecraftian tone, even if the manual insists that *The Legacy* was inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* story.



The visuals of the game were very advanced for the time, and the interface is based on resizeable windows that can be moved around.



The Legacy presents several pre-made heirs for you to choose, such as a retired marine, a businesswoman or a journalist, but you can also create your own.

However, while *Alone in the Dark* was about puzzle-solving and a few deadly monsters, *The Legacy* is an RPG. A dungeon crawler, to be precise. Each level is a twisting maze, filled with one-way doors, traps, teleporters and secrets – challenging to navigate even with the help of the on-screen mini-map.

Monsters are also plentiful. From zombies to extra-dimensional beings, be prepared to fight a lot. Combat is in real time, much like *Dungeon Master*, and each victory gives you XP to improve your stats and skills – but will likely also cost valuable resources.

And that's the challenge: resource management. Health items are extremely rare, as are bullets and crystals that restore magic power. You can rest to heal, but only at rare safe areas – and sleeping makes you hungry, so you're limited by food availability.

As such, *Realm of Terror* can be a very difficult and frustrating game – one that might force you to load an old save file or even restart if you wasted too much ammo, magic or health early on and can't proceed. Its first few hours can be punishing for newcomers, especially if they spent points on the "wrong" skills, but that's also when the atmosphere is at its best.

Sadly, once you're better prepared, the tension dims and inventory management becomes the main challenge. The game has dozens of weapons, items and puzzle pieces, but you can carry very few of them at once. You'll often find a puzzle and be forced to backtrack to grab its solution. Luckily, the monsters don't respawn – if you bothered to kill them.

Overall, *The Legacy* is an exotic and charming RPG, with a presentation ahead of its time and some tense moments. But once its Lovecraftian monsters become trash mobs, most of that atmosphere vanishes. It's still great for dungeon crawler fans, but it's easy to see why *Alone in the Dark* is the superior horror game. **FE**

Hired Guns



DMA Design, 1993
Amiga and MS-DOS

Multiplayer RPGs released before the Internet came along are rare treasures. While they're often limited in some manner, they more than make up for it with the joy of not being alone in front of the computer.

Hired Guns is such a game, one that aims for those aspects of gaming: the companionship of friends and teamwork. This real-time dungeon crawler allows up to four players to squeeze in front of a single computer to control a band of mercenaries on a top-secret mission.

The game pays for its multiplayer focus by being a very "lite" RPG. There is no character creation process: players pick their merc(s) from the pool of 12 available characters, and besides included gear, three bare-bones stats and a Human/Droid race factor, there is nothing more to speak of in RPG terms. The XP only serves as a high score counter, nothing more.

What helps give each character an identity is their gear. The medic carries health kits and a stun gun, the combat droid lugs a mini-gun about and the mystery woman packs a plethora of psi-amps, the game's version of magic spells. These limited-use items do things like act as weapons, build bridges, teleport players and generally affect the terrain in various ways, and are often essential to completing each stage.

There are three game modes on offer: practice stages, single missions and the long story campaign. Gameplay in each one boils down to finding keys, killing baddies, solving environmental puzzles and reaching the exit, sometimes under a time limit.

In order to fit in the multiplayer the UI has been streamlined to a bare minimum: each character gets 25% of the screen, with tabs for their first-person view, inventory, stat page and map display. Playing with the mouse is surprisingly intuitive, but not so much with the keyboard and joystick.

Hired Guns is truly a case of "the more the merrier"; playing alone has you control four mercs at once, while 2-player mode splits them evenly and 3 and 4 players get only one merc each, which is where the game truly shines.

The campaign is long and challenging and I strongly advise tackling it with a couple of friends, just like I did in 1995, hence the fond memories I have of this game. **ÁV**

A reboot of *Hired Guns* was being made in the late 90s, as a multiplayer mission-based FPS. The game was cancelled, but a demo is still available for download.



Character selection screen, showing one of the 12 playable mercenaries. Each comes with unique stats and inventory.



A four-player game where each character is accessing a different screen: first-person view, map, stat screen and inventory.

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 a planet full of life. It was turned into the desert by power-hungry and mad wizards thousands of years ago. Here we follow the story of four unlikely heroes. Slowly rotting away in a 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 more forgotten souls whose corpses will be buried under the 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 the race of your characters, their alignment, their professions 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 sets it apart from other RPG games of its time: Psionics. Each character has psionic abilities that allow them to disintegrate animate objects, absorb diseases or transform your arm into a weapon. Beware though, almost all intelligent creatures on Athas have such abilities, and they will not hesitate to use them.



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 Psionicist, a Half-Giant Gladiator or a Mul Preserver.

Your party begins as slave gladiators, forced to fight monsters to the death in the arena. The world of *Dark Sun* is presented in top-down, 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 their inhabitants, solving small puzzles and mini-quests. This is where you'll slowly notice some of the great elements of *Dark Sun*. The dialogues 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 the 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 travelling 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 open space with many quests, adding to nice 40+ hours of gameplay.



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



Every character in *Dark Sun* can use Psionics, 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-foot-tall Mountain Stalkers or the huge Mastyrial 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 honourless 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 positions.

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

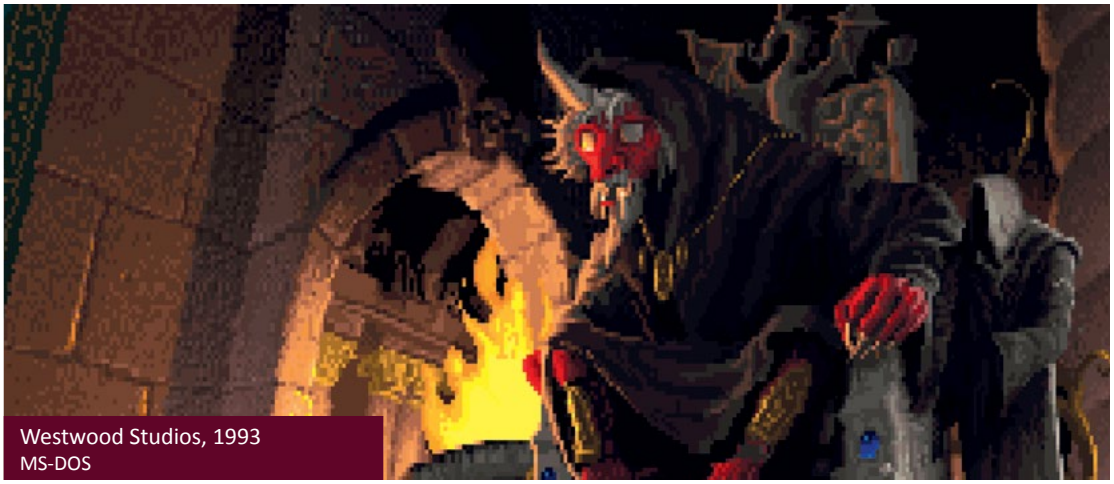
In short, *Ravager* is bigger, louder and much more buggier. Sprites got much bigger, animations were improved and the overall mood became much grittier and dark. The atmosphere was improved by voiced dialogue, new cutscenes and a great CD-audio soundtrack. Sadly, some of the bugs were game-breaking and you could face a complete restart of your game due to an 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*. Its 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 dialogues, 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.

Lands of Lore:
The Throne of Chaos



Westwood Studios, 1993
MS-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.



Not only is 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.

Much like titles from the Gold Box and *Ultima* series, the game came with a more technical manual explaining the interface and separated the fiction out into a 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 up with, each with their own strengths and weaknesses from the scaly Ak'shel and his magic to the roguish Kierean, 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 character 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 pixelised 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 deceptive simplicity. It's a formula that holds up well even today, and a crawl still worth delving into. **RE**

Dungeon Hack



DreamForge Intertainment, 1993
MS-DOS

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 customise its random dungeons. It also offers some new features, such as the addition of an automap 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, in which you descend through 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 dozen keys into a dozen types of door 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 – and face hazards such as underwater levels, anti-magic fields and starvation.

Yet between the over-reliance on die 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 overlook 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 mini-map is also welcome.



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

Forgotten Realms: Unlimited Adventures



Strategic Simulations, Inc, 1993
MS-DOS and Mac

You can check the Unlimited Adventures Hall of Fame to learn all about *FRUA*'s most popular modules, then download the modules from frua.rosedragon.org

The popular "Gold Box" series began in 1988 with *Pool of Radiance* and now, after six years, twelve games and several big changes in the industry, it was showing its age. SSI then concluded the series with *Forgotten Realms: Unlimited Adventures* (*FRUA*), a toolset intended to allow aspiring designers to create their own Gold Box-like games, replicating most of the functions that existed in the core games.

At first *FRUA* had some hard limitations on what could be changed, but they were eventually overcome with the use of hacks, such as *UAShell*. These hacks allowed a designer to introduce a multitude of changes to the default *Dungeons & Dragons* modules and create other styles. Since the toolset's release, the *FRUA* designers have developed all kinds of fantasy modules, as well as science fiction, cyberpunk, horror, humour, superhero and even anime-style modules.

Over the years, a community of devoted followers has sprung up around the *FRUA* toolset. This collection of designers, hackers and players continually keep new innovations and modules (also referred to as "designs") coming out at a regular intervals.



While *FRUA* was somewhat limited at first, players have since created tools to allow for custom classes, races, stats, artwork and music.

The community hosts a forum at www.ua.reonis.com, releases an occasional newsletter and even holds module creation contests based upon various themes. They post reviews of modules, both new and old, in order to help new community members find the best-quality scenarios to suit their needs.

No mention of *FRUA* could be complete without a discussion of the actual modules created for it. Many of them rival the original Gold Box series of games in design, scope and ambition.

Those looking to stick with *D&D* need look no further than Ray Dyer's massive "*Realm*" series. This group of 40+ modules translate many popular *AD&D* tabletop modules into playable *FRUA* scenarios. Everything from "*The Keep on the Borderlands*" to "*The Temple of Elemental Evil*" to even a remake of "*Pool of Radiance*" can be found within *Realm*.

Original *AD&D*-style modules exist as well, including Ben Jockish's "*The Sect*," John Rudy's "*The Guild*" and Ben Sanderfer's "*AT1: Dark Alliances*". These adventures can take players through Dragonlance, the Forgotten Realms, Greyhawk or any number of *AD&D*'s established worlds, and anyone who wants to roll up a party and delve into deep dungeons looking for treasure is likely to find a lot to love.

Science fiction modules are less prevalent but still popular, with several of them being based upon Buck Rogers (in the style of the SSI's *Buck Rogers* games). Harri Polsa has created a series of sci-fi modules around his main character, Millar Jade Vanderholle, though they have met with some controversy due their explicit sexual nature.

All modules are classified as either "Vanilla", which uses only *FRUA*'s assets, "French Vanilla", which adds new artwork, or "Hacked", which has extensive changes and requires the use of the *UAShell* mod.



Areas are 24x24 squares in size and can have multiple tilesets at once, making for large and diverse dungeons.



Besides the first-person exploration, you can also create overland maps with events and random encounters.



"Hacked" modules use *UAShell* to have more flexibility, allowing them to modify *FRUA*'s rules and appearance.



Some modules have a bigger focus on storytelling and will provide a pre-made character for players to use.

It should also be mentioned that, while intended primarily as a tool to create scenarios, *FRUA* did ship with a sample adventure called "*Heirs to Skull Crag*", a forgotten 13th entry in the Gold Box line-up. However, its reviews have been less than favourable in comparison to the SSI classics that preceded it.

Given the limitations of *FRUA*, it was only a matter of time before someone began work on a sequel to the toolset in order to remove those limitations.

In development since 1995, *Dungeon Craft* has seen several modules released for it. The advantages of this toolset include being able to run natively in Windows, the use of high-resolution artwork and having an unlimited number of events and art assets. The disadvantage is not being compatible with *FRUA* modules. The engine is open-source, and still under development, with a large following all of its own.

Another spiritual successor, the *IceBlink Engine,* was kickstarted in 2012. Combining parts of *FRUA* and BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights*, it can be used to create modules for both Windows and Android systems. It is still lacking in features, but its future looks promising.

Despite developments on these systems, though, there still remains a hardcore following for *FRUA* and its modules. New breakthroughs in hacking the engine continue to happen and designers find new ways to excite players through inventive use of artwork and storytelling. For a toolset that is nearly 25 years old, *FRUA* has stood the test of time.

As members of the community like to say: so long as there are adventures to be played, there will be someone there to play them. And so long as there are stories left to tell, there will be someone there to create them. **BE**

SSI abandoned *FRUA* within a year of release, leaving some bugs behind. The *FRUA* community has since released their own unofficial 1.3 patch, fixing several issues.

Mods:

UAShell: An important tool that applies the hacks within a module's directory, such as custom art and music, then reverses those same hacks when the player is done. It contains several tools to help designers affect changes within the *FRUA* engine, so running a hacked module without *UAShell* can lead to strange results and even the odd bug or crash.

Ultima VIII: Pagan



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

Ultima VIII: Pagan is overall the 13th game to bear the *Ultima* name, and it is one of the franchise's most controversial entries. Rushed out, much of the game was 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 *Super 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.



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.

Instead, it is an enduring testament to the way in which the "business" side of the gaming industry can cripple a promising project – 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 adopted 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 and 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 marginalising them in favour of weapon-based attacks.

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

"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."

– *Richard Garriott*, Ultima VIII: Pagan*'s producer*



The Guardian is worshipped 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 endeavour.

So – with all of these caveats, flaws, questionable design choices, and development woes, what worth does *Ultima VIII* offer? 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 demon 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.

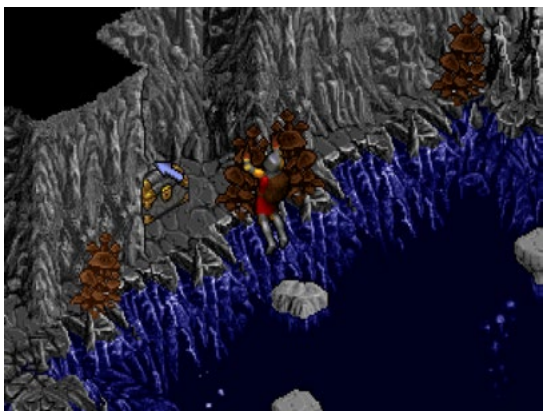
At the game's conclusion, it is clear that the Avatar's victory is Pyrrhic at best; and at worst, it is not a victory at all, but rather the final collapse of a moral code that the Avatar has spent many *Ultima* games striving to uphold and protect.

Ultima VIII is a very disappointing example of squandered potential. And yet, beneath all of its faults and missteps, there lies within it an important philosophical counterpoint to the naive 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 were planned, but both were cancelled due to poor sales. Read more about *The Lost Vale* on page 508.



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



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

ADOM

Ancient Domains of Mystery



Thomas Biskup, 1994
Windows, MS-DOS, Amiga, Mac and Linux

Thomas Biskup created an Indiegogo campaign in 2012 to fund a 'rebirth' of *ADOM*'s development. It raised $90,000.

I was lucky enough to have a home computer in the early 80s. I learned how to read and type by playing interactive fiction games and roguelikes. The high difficulty and complexity of those early roguelikes means that many of them have been a fixture in my life for decades, and of those early roguelikes, *ADOM (Ancient Domains of Mystery)* has meant the most to me over the years. The first release of ADOM was in 1994, and development continued until 2002. In 2012, development resumed following a successful crowd-funding campaign.

The first time I played *ADOM* it felt like a missing connection between interactive fiction and roguelikes. Interactive fiction games (the early *Zork* games and *Colossal Cave Adventure* tend to be the most enduring examples) give you the feeling you're exploring real places: handwritten stories embroidered with puzzles, and rooms furnished with enough clues to solve those puzzles but written to suggest a lived-in world beyond that room.

Rogue, the game that gives 'roguelikes' their name, was an attempt to solve a specific problem with interactive fiction: once you figured out the puzzles, there was little incentive to play them again (beyond the comfort of returning to a beloved film or novel).



ADOM uses nine main stats and over 40 skills you can level up and train for, as well as a corruption system which incurs random mutations, such as gills or acid blood.

The way that roguelikes tried to solve the problem was to focus on procedural generation: the task of world-building was collapsed into algorithms that would build it anew every time the player embarked on a new quest. However, in the quest to produce the perfect "forever" game, most of the world-building was given over to the cold thrashing jaws of procedural generation.

ADOM differentiates itself from other roguelikes right from the start: before players begin the game, they are invited to "Embark on the Postcard Adventure" – an option on the main menu that lists Thomas Biskup's home address with the simple request to send him a postcard if they enjoyed *ADOM*. It's a remarkably human gesture in a genre of game that established itself as a vector for cold machine logic.

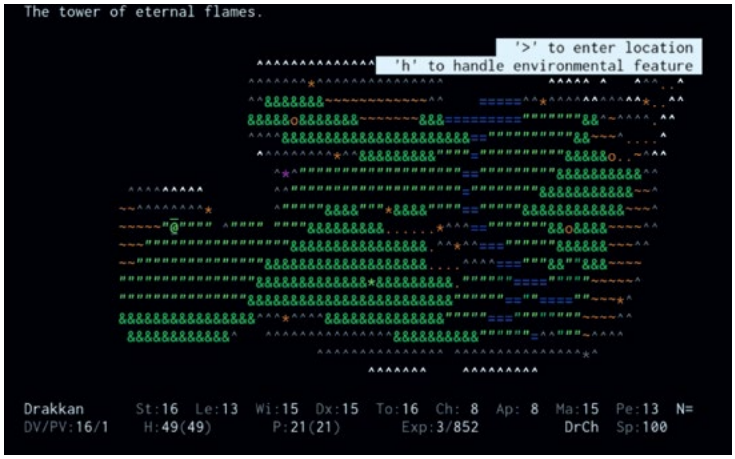
During character creation, there are 12 races and over 20 classes to choose from. Certainly, some combinations are more effective than others, but the game will let you pick any combination you want. In keeping with the concerns that motivated *Rogue*, the choices you make during character creation will have a major impact on how the game plays out.

Once you've created your character, a short passage describing your upbringing is generated, populated with some events that relate to your race and class. It's a brilliant way to prime players, something that later roguelikes would replicate and build upon to great effect.

After this, *ADOM* does what made me fall in love with it, something that cut against the established orthodoxy of roguelikes up until that point: *ADOM* drops you right into the mountainous Drakalor Chain of the world of Ancardia; not the top floor of an astonishingly deep dungeon, but a whole corner of the world, full of caves and towns and dungeons.

"ADOM was inspired by several roguelike games: most prominently *NetHack, Angband* as far as early visualisations go and *Omega* for the wilderness area. The commercial RPG *Wasteland* (IMHO still the best computer RPG ever) was the prime sample as far as open storytelling goes, the pen-and-paper RPG *Warhammer* provided the inspiration for Chaos and Corruption."

– *Thomas Biskup, ADOM's creator*



ADOM's fixed world map was inspired by another roguelike, *Omega* (1988), and would set it apart from other roguelikes.

While dungeons are procedurally generated, the overworld in *ADOM* remains static. The starting town, Terinyo, is always in the same spot, as are the dungeons. Ancardia is a lived-in mess of a place, with quests to complete and people to meet. The quests come in a range of flavours: many require the player to kill a monster somewhere, some are epic, world-changing fare – stop (or join) the chaos that threatens all of Ancardia – and, to my delight, a few are cheerfully banal: save a cute puppy at the bottom of a dungeon.

ADOM is an important game in the roguelike canon, but what does that mean to someone who hasn't followed the genre for decades? At the time of writing, Biskup has made good on his promise to implement graphical tiles and release the game on Steam. He has added an indispensable tutorial mode and a range of difficulty options, making *ADOM* one of the most accessible traditional roguelikes on the market.

Many traditional roguelikes, for all their procedurally generated content and complexity, still dabble with handcrafted sections, but that authored content is often exclusively focused on small puzzles that are disconnected from a wider world.

If you are not already sold on banging your head against a vertical difficulty curve, there's little there to motivate you to stay; very few of those early roguelikes care about the stakes of a wider world beyond their dungeons.

ADOM's gambit is that there are wider stakes than simply getting the MacGuffin or killing the evil in the dungeon. It's no surprise that *ADOM*'s design decisions inspired some truly phenomenal modern roguelikes, such as *Tales of Maj'Eyal* (2012) and *Caves of Qud* (2015). But what really makes *ADOM* special is how it still holds up even in the context of that kind of competition, even after so long. **RP**

If you want to know more about *ADOM*'s history, check out this 2016 presentation Thomas Biskup gave at the Roguelike Celebration event.



ADOM Deluxe, sold on Steam since 2015, comes with graphical tiles, mouse support, achievements, more gameplay customisation options, special challenges and other nice updates.

Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse



Cyberlore Studios, 1994
MS-DOS

Cyberlore Studios was founded in 1992 by ex-SSI developers. Later they partnered with their former employer to make *Al-Qadim* and *Entomorph*.

Al-Qadim is not your typical RPG. Usually, CRPGs are about experience points, stats, numbers, skills, plethora of weapons and huge amounts of choices. And although *Genie's Curse* is based on the obscure *AD&D* setting *Al-Qadim*, the game is nothing like that. You play a predefined character and you won't ever need to check your stats. Yet still this game is for me one of the best role-playing experiences I have ever tasted. Why, you might ask?



Al-Qadim combat and puzzles are simple, but well-executed, similar to those on the 2D *Legend of Zelda* games.



The dialogues are interesting and well-written, but, despite the many choices, few of them have actual consequences.

Al-Qadim puts you in the curly shoes of a corsair finishing his training. Note that you are not a corsair in the ordinary meaning – on the contrary, you are a law-upholding hero, part of a respected family, that adheres to a strict code of honour and is always helpful to anyone in distress. That's what I liked about the game, it moves away from statistics and numbers to what I find really important: character and storytelling. It's true, you don't have much choice in how to play the game, and the story tries to keep you very strictly on rails, but in exchange it gives you the opportunity to really create a connection with your character.

As you return home, you are joyously welcomed by your family. That time is, however, cut short due to a tragic event – your family's genie has attacked the ship of the Caliph. With your parents now in prison, it's your task is to find who is responsible for this. For that you'll battle foes with a very simplified real-time combat and overcome many puzzles, usually based on switches and maze navigation. When you are not fighting or getting lost, you'll be testing your wits during conversations with NPCs.

The *Al-Qadim* setting is heavily influenced by the Arabian Nights stories, so during your travels you'll seek advice from a sorceress, solve riddles from djinns, sail the seas on a magical ship, ride on flying carpets and other fantastical adventures. The game has beautifully drawn graphics, with vivid details, that give it a fairy-tale feeling. This atmosphere is further enhanced by its rich Arab-inspired MIDI music.

Al-Qadim is worth trying for various reasons. If you love good storytelling and you would like to relive your childhood, when the fairy tales were full of true heroes with pure heart, then it is definitely a game for you. Just don't come in expecting the complex, stat-heavy RPG experience of other SSI titles. **BM**

Superhero League of Hoboken



Legend Entertainment, 1994
MS-DOS

After releasing *Zork* in 1980, Infocom ruled the text adventure genre during the 80s. When the company was purchased by Activision in 1989, a few employees decided to jump ship and set up their own company, called Legend Entertainment.

Their first games, such as the *Spellcasting* series, were roughly text adventures with static images and a friendly interface. However, in 1994, armed with a new engine, Legend tried something truly unique.

Created by veteran Steve Meretzky, *Superhero League of Hoboken* is a humorous Adventure/RPG hybrid about a team of ridiculous superheroes who live in post-apocalyptic New Jersey.

As the Crimson Tape, a hero whose only power is to create organisational charts, your task is to gather a team of similarly underpowered heroes and wisely use them to complete various missions.

These missions are solved in the usual old-school adventure game fashion: you collect countless weird items, using them and your "unique" powers to create rather unusual solutions – like playing Frank Sinatra songs to kill an army of evil pigeons.

The game, however, is explored via an RPG-like world map, where you can freely travel from your HQ to various locations, such as villages, stores, museums and decayed landmarks. More areas open as you learn to cross rougher terrain and acquire subway passes.

You'll also face random battles against bizarre creatures, like psionic evangelists, mutant bureaucrats and even a robotic version of Richard Nixon. Combat is turn-based and very simple, even though it allows for 9 party members. Most heroes will just melee or shoot, but a few weird powers like Tropical Oil Man's "increase foe's cholesterol" can be quite useful.

The downside of this unusual mix of genres is that you'll spend a lot of time walking across the huge map and battling monsters while trying to figure out the puzzles. Often the item you need for a mission is on a dangerous and undiscovered area far away, or even only available as a rare drop from battles.

What holds everything together and keeps the game enjoyable is the brilliant writing. From missions about buying guacamole to lawyers suing your party mid-battle, *Superhero League of Hoboken* manages to be as funny as it's flawed. **FE**

Legend would still produce a few more games, such as the cult classic *Deathgate*. It then closed down in 2004.



Some items are used for puzzles, others to reach new areas, and a few will even increase your stats or give characters new superpowers.



The RPG side is very accessible, with a simple turn-based combat system, few stats and heroes that automatically wear their best equipment.

Realmz



Fantasoft, 1994
Mac and Windows*

Countless adventures across countless realms – this might as well have been the slogan of *Realmz*. Developed primarily for Macintosh, *Realmz* is a game that proudly wore its genesis in the 90s on its sleeves – bright colours, an incredible assortment of character creation options, plus a shareware philosophy and business model that led to an incredible staying power, even as time wore on.

On first running *Realmz,* the player is presented with a single "scenario" that they can play to their heart's content: the City of Bywater, a simple and relatively bare-bones adventure that could be completed in the haze of a summer afternoon. Not counting the areas sealed off until you paid for and registered your copy, that is.

Despite the simple and relatively spartan roots, Bywater is still a fun and surprisingly versatile little adventure. And behind it lies *Realmz's* incredibly complex character creation system. The plethora of options and statistics is astounding, allowing you to create truly complex parties of up to six characters, with exotic heroes such as Leprechaun Cabalists, Kobold Crusaders and Vampire Dabblers.



Realmz was quite ahead of its time, allowing events to be solved in multiple ways: dialogue choices, skill checks, special items, spells, etc.

Each of the 19 races and 20 classes – or castes, as they are known in *Realmz* – also possesses other advantages or disadvantages, such as fire-resisting demons or regenerating lizardmen. Stats range from movement and attacks per round to racial resistances, hated enemies and even complex ageing charts.

Fine-tuning your party leads to one of *Realmz*'s many surprising strengths – the multiple approaches to certain events. Wandering around Bywater, for example, might lead you to a young boy whose dog has fallen down the well. To help him you can use a rope, have an acrobatic party member flip down into the well, call the town guard, try to use a spell, etc.

This flexibility also lent itself well to combat. Turn-based and highly tactical, combat is reminiscent of SSI's "Gold Box" RPGs, updated to include a mouse-driven interface and improvements such as terrain types, obstacles, guarding against approach and much more. Every battle feels unique as large enemies jump over obstacles, giant bees paralyse the party, necromancers summon undead hordes, squishy rogues chuck flasks of oil to save their lives, etc.

Realmz is a potpourri of old-school pen-and-paper ideas, and nowhere is that more true than magic. There are three different schools of magic, each with their own utility, combat, and scenario-based spells. The Waterworld spell, for example, makes your party able to breath underwater, opening new horizons for you to explore – or allowing you to survive a flash flood in a murky cavern. Casting is mana-based, and you can "overcast" a spell, increasing its mana cost, but also its damage and area of effect.

The scenario is a melange of fantasy that does whatever it pleases, and it's all the more charming for it. Barring some twists and turns, Bywater is a shallow and linear story, but can be surprisingly effective.

***The Windows version of *Realmz* is outdated and doesn't have the *Divinity* toolset. It's advised to play the Mac version, using emulation software such as *Basilisk II* or *SheepShaver*.**

"Most of the *Realmz* scenarios have been aimed towards hack-and-slash as that area is really lacking in RPGs. Sure, there are games out there that give you hack-and-slash, but they don't go into enough detail with character development. I got so sick of games that had your character broken down into 3 coloured lines: Health, Attack and Defense. I wanted a game that let me get into the nuts and bolts of a character's stats. That is where I think *Realmz* top-of-the-line."

– Tim Phillips, Realmz's creator



Combat is the main strength of *Realmz*. Tactical, full of options and with a mouse-driven UI, it feels like an updated Gold Box game.

Regardless, the solid and multifaceted character-building combined with the flexible encounters and events successfully convinced players to register their games, which not only unlocked all of Bywater, but gave access to the *Prelude to Pestilence* scenario, a higher-level scenario, while also offering the ability to create high-level characters. Which you'd end up needing if you didn't spend your time wisely in Bywater (or spent too much time, and become a little too strong). Combat can become very complex very quickly, especially when magical enemies, buffs and debuffs come into play.

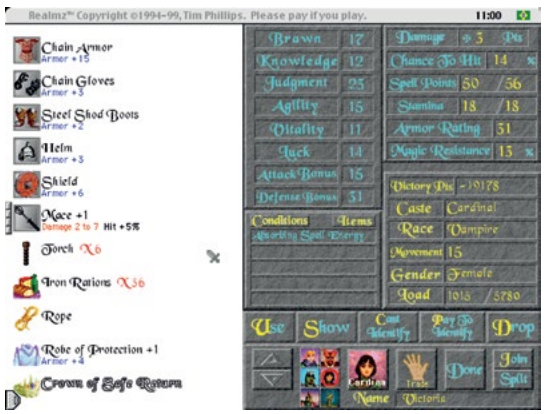
But make no mistake – the meat of the game was the stories you built around your characters and party; as well as recruitable allies such as the friendly wizard Vodalian, or Reppep Rd, a drunk dwarf found in the local brothel. Being able to imagine your party and their stories, however, is probably what lead so many fans to want to create more, and developer Tim Phillips allowed them just that.

The *Realmz Divinity toolset* is fairly primitive by today's standards for mod tools, but at the time it allowed fans of the game to create their own scenarios to do with as they pleased. You could even license them in the hopes that someone would pay you for your time, share them with friends or spread it freely, on the wild and untamed Internet of the early 90s.

And many did. Though it never flourished in the way gaming communities have now, with easier access to the Internet and fewer barriers to entry, the fact that a humble shareware game survived from 1994 to the early 00s is a testament to the stories fans created.

For all the faults *Realmz* has – a hefty interface and manual that wants players to pay respect to them, a somewhat cumbersome weapon-swapping mechanic that becomes remarkably intuitive the longer you play, a blistering maze of hotkeys, and no real end-state – those too are its strengths, as well, and it deserves to be remembered for them. There are still realms out there waiting to be explored, after all. **TW**

In 2001 Fantasoft released *New Centurions*, a sci-fi RPG based on *Realmz's* engine. It was only released for Mac, and is no longer available for download.



The interface is rather clunky, but it offers very detailed information on all the game's stats, rules and items.



The magic system allows players to boost the strength and area of a spell by spending more magic points.

The Elder Scrolls: Arena



Bethesda Softworks, 1994
MS-DOS

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 pen-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.

***Arena* can be somewhat tricky to run properly under DOS Box, so we recommend the handy ArenaSetup package, that comes pre-configured.**



Seasons alter the weather, clothing and races change with each region and even landmarks, such as Morrowind's Red Mountain, can be seen on 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 layout is a familiar starting point that *Elder Scrolls* fans will immediately recognise – 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.

18 classes await in *Arena*, along with *D&D*-like stats to shape their your 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 fibre 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 titles 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 armour 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 rumours pointing you towards one of the legendary artefacts 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 kept playing, the randomly generated quests made it easy to ignore the main campaign. The way that the game randomised the end-goals for side-quests, dungeon locations, and the rumours 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. The massive continent is mostly empty, filled with procedurally generated plains. Despite being visible 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.

Regardless, the sheer geographic vastness and the idea of infinite adventure successfully 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. **RE**

Since 2004 Bethesda has made *Arena* freely available for download, as part of the 10th anniversary of *The Elder Scrolls* series.



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 rumours.



1995-1999 New 3D worlds and new audiences

The second half of the 90s continued with the impressive release of new games that spawned iconic series or even entire new genres, but now 3D graphics were the new hot thing.

Powered by the new generation of consoles, *Super Mario 64*, *Final Fantasy VII, Metal Gear Solid, Resident Evil, Medal of Honor, Tomb Raider* and *Gran Turismo* sold millions and set the standards for 3D games.

On the PC side, RTS and FPS titles continued to rise in popularity, with blockbusters like *Command & Conquer, Age of Empires, WarCraft II, StarCraft, Quake, Unreal* and *Half-Life*. With the audience expanding, games like *Full Throttle, Diablo, Phantasmagoria* and *Baldur's Gate* also sold over a million copies each – an amazing feat at the time.

However, producing games was quickly becoming more and more expensive. Mistakes had a heavier costs, and companies like Interplay started to sink under failed attempts to get into the 3D craze and/or the booming console market. Decade-long series suddenly ended after disappointing jumps to 3D, such as *King's Quest VIII: Mask of Eternity, Ultima IX: Ascension* and *Quest for Glory V: Dragon Fire*.

The arrival of *Windows 95* erased any remaining doubt that PCs were now synonymous with *Windows*, but the "Wintel" combo was weakened as Intel's Pentium chips saw increased competition from AMD. Rivalry was also grew increasingly fierce among 3D acceleration cards, sound cards, peripherals like joysticks and even Internet browsers.

With 3D games being so popular, companies like 3dfx, Nvidia, S3 and ATI fought for dominance with their "3D accelerator" graphics cards – a battle mostly dominated by 3dfx's popular Voodoo cards.

By the mid-90s, the Internet had become the new frontier for business. Every company wanted a website (not often knowing why), eBay and Amazon were founded, the first banner ad campaigns appeared and there was a lot of market speculation – the dot.com bubble had begun.

Two browsers fought for dominance then: the *Internet Explorer* and the *Netscape Navigator.* But Microsoft giving its browser for free to any *Windows 95* owner led to a quick victory, with most browsers becoming traditionally free and a subsequent trial in 1998, which condemned Microsoft for crushing its competitions to secure its monopoly.

Meanwhile, Apple was lost. Their new console, Pippin, was a failure while the Macintosh was a relic. The solution was to bring back Steve Jobs, fired in 1985. With the release of the iMac in 1998, he managed to revive Apple, establishing it as the "cool" and out-of-the-box alternative to PCs.

Between *Windows 95's* accessibility, popular new games and the lure of the Internet, the late 90s is when computers finally went mainstream.

Trends:

Online and LAN Multiplayer: *Doom* allowed up to four players in deathmatch battles. With access to Internet still limited, the more popular solution was *Doom* LAN parties. When games like *Quake* and *StarCraft* arrived, the Internet was much more widespread, and playing online became extremely popular. However, it wasn't simple – the IP address of players and servers had to be found and typed in. To help, services like GameSpy and Blizzard's Battle.net started to appear, listing servers and handling matchmaking.



GameSpy was originally called QuakeSpy, created in 1996 to help people play *Quake* online.

3D Graphics: The 90s was a decade of learning how to handle 3D games. Even explaining them was difficult early on – *Ultima Underworld* (1992) had to run magazine ads showing an object from multiple angles to illustrate the concept. Then came problems like controlling characters (and cameras) in 3D space, competing rendering technologies, primitive tools, high system requirements, etc. It was a very long process, but one that led to important breakthroughs such as the creation of the analogue stick.



Super Mario 64 was an early poster boy for 3D games, showing just how well the concept could work.

MMORPGs: While MUDs and other permanent online worlds existed for decades, the late 90s saw the popularisation of commercial graphical MMORPGs. *Meridian 59* (1996) and *Ultima Online* (1997) not only brought in a record number of players, but also standardised charging flat monthly rates, as opposed to hourly fees. They would be followed by *Lineage* (1997), *EverQuest* (1998), *Asheron's Call* (1999) and many others, then peak with the genre's biggest title, *World of Warcraft* (2004).



Ultima Online was the first MMORPG to reach 100,000 subscribers.



Windows 95 arrives. A landmark, it helped make computers more user-friendly and became synonymous with PCs.



The **Nintendo 64** is released, still using cartridges but introducing the analogue stick. It would sell 32 million units worldwide.



DVDs start to be commercially available in the US, offering much larger storage capacity and faster transfer rates than CDs.



The **iMac** is released. Created by Steve Jobs in his return to Apple as CEO, it marked the rebirth of the company's popularity.



The **Dreamcast** is released. Facing the PS2's overwhelming popularity and SEGA's own internal struggles, it was quickly abandoned, selling 9M units.

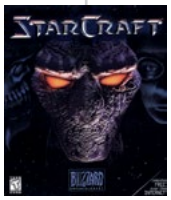
1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999



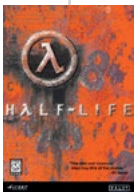
Pokémon is released in Japan for the Game Boy, selling 10M copies. It would arrive in the West in 1998, starting a "Pokémania" that took up the planet, from games to anime, toys, cards, etc.



Quake would follow up on *Doom* with fully 3D graphics and physics. A landmark that popularised deathmatches, WASD controls, mods like *Team Fortress* and even led to Machinima and speedruns.



StarCraft is released. The most popular RTS of all time, it offers three races, great story and excellent multiplayer. It became an early eSport icon and sold over 11M copies.



Half-Life pushes the FPS genre from killing arenas to an immersive interactive world, built on seamless storytelling. It also had countless mods, including the still-popular *Counter-Strike*.



Bleem! is released. A commercial PS1 emulator for PCs, it was brutally sued by Sony. Despite winning in court, the legal fees put it out of business and emulation became an industry taboo.

Witchaven



Capstone Software, 1995
MS-DOS

***Witchaven* was made using the BUILD Engine, which would later be used by *Duke Nukem 3D*, *Shadow Warrior* and *Blood*.**

Witchaven is not a fully fledged RPG – it's a first-person shooter (or rather, hack-and-slasher) with RPG elements. There are quite a few of those elements: XP, levelling up, degrading weapons, different types of armour, spells, traps, secrets and other goodies. There are five different types of potion 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.



The game makes great use of physics, with neat tricks such as firing arrows into a wall and climbing on top of them.



Utility spells like Fly and Night Vision, as well as potions of Invisiblity and Fire Resistance, are important tools for your survival.

You play as knight Grondoval, a one-man army sent to defeat the evil witch Illwhyrin. Killing trolls, imps and other enemies 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.

Talking about defeat: the need to think tactically or die is exactly what makes *Witchaven* so compelling. 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 the 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, you'll find fewer 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 while!) would be 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 those up.

There are a few shortcomings (mainly squishy controls and visually poor interior design), but the game scores with its clever use of physics and gripping combat. Defeating foes with environmental help is even more rewarding than using the 'Nuke' spell.

Witchaven stands today as a product of its time, when games like *Doom* and *Hexen* were kings and everyone wanted a piece of the pie. Too bad that its 1996 sequel expanded primarily on the shortcomings: *Witchaven II: Blood Vengeance* suffered from horrible controls that rendered it nearly unplayable. **NS**

CyberMage: Darklight Awakening



Origin Systems, 1995
MS-DOS

In the not-so-far future, governments have made way for mega-corporations, but their pursuit of profits at any cost isn't to everyone's liking. As a consequence, armed rebels have taken the fight to the streets. This is the Cyberpunk era you live in, and this is where you manage to get yourself killed.

Then you suddenly get better. You awake in a lab – without memories, but with a gem implanted into your forehead, and with the minions of NeCrom hot on your trail. If you want to find out why this guy is after you and why you suddenly have access to a mystical power called "Darklight", you'd better run – NOW!

Thus starts *CyberMage: Darklight Awakening,* by David W. Bradley of *Wizardry* fame. At first glance, *CyberMage* may be a futuristic first-person shooter, but it's driven by a compelling story and incorporates several RPG elements. There are traps, secrets and puzzles, exploration is an important (and quite rewarding) part of the game and the atmosphere is immersive. You can (and will have to) talk to NPCs to gather information – friendlies and hostiles alike. Not everybody should be killed just because the game looks like a shooter! Gambling and spending the money in different stores are options just as are watching TV or driving tanks. And then there are your "magical" skills.

CyberMage's way of imparting new spells on the player's character is also intriguing. You'll also learn a new Darklight power by being exposed to its effects! This makes for interesting situations: running from an enemy with a strong power might be an option if your health is low, but, if it's not, charging him to get hit and return his gift would be the better alternative.

There's also a more traditional arsenal for non-magical combat. Each weapon works differently against each type of enemy, while your body armour is split into separate parts which can be repaired or replaced.

But the most important piece of equipment is your jetpack. Once you acquire this, you will be immune to a score of bugs, as the game will occasionally crash if you happen to tread on the wrong patch of ground.

Add extreme hardware requirements, stupid NPCs and a choppy engine, and you'll know why *CyberMage* never got the cult following it deserves. But behind those shortcomings lies an atmospheric, detailed and beautiful Cyberpunk world that begs to be explored. **NS**

***CyberMage's* story is told through comic book-style cutscenes, and the game itself came with a comic book showing the events that lead to your death.**



CyberMage was produced by Warren Spector, and some of its elements feel as a stepping stone for what he would create in *Deus Ex* five years later.



The game is fully voiced, but dialogues are simple and one-sided, with NPCs usually just asking for money, items or for someone to be killed.

Ravenloft: Stone Prophet



DreamForge Intertainment, 1995
MS-DOS

Stone Prophet uses its CD-ROM capabilities in an unusual way, 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: Arena*. It includes an automap 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-and-night cycles, and the blazing sun battering the desert by day requires players to maintain a supply of water in order to survive.



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.

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 be poisoned, given diseases, paralysed, stunned, explode upon death, or cast 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 a very limited inventory space, and can't hold anything in his hands.

The inventory is very elegant, with a simple drag and 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.



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



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



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



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

These harsh inventory limitations force 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).

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, provides important insight into the plot as well as items necessary to progress in the quest to leave Har'Akir.

Stone Prophet is actually the third RPG 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, the party must find a way to defeat the dark lord of the land and secure their safe passage back home.

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

Unfortunately, these games aren't quite as good, which led to the entire series being often overlooked. Regardless, *Ravenloft: Stone Prophet* is more than worth a look, and if you enjoyed DreamForge's take on dungeon crawlers, perhaps give the other titles a try as well. **DD**

Exile:
Escape from the Pit



Spiderweb Software, 1995
Windows and Mac

Exile: Escape from the Pit was the first of many games developed by Jeff Vogel at Spiderweb Software. A 2D, turn-based CRPG with party management and top-down perspective, it's probably best known now as the source of the *Avernum* games.

The backstory took a lot of fantasy tropes and twisted enough of them to make something unique. The land of Exile is an underground, subsurface world where political enemies of the Empire and hardened criminals are sent via a one-way portal. Glowing moss on the rocks provide a poor light, while mushrooms, rock lizards, and underground streams allow bare survival. The people of Exile are beset by underground tribes of goblins, lizardmen, and other threats without aid or care from the people of the Empire. And it seems a demon allied with the Emperor might be behind a series of other misfortunes.

As one might imagine, the people left here to die hold a strong grudge against the Empire. Since they feel as if they might be doomed anyway, they can at least strike back. And that's your quest – to find a way back to the surface and enact revenge.



Starting with *Exile*'s underground prison world, Jeff Vogel's games have a tradition of featuring unique settings and premises.

Before you can get said revenge, you will create a party of six characters and assign skill points and attributes to assist in whatever role each character is to take. Although you are going to need some heavily armed fighters, it's necessary to have a thief to handle traps and locks, a divine spellcaster for healing the party, and an arcane spellcaster to throw fireballs.

New points can be assigned to improve your characters upon gaining enough experience to level up, and there will be enough currency earned during your first quests to be able to afford decent armour and weapons. The best spells cannot be employed until characters build up enough skill to cast them, so forget about raining death upon those that oppose you right at the start.

Also, expect characters to die a lot, so save early and save often. *Exile* is incredibly difficult unless you find several important hidden treasures, requiring you to have to invest a few hours in searching your surroundings. Although the enemies you encounter near the first town are a minor threat, wandering monsters become increasingly hard the further you get from civilisation.

Skills alone won't guarantee survival, meaning that you are going to have to loot dungeons in order to purchase better weapons or find secret stashes of magical equipment. This game was designed with the completionists and explorers in mind.

Not everyone will want to kill you, and your party will find new allies during their quest. The negotiations your heroes make in *Exile* become important factors in future games, and a couple of new races become playable in the sequel.

These new relations drive the plot of this and future games, adding lore and a sense of wonder that was well designed by Mr. Vogel.

"One of the biggest challenges [in remaking games] I've had is to just respect my younger self, to look at something and say, that's dumb, that's broken, that's out of control, and then just trust my younger self and trust my fans who loved this game and leave it be."

– Jeff Vogel, Exile's creator and Spiderweb Software's founder



Exile's combat is turn-based, with a party of up to six characters. Its remakes would keep the high difficulty, but reduce the party to four characters.

Originally released as shareware, *Exile* came out at the perfect time, as you can count the amount of worthwhile CRPGs published in 1995 on one hand. Although isometric and first-person games were the norm during the mid-90s, many players still fondly remembered *Ultima V*'s top-down graphics.

In fact, Vogel took many aspects of *Ultima V's* combat and improved upon them, making *Exile* a much better tactical RPG than its contemporaries – and the *Ultima* games themselves. Not a bad accomplishment for a game made entirely by one man.

It's success led to *Exile II: Crystal Souls* (1996), a larger sequel with more character creation options, and *Exile III: Ruined World* (1997), which blew its two predecessors out of the water in size and plot twists. *Blades of Exile* was released in the same year, adding three short scenarios and a game editor, creating a large modding community that still has websites and modules in existence today.

The popularity of the story led Spiderweb to revisit and update the original trilogy twice with more technically advanced game engines.

The first was in 2000, with *Avernum*. Vogel updated the interface, made graphics isometric, expanded the story and renamed the underground world of Exile to Avernum. After remaking the original trilogy, Spiderweb created three more *Avernum* games, and a *Blades of Avernum* game editor.

In 2011, Vogel released *Avernum: Escape from the Pit*, once again updating the graphics and interface, rewriting the story and adding new side-content. As Sade says, it's never as good as the first time, as I consider the *Exile* trilogy to be the best series authored by Jeff Vogel despite the many other great works he has developed through the last two decades.

The original *Exile* trilogy is freeware now, freely available on Spiderweb's website, so prestigious gamers have no reason not to give it a go. **DT**



The first remake, *Avernum* (2000), was also released as shareware, and eventually became a six-game series.



Avernum: Escape from the Pit (2011) is a remake of a remake, but also a great entry point for modern gamers.

World of Aden: Thunderscape



Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1995
MS-DOS and Windows

Three novels and a tabletop RPG based on the World of Aden setting were released in 1996, and in 2013 a sourcebook for Pathfinder was successfully kickstarted.

After the decline in sales of their games during the early 90s, SSI had lost the *AD&D* license. So the company had Shane Hensley, author of *Deadlands* and *Savage Worlds*, create a new fantasy setting for their next games – the World of Aden.

A peaceful world until a mysterious eclipse called the Darkfall brought demons into the land, Aden had its inhabitants employing both magic and technology to defend their world from the evil Nocturnals.



The game offers a great variety of combat moves and tactical options, but the enemies are dull and easy to kill.



Each level up you gain a number of points you can use to improve your skills or learn new ones, but it's advised to specialise your characters.

Thunderscape is the first of the two games set in the World of Aden. A 3D dungeon crawler, you start by creating a party of four characters using an original classless ruleset, with nine races, five attributes and 18 skills – including a few non-combat ones, such as Pickpockets, Lockpick, Fast Talk and Xenology.

You're then taken to the bottom of a valley, where begins your quest to stop the Nocturnal army. While the graphics aren't impressive, with brown muted colours and poor draw distance, it's a fun start, as you climb the valley coming across a shop, an elevator, secrets, riddles and two NPCs you can recruit.

The combat system is especially well-designed. Turn-based but fast, thanks to the efficient interface and quick animations, it also offers a great deal of options. There are over 20 combat moves, such as Berserk Attack, Mighty Blow, Kick, Shoot, Shield Bash, Feign, Aim for Vitals, Block Enemy Advance, Dodge Backstab and even the Fast Talk skill to bribe or confuse enemies. Spells can also be tuned, as you can set how much mana to spend when casting them.

It's a depth rarely seen in dungeon crawlers, but, unfortunately, it's wasted on the game's poor content. Most enemies are too easy and stupid to force you to fully use the combat system. Add a lot of backtracking plus rapidly respawning enemies and after a while you'll get bored and just auto-attack everything.

And while the first area is content-rich, most others are giant, featureless maze-like levels that just require you to randomly explore until you find the key, item or lever you need to open the next level.

While it was innovative, *Thunderscape* feels like a shade of a much better game. Great systems are in place, but the content fails to take advantage of them, offering instead an easy, dull and repetitive experience. At least the guitar-driven soundtrack is excellent. **FE**

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 a 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 labour 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, armour 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 colourful and the soundtrack is rich. But, unless you are starved for exotic games, it's best to avoid *Entomorph*. **FE**

Thunderscape and _Entomorph_ sold well, but by then SSI had already been sold, and the company's new owners cancelled any further World of Aden games.

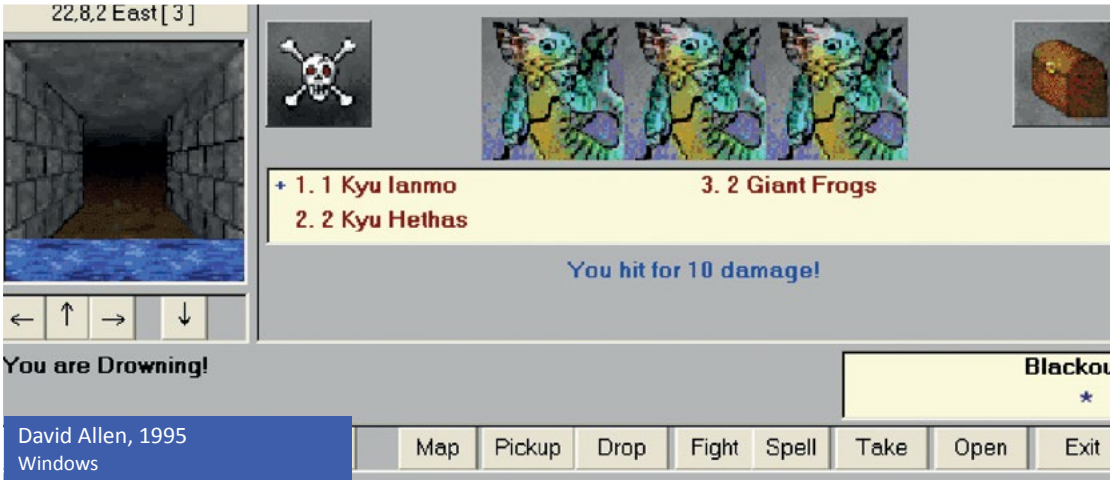


You'll morph into a giant mantis as the game advances. More insects will appear as well, and the island's vegetation will slowly be destroyed.



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

Mordor: Depths of Dejenol



David Allen, 1995
Windows

Mordor: Depths of Dejenol is a MUD-inspired dungeon crawler created by David Allen. Having gone largely unnoticed at the time of its release, it has since attained cult status and spawned a series of reiterations, the latest of which is *Demise: Ascension*, a polished, expanded and refined experience with *Mordor* still deeply at heart.

Although a lacklustre story drives the game forward, the core principle that keeps you playing is the prospect of tackling a foreboding, labyrinthine dungeon complex in a number of diverse playstyle, all with their strengths and shortcomings. To get the most out of *Mordor* you need to plan your progression in advance, even lay the groundwork with disposable characters you don't mind abandoning once they've picked up their share of tomes and potions.

Starting up your first game is a daunting task – the several races, stats, alignments and guilds all make a difference between a successful progression and an essentially flawed character that just won't cut it at the deeper levels. *Mordor* swiftly and mercilessly punishes the ignorant, cocky or unprepared adventurer.

Fans at Braindead's Mordor Site created several tools and mods for *Mordor*, and have also been working on a remake, named *Mordor XP: The Demise Of Dejenol*.



The Windows-based interface is dated and unfriendly, but allows for customisation and quick play once you're familiarised.

Unlike with some other titles, you'd best read the manual before going in. Even then, death is a novice's companion. The guilds help with resurrection costs at the start, but unprepared players might find themselves with dead characters they've put dozens of hours into with no immediate means of getting them back.

Your adventures start in a town which provides equipment, levelling and questing opportunities as well as places to store your hard-earned gold, raise dead comrades and heal wounds. These only offer a brief respite, as you will be spending most of your time exploring the massive dungeon.

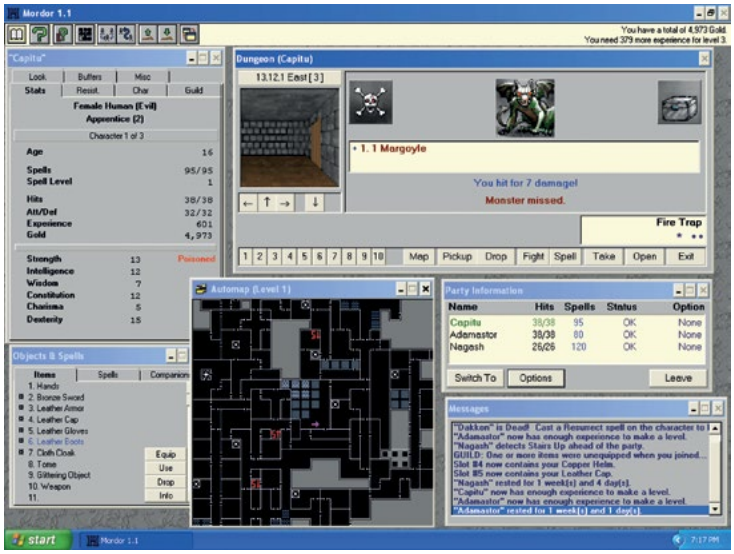
Mordor has only one dungeon, but it spans 15 large floors, each 30x30 squares wide. Add anti-magic and underwater areas, teleporters, quicksand you can lose your items in, buff-stripping squares and, of course, a plethora of trapped chests that can do anything from displacing or poisoning party members to killing them outright, and you have a playing field that needs to be tread upon lightly.

The staple of *Mordor*'s gameplay is its semi-automatic RTwP combat. Its most basic form consists of simply watching the battle log until either side dies. Bigger groups and harder foes require a more active approach however. Fights that would be impossible to win by hitting away and hoping for the best become manageable once you pause the combat in order to cast the right spells, assign different targets and defend weaker party members.

Encounters range from standard fantasy fare to more obscure foes like balls of energy – all beautifully illustrated in a unique art style. Some are timid, others cast spells or can instantly kill you by decapitation or stoning. There are even some that will talk to you or join and become companions – which can also be purchased (and sold) as slaves in town.

"Out of all the work I've done, I think *Mordor* was my absolute favourite. Sadly, all of the games I created after *Mordor* just got more complex and brought more problems rather than established a simple cut-and-dry fun time like *Mordor* did."

– David Allen, *Mordor's creator*



While you can pause to give direct orders, combat is mostly automatic. *Mordor*'s real focus is on carefully building the perfect party and managing your resources.

Your characters improve by gaining levels in their respective guilds and by finding better loot. There isn't much diversity to the items you'll find, especially when starting out, but each serves a purpose and there are no fillers or randomly generated ones. Some are cursed of course, but that's a different matter.

Foresight (or metagaming) is vital when managing your party. A single character can potentially join all the guilds their alignment and race allow, but that becomes prohibitive due to the huge XP requirements later on. Guild levels go up into the hundreds, even thousands, and neglecting one guild while focusing on another results in severe penalties later on. A balanced party mitigates this, but the weakness of individual members makes for slow delving in return. Whichever way you pursue, be prepared for A LOT of grinding.

After the release of *Mordor*, David Allen began working on a sequel – *Mordor 2: Darkness Awakening*, blending 3D environments with 2D monsters.

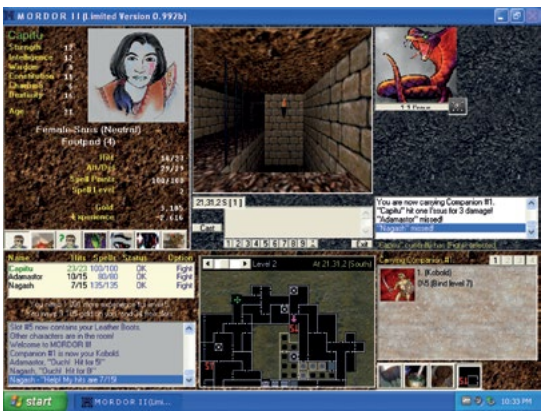
He then made a deal with Interplay to publish it, renaming it *Infinite Worlds*, but unfortunately the partnership didn't work out. In 1999 the game finally came out, now as *Demise: Rise of the Ku'tan*.

Demise featured fully 3D graphics, multiplayer and expanded the dungeon to 30 massive levels, each 45x45 squares wide, with specific tilesets and unique locations like beaches, swamps and graveyards.

While critics unanimously bashed the game, it developed a cult following. David Allen went on to work on MMOs, but sold the game's license to a fan, who continues to patch and expand the game – the latest version being *Demise: Ascension*.

Mordor and *Demise* are an acquired taste. The planning, vast amount of grind and possibility of a major setback whenever you descend are certainly not for everyone. Nevertheless, they have a unique, addictive feel that constantly drives the determined adventurer ever deeper. **OU**

In 2004 a group of fans created *Demise - The Revelation*, an expanded version of *Demise*. Still updated, it's now a different branch of the official *Demise* and freely available for for download.



The *Mordor 2* and *Infinite Worlds* betas are still available online. While buggy, *Mordor 2* is highly regarded by fans.



Demise's crude 3D graphics were already dated in 1999, but the insane size of its dungeons remains unmatched.

Albion



Blue Byte Software, 1995
MS-DOS

Albion began as a sequel to _Ambermoon_, but Thalion 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 favourites – I was convinced and bought the game. I was starving for a new good CRPG and was positively surprised when I realised 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.



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

Barely surviving the crash, you wake up in a 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 also features 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 labour 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 dialogue 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.



Albion features various different types of perspective. 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 six 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-and-night cycle and the shops' opening hours.

Battles are turn-based, very challenging and take place in on a 5x6 grid. Combat is very tactical, featuring a 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 automap 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**

Stonekeep



Interplay, 1995
MS-DOS

Stonekeep always makes me think of the adventure films of the 1980s like *Labyrinth* and *The Neverending Story*, mostly due to how film-like the game is. Drake, the young naive protagonist, is thrust into a fantasy world to battle magical beasts, joined by strange but loyal companions as he strives to confront the Big Baddie and save the day. Shame the game didn't sport a synth-pop soundtrack or it would be an all-time classic.

***Stonekeep 2: Godmaker* was in development for years, but got cancelled in 2001. The series was revisited in 2012 with *Stonekeep: Bones of the Ancestors* for the Wii, but it was terribly reviewed.**



Combat is real-time, but you can pause to use items. Eventually you'll be joined by companions, who help fight automatically.



Although it aged poorly, the extensive use of FMV was one of *Stonekeep*'s selling points and took a big chunk of its 5 million dollars budget.

The FMV intro tells of a castle named Stonekeep that is attacked by a great evil. Only Drake survives and, as he returns years later to learn what happened, he is set on an epic quest to save a pantheon of gods from peril. Nothing new there really, except everything in *Stonekeep* is about immersion. Video replaces pixels, voice acting replaces text and even the game's interface is justified as being magical artefacts.

Speaking of magic, the game's magic system is quite ingenious. Basic rune-like symbols represent different spells, but they can also be mixed with other symbols to get neat upgrades, leading to a remarkably flexible system. By comparison the combat system is just "whack things with it to get better at it"-variety, which gets the job done.

But *Stonekeep*'s strength doesn't lie in its graphics or game design, but in the characters you meet. Stout dwarves, cowardly greenskins, creepy undead and singing fairies are part of a wide cast of characters with actual personalities that stick with you long after you've stopped playing (especially the fairies). All of this gives *Stonekeep* a somewhat light-humoured atmosphere that still holds up today.

If this game has a flaw, then it is the fact that beneath all that sparkle is just a simple grid-based dungeon crawler, which feels restrictive and out of style with the graphics. Another low point is the uneven flow of the second half of the game, where exposition is either dumped on the player in large amounts, or scattered about so scarcely that it takes effort to even find it, leaving players wondering where they are or what they're supposed to be doing.

Like those child-like adventure films of the 1980s, *Stonekeep* is no outstanding milestone, but its innate charm and the rosy tint of nostalgia help make it a fondly cherished game nevertheless. **ÁV**

Strife: Quest for the Sigil



Rogue Entertainment, 1996
MS-DOS

ShadowCaster first attempted to blend FPS/RPG elements back in 1993, and the following years saw other hybrids such as *Hexen*, *Witchaven, System Shock* and *CyberMage*. Yet, the game most often remembered as "the first FPS/RPG" is *Strife*.

There's a reason for that. Even the first minutes of *Strife* feel very different. You start the game, fight a couple of guards and then, instead of killing demons, you walk into a peaceful town, with various shops, a bar and some interactive NPCs throwing gossip.

You're then contacted via radio by "Blackbird", who asks you to join The Front, an underground resistance against the evil theocracy of The Order. This isn't just some throwaway backstory – you'll actually go to the rebel's HQ and work with them.

Your first objective is to take over The Order's base in town. For that you'll have to perform a few sabotage missions and trade favours with other NPCs – all of whom have charming voice acting and portraits. Once the base's defenses are down, you'll attack it alongside rebel troops, kill the enemy general and move your HQ there! It's a nice, satisfying pay-off.

After that, the town's gate opens and you're sent to another location, to further battle the forces of The Order. The world is hub-based, with the maps linking together to form an overworld of sorts you can freely explore, thought the main quest is mostly linear.

Some of your missions can also involve stealth, meaning disguising yourself and only killing enemies with a poisoned crossbow. As your quest advances you'll uncover more about The Order, learn about the mythic Sigil and experience some great plot twists.

You'll also gain access to new weapons and upgrades, such as a grenade launcher or increased accuracy stat. Just be sure to carefully manage your money between health kits, armour and ammo.

Finally, while most of the dialogue options are illusionary, there's a choice about half the way into the game that forks the game into two different routes, each with different missions and endings.

Strife was the last game to use the *Doom* engine, which was already heavily dated. But, while other FPS focused on new 3D graphics, *Strife* instead presented a new path for the genre, with memorable NPCs, an early open world and a cool, branching story. **FE**

Strife was re-released in 2014 on Steam as _Strife: Veteran Edition_, using an engine based on _Chocolate Doom_. Many improvements were added, and its source code is freely available.



Strife's combat isn't the best among *Doom clones*, but it presents some great set-pieces and fun weapons.



Dialogue choices are mostly pointless. Here the first choice begins the main quest line, the second one kills you and the third one just ends the dialogue.

Anvil of Dawn



DreamForge Intertainment, 1995
MS-DOS

Anvil of Dawn got voted 'RPG of the Year' by CGW, but was Dreamforge's last RPG. They would still publish a few other titles, such as the cult adventure game _Sanitarium in 1998_, before closing down in 2001.

You begin *Anvil of Dawn* by choosing one of five heroes who have gathered to bring down the evil Warlord. However, while the other four heroes are sent ahead to attack the invading army head on, you are taken aside for a covert mission, tasked to find the secret behind the Warlord's power.

Anvil follows in the footsteps of *Lands of Lore*, mixing a slick presentation with a more accessible brand of real-time dungeon-crawling.



Combat is rather simple and does not require much more than clicking your opponents to death.



The interface is mouse-driven and intuitive, but the inventory can get confusing later on, when carrying dozens of items and containers.

There are just four base attributes, and these can only be tinkered with at the character selection screen. To increase your powers further, you will have to find items such as potions that permanently increase your hit and spell points. You will also spend experience points to increase the potency of your spells and the damage of your weapon attacks. These experience points are earned by inflicting damage, and may only be spent once you have completed a dungeon.

Every NPC you meet is fully voiced and there's a unique voice set for each of the different player characters as well. The delivery of said voices may not always be very convincing, but at least the effort has provided some good variety. James C. McMenamy has created a great, dynamic (even sometimes bombastic) soundtrack for the game, which is an impressive feat considering its MIDI format.

The automap in *Anvil of Dawn* is one the game's strongest points, and it has many times been called one of the best automaps in role-playing game history. It shows anything you would want to see: monsters (alive or dead), doors, stairs, interactive objects, and much more. It even shows walls and outlines from where you have explored in previous games. True map aficionados can also print maps of the game's massive dungeons, or export them to text files.

Anvil of Dawn won the "RPG of the Year" award from Computer Gaming World in 1996, trumping over heavyweight releases like *Might and Magic IV* and *Stonekeep*. It features fantastic aesthetics, great exploration with varied environments and an almost unparalleled automapping system.

It may not be a favourite among hardcore dungeon dwellers due to its simplistic character development, but I'd say it's a great starting place for anyone new to dungeon crawlers. **ZE**

Dungeons & Dragons: Shadow over Mystara



Capcom, 1996
Windows, Arcade, PS3 and Xbox 360

Back in 1991, Capcom released *King of Dragons*, a side-scrolling beat 'em up arcade game. It expanded the barbarian theme of *Golden Axe* (1989) into a full-blown *AD&D*-like setting, allowing up to three players to choose between a Fighter, Dwarf, Elf, Cleric or Wizard and battle orcs, dragons, gnolls and other fantasy creatures, as well as level up, gaining more hit points, armour and damage.

While *KoD* was simplistic, Capcom invested in the formula and released *Dungeons & Dragons: Tower of Doom* in 1993. Now an official *D&D* title, it allowed for up to four players and featured a Fighter, Cleric, Elf and Dwarf battling against iconic creatures such as Owlbears, Displacer Beasts and a Lich.

The gameplay was greatly improved, allowing players to block, riposte, roll, dash, slide and perform special attacks. The Elf and the Cleric could cast a limited number of spells each life/continue/area, such as Invisibility, Turn Undead, Hold Person and Magic Missile, with more being learned as they level up.

Multiple items were available, such as throwing daggers, +1 arrows, magical rings and power-ups like the Boots of Speed or the Gauntlets of Ogre Power. Players could spend the gold they collected in shops between each area, and occasionally the party was able to choose where they wanted to explore next.

Tower of Doom was already impressive, but its sequel, *Shadow over Mystara,* improved the formula in every way. New melee attacks were possible and an inventory allowed you to equip different weapons, armour and items. Two more heroes were added – the Wizard is a glass cannon with powerful spells like Meteor Swarm and Power Word Kill, while the Thief is a nimble fighter, able to pick locked chests, disarm traps and double-jump. Even the graphics are better, as the new art assets sport a unique, stylised look.

Moreover, the game is packed with well-hidden secrets. The Elf can guide the party through a forest side-path, the Cleric can uncurse mysterious blades, body parts of defeated monsters can be used to craft equipment and so on. It's a delightful game to explore.

Although they are beat 'em ups, you can feel the developer's passion for RPGs. Both the *D&D* games were ported to PCs as the *Chronicles of Mystara* bundle in 2013 and are a must-play for arcade fans. **FE**

Using the *OpenBOR* engine, fans created sequels to *SoM*, such as *Knights and Dragons* and *D&D: The Rise of Warduke* – two amazing open-world beat 'em up RPGs.



The inventory is a great addition to the beat 'em up formula, as you hunt for hidden equipment and adapt yourself for each challenge.



Each of the six characters has an alternate sprite set, which comes with different spells and items, effectively offering twelve unique characters.

The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall



Bethesda Softworks, 1996
MS-DOS

Since 2009 Bethesda made *Daggerfall* freely available for download on their website, as celebration for the 15th anniversary of *The Elder Scrolls* series.

Envisioned as a game where you can do anything and never run out of quests and dungeons, *Daggerfall* was the most ambitious sandbox game ever conceived. Such projects often end up as horrible disasters (vide *Battlecruiser 3000AD*), but somehow Bethesda Softworks managed to pull it off, even though the effort and dedication to this worthy cause nearly bankrupted it, leading to its acquisition by ZeniMax and re-examination of priorities.

Procedurally generated, *Daggerfall* features a truly humongous world with over 15,000 towns and dungeons, over 750,000 characters, and a large number of guilds, temples, knightly and Templar orders, witch covens, vampire bloodlines, werewolves, and even wereboars (each with their own quests), all tied together with a handcrafted non-linear main quest with six different endings.

The game has a very detailed character system and a robust skillset, supporting different ways to handle obstacles and survive (climbing vs levitating, medicine/swimming vs casting spells, raw damage vs backstab and critical strike, etc.).



Besides the multiple armour parts and accessories, *Daggerfall* also offers hundreds of clothing pieces, so that you can properly role-play your Argonian vampire noble.

Even the character generator is overwhelmingly complex by today's standards, allowing you to create unique characters with different advantages and disadvantages (weakness in holy places, rapid healing in the darkness, forbidden armour type, immunity to magic, affinity with certain weapons, phobias, etc.).

Your level-up speed is tied to these strengths and weakness, so you can make a juggernaut of destruction who'd level up very, very slowly, a sickly warrior allergic to sunlight and physical activity who'd level up twice as fast, or any other combination of different traits and curses – though some can play horribly.

Daggerfall did a lot of interesting things but if I had to pick the best, it would be the dungeons: it made you fear them. In most games a dungeon is a short hallway with some rooms; if you're lucky, there is a lower level with another hallway. Not in *Daggerfall*. You go into a dungeon, you don't know when or IF you're coming back. You don't know if your weapons will last, if you have enough supplies, if you're prepared to deal with whatever you'll find there. Emerging from a dungeon alive was an accomplishment and I can't think of another game that managed to pull that off. Certainly not *Skyrim* where on your way to a quest dungeon you run into 3-4 lesser dungeons and clear them out while you're in the area.

The dungeons' design is fantastic and skill-based – walls and air shafts to climb, open areas to levitate, pits to jump over, flooded areas to dive into, hidden areas and doors, multiple routes, switches, elevators, teleporters and so on.

Basically, Bethesda put together a very detailed character system and built a procedurally generated world around it, as opposed to putting together a pretty game and throwing in some skills for the player's amusement.

"I think it's pretty astonishing how many things actually did make it into *Daggerfall*. I mean, don't forget that turning into a vampire and a werewolf and buying boats and property and all that stuff were essentially 'easter eggs' in the game. We didn't mention any of that in the manual or in previews. They were just things to reward the player if he kept on playing."

– Ted Peterson, Daggerfall's lead designer



The dialogue system allows you to ask anyone about several topics using three different tones. NPCs also react to your reputation, level, guild and race.

The random quests deserve a special mention as well. They were well-written and did a great job supporting different characters and role-playing. For example, a priest might ask you to protect his temple against thieves coming to rob it, or to travel to some village and cast an elaborate healing spell on a sick person or investigate divine manifestations. While not very complex, such quests were infinitely more engaging than "kill 5 wolves".

In addition, *Daggerfall* had a superb atmosphere (just go out at night to enjoy delightful MIDI music, occasionally interrupted by the slain king's ghost screaming "Vengeaaaance!"), tons of spells, a detailed spell-making and enchantment system with advantages and disadvantages, horses to ride, carriages to haul all that loot after a busy week in a dungeon, houses and ships to buy, lycanthropy, vampirism, banking, Daedra princes to summon in exchange for legendary artefacts, a truckload of monsters, etc.

Despite its flaws (mainly, bugs and the inevitably repetitive nature of procedurally generated games), *Daggerfall* remains an impressive achievement in game design and complexity, standing next to the other notable and unsurpassed games of that era like *Darklands, Ultima Underworld* and *Realms of Arkania*.

Considering that a game of such depth and complexity will never be made again, I'd suggest you grab DOSBox and see what games were like in the olden days when giants were upon the earth. **VD**

Useful Files and Mods:

Ancestral Ghost's Daggerfall Setup: Installs the game, applies patches and fan-made quest packs, increases the game's draw distance and configures DOSBox to best run the game. Highly recommended.

Daedrafall: An interesting mod that allows you to play as a Daedra who kills the game's original hero.

Currently there are two projects aiming to remake *Daggerfall* – *DaggerXL* and *Daggerfall Unity*. Both seek to port the game into a new engine, allowing better graphics, new features and greater mod support.



Even with the 3D map, finding your way out of a massive dungeon can be a nightmare. A teleport spell sure helps.



Be prepared: some enemies have spells and resistances that can single-handedly neutralise your tactics.

Diablo



Blizzard North, 1996
Windows, Mac and PS1

The history of *Diablo* is explored in the *Stay Awhile and Listen* book, published in 2013 by David L. Craddock.

"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 with the choosing of a character class and a name. Each class has attributes pre-allocated and a special skill. The Warrior specialises in melee weaponry and repair. Archery and trap-disarming are handled by the Rogue. Finally, the Sorcerer specialises in powerful spells and the ability to charge magical staves.

Further abilities however are not locked into 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 customisation wouldn't come until *Diablo II*.



"Stay a while and listen" says Deckard Cain, one of the most recognised NPCs in gaming. He'll tell you tales and identify items, but will charge you for that.

Diablo excels at world-building. Tristram is a quaint little gothic town whose 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 single best tracks in gaming history. Strong voice acting and nuanced dialogue introduces you to the world in *Diablo*. Each of Tristram's cast tells a part of the story through quality voiced dialogue in addition to their gameplay functions.

The cast of characters, music, and gothic-styled art of the town creates 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, levelling 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 colour palette swaps – and occasionally you'll also encounter unique fiends that come with special abilities and resistances.

Experience gained from killing these monsters eventually leads to a level-up where you can allocate five points to Strength, Dexterity, Vitality, or Magic. Each of these affect derived statistics like damage, chance to hit, life, and mana.

"Originally, *Diablo* was a turn-based game. It was largely modelled around a roguelike game called *Angband*. [...] 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."

– David Brevik,
Diablo's 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 armour 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.



The small grid-based inventory forces players to go back to town frequently, for a brief moment of respite.

In 1997, *Diablo* got 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.

Mods:

Belzebub: aka *Diablo HD*, it adds widescreen support and extensive gameplay changes, such as rebalanced classes and features from *Diablo II*.

Diablo Awake: Adds new monsters/bosses, spells, quests, and items, plus bug fixes and gameplay tweaks.

The Hell: Claiming to be the hardest of all *Diablo* mods, it adds new classes, items and over 500 named monsters.



The *Belzebub* mod also adds content that was cut from the game, such as the Butcher's Chambers.

Birthright: The Gorgon's Alliance



Synergistic Software, 1996
Windows

The *Birthright* campaign setting was released in 1995, designed by Rich Baker and Colin McComb. It was built around the concept of bloodlines having divine powers that help heroes to rule kingdoms.

Birthright: The Gorgon's Alliance is an ambitious hybrid game based on the obscure *Birthright AD&D* campaign setting. The game consists of three distinct segments: the main strategy map where you control your kingdom, real-time battles between armies and a dungeon-crawling "adventure mode".

While marketing focused on the battles and RPG elements, those were by far the most disappointing aspects of *Birthright* and doomed it to being forgotten.



The army battles are very limited. Even Wizards and Clerics don't do much besides casting damage spells.



The strategy segment is the saving grace of *Birthright*. You can choose to play with all the complex rules and features or in an easier, lite version.

The biggest and most important part of the game is the grand strategy map, where you'll choose one of 18 available kingdoms and lead it to victory against the Gorgon invasion. This part is actually very well done and complex, as you get various options such as building fortifications, casting global magic, building trade routes and conducting espionage, allowing the player to choose his own playstyle.

When armies clash, you go to the rather limited battle segment. You can field only a small part of your army, leaving the rest in reserve to replace damaged units. And both sides can only move units in a small 5x3 grid, which leaves little room for any real tactics.

In the adventure segments, your regent and his lieutenants go delving in dungeons after relics in a 3D first-person blobber. Mechanic-wise this part is rather shallow – despite using the *AD&D* ruleset, you are limited to premade heroes and can't customise them much. The combat itself can be played in either real-time or turn-based mode, but both are poorly done. They are also confusing, thanks to a "cinematic" camera that pans out to show the characters fighting, which often results in said camera getting stuck. The redeeming part is the level design, as maps are filled with secrets that are quite rewarding to find.

Birthright also offers multiple paths to victory, tough conquest, diplomacy, economy, magic and/or acquiring relics. Everything you and other regents do generates victory points and every few turns the game shows the progress of all factions.

It's easy to see why this game was both a commercial and a critical failure – the adventures are frustrating, battles are underwhelming and the strategy part is overwhelming. As such, those looking for an RPG should stay away, but strategy fans might find *Birthright* worth playing. **MV**

An Elder Scrolls Legend: Battlespire



Bethesda Softworks, 1997
MS-DOS

The Battlespire is a training centre for aspiring Imperial Battlemages, 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! Now a seal blocks the portal you entered by, it looks like your only way out of this nightmare is through battle.

Originally planned as an add-on to *Daggerfall*, *Battlespire* was published as a stand-alone game. 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 randomised instance in *Battlespire*: Unlike the *Daggerfall* dungeons, the complex maps here are entirely handcrafted, so you won't end up starving in a misbuilt 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 outmanoeuvre 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 of opportunity to get to know the invaders and make allies. Yes, you read that 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.

Furthermore, *Battlespire* adds to and draws on established *Elder Scrolls* lore. Enjoyed *Oblivion* and want to learn more about the Daedric realm, Mehrunes Dagon and his infighting court? Play *Battlespire*!

My only gripe are the bugs. While it's not the bugfest *Daggerfall* was, some might force you to start levels all over again, so be sure to patch it. But don't you dare ignore this fun and demanding game just because of this. The scheming, the voice acting and the dialogue options are too brilliant to miss out on. **NS**



Combat is similar to *Daggerfall*, with the mouse movement controlling the weapons' attacks.



You can pick a pre-made class or create your own, customising stats, advantages and disadvantages, as well as buying your starting equipment, items and spells.

After *Battlespire* Bethesda released another spin-off: *The Elder Scrolls Adventures: Redguard*, a 3D action-adventure game. Warmly received, the game's most memorable feature was its black protagonist.

Fallout

A Post-Nuclear Role-Playing Game



Interplay, 1997
Windows, MS-DOS and Mac

Fallout had a very rough development, filled with cancellation threats and a lot of work being done by developers in their spare time. After _Diablo_'s success they were heavily pressured to turn the game into a real-time multiplayer RPG.

It's very difficult to convey just how important the first *Fallout* was to CRPGs. Not only because now most people associate the series with Bethesda's open-world games, but mainly because its influence is so widespread that it became almost invisible.

The JRPGs, RTS and FPS genres were booming back in 1997, but CRPGs were practically dead. *Diablo* had been a big hit, but the genre was otherwise stale – most games were Tolkien-esque heroic fantasies where you made a character/party and went out exploring dungeons and killing stuff. They were combat-focused, extremely linear and usually poorly written.

Fallout changed everything. A spiritual successor to *Wasteland* (1988), it's post-apocalyptic, packed with dark humour and presented in a retro-futuristic style, spiced with ironic optimism based on 1950s America.

You play as a citizen of an underground vault, who must leave this sheltered life and venture into the radioactive wasteland in search of a Water Chip. *Fallout* offers a large, non-linear open world full of perils, but is not an RPG about raiding dungeons – most of your time will be spent in the few surviving towns, dealing with man's biggest foe: other man.



Combat is turn-based and uses action points, a simplified version of *X-COM*'s Time Units. The game allows you to aim shots at specific body parts of enemies to blind or cripple them.

It must be said that *Fallout* excels at atmosphere and world-building. Everything follows a coherent internal logic, the soundtrack is foreboding and the writers knew just how to build up tension, e.g. the way the Deathclaw is introduced – first in wild rumours, then slowly coming to the forefront – is outstanding.

However, what defines the game is the amount (and quality) of role-playing options. *Fallout* wasn't the first RPG with choices, but it was the first entirely designed around them. The developer's goal was that every quest should be solvable in at least three ways: combat, dialogue or stealth. And they succeeded.

A simple side-quest such as Raiders kidnapping a girl has multiple approaches: you can kill everyone, talk them down or sneak in and lock-pick the girl's cell door. That would already be impressive even by modern standards (and it's far more than Bethesda now offers), but *Fallout* goes further. You can also trade for the girl, blow her cell, ignore her and join the Raiders, challenge their leader to a fist fight, or even disguise yourself as their previous leader.

Every time you play you'll find new solutions. And the designers were not afraid of letting you skip content – why battle dozens of giant scorpions when you can just blow up their cave's entrance instead?

Behind all this is the game's robust character system. *Fallout* was initially going to be based on GURPS, a popular and flexible tabletop RPG system, but the game's violence led to the license's owner later refusing the deal. The designers then had to quickly create their own ruleset: the SPECIAL system.

Based around seven stats and 18 skills ranging from Small Weapons to Sneak, Repair and Speech, it offers an amazing range of role-playing options. This, combined with the multiple solutions to each quest, means you can truly play however you want.

"*GURPS* was another huge influence on me. With its generic system that allowed any setting to be used, I could finally make up any adventure story and it would work. Science fiction stories set in space, superhero adventures, a psionic system that was balanced... *GURPS* opened my eyes to the world of adventure beyond the realm of fantasy."

– Tim Cain, Producer, designer and lead programmer of Fallout



Depending on your stats, items and skills, new dialogue options may appear, but they aren't marked. You'll have to read everything and decide which answer is better.

In *Fallout* it's perfectly possible to play a pacifist, talking your way out of conflicts and finishing the game without killing anyone – even the "big bad" is reasonable. Or you can do the exact opposite and kill everyone. Or how about playing as a character with intelligence so low that he can't even speak properly?

The game reacts to all that in meaningful ways, including the now-famous ending slides that show the consequences of your actions. Your first playthrough won't last more than 20 hours, as the game is short and has a time limit, but you can easily spend hundreds of hours replaying it to try new characters and paths.

Sadly, *Fallout* isn't perfect. Combat can be quite satisfying thanks to the excellent animations, fast UI and great sound design, but it also lacks in depth and is quite unbalanced: critical hits are far too powerful. There's also some minor annoyances, like how the AI companions you can recruit are ridiculously stupid.

The sequel, *Fallout 2 (1998),* would improve on these and add much more content and polish, making it, for some fans, the best game of the series. However, the original game will always remain this concise and expertly crafted experience that should be played by every RPG fan. And then replayed, over and over.

Fallout carved a new path for CRPGs, pushing the concept of "choice and consequence" deep into the modern rendition of the genre. But, to this day, very few games reached the impressive standards that *Fallout* has set over 20 years ago. **FE**

Mods:

Fallout Fixt: An excellent mod pack with the best patches and mods in a customisable installation.

High-Resolution Patch: Unlocks higher resolutions. Not recommended, as it can spoil some moments.

The first release of *Fallout* had a time limit which changed with your actions. Due to negative feedback, the 1.1 patch greatly extended the limit, but the *Fallout Fixt* mod can revert it back to the original.



You'll travel across the wasteland through the world map, trying to uncover new areas and avoid random battles.



Fallout introduced ideas like choosing a Perk every few levels, which *D&D* 3rd Edition later mimicked with Feats.

Lands of Lore II: Guardians of Destiny



Westwood Studios, 1997
Windows and MS-DOS

Westwood Studios was sold to EA in 1998, and in 1999 they released *Lands of Lore III*. The worst game in the series, it was universally bashed for its outdated 3D graphics and bland gameplay.

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 four 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 this, 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 of revenge, but rather a wisecracking 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 and 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 favours 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 an evil one – each offering a few unique events and endings. There are no dialogue 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**

Descent to Undermountain



Interplay, 1997
MS-DOS

Back in the mid-90s, Interplay's internal teams were working on two CRPGs: their big bet was the eagerly awaited *Descent to Undermountain*, while the other was a side-project named *Fallout*.

This may sound weird today, so some context is needed. Interplay scored a hit in 1994 by publishing *Descent*, a 3D zero-gravity FPS were you controlled a spaceship and could move in any direction. Around the same time, the company bought the license to make games based on *AD&D,* and thus a bold idea was born: a fully 3D *Dungeons & Dragons* multiplayer dungeon crawler based on the *Descent* engine!

While a clever business decision, the technical side was a disaster. Unfamiliar with the engine, the team struggled and the game was delayed for years, then suddenly rushed out for 1997's Christmas – without multiplayer (which was still listed on the box). Worse, it was practically unplayable, with constant crashes, slowdowns, enemies floating in mid-air, a brain-dead AI, unclimbable ladders and many other serious bugs.

Even if you got the game to work, combat was a mess. The *AD&D* rules were crudely adapted into a real-time Action RPG, as monsters and the player just keep missing each other until someone scores a lucky dice roll – in which case a single blow can kill your character during the first several hours.

Similarly, you can play as a Fighter, Cleric, Thief or Mage (or even multi-class) – with iconic spells like Fireball, Invisibility and Feather Fall. But until you level up a few times, you're limited to one spell per day. After that, your options are to battle monsters with a dagger or to find a (rare) safe place to rest.

There isn't much enemy or environment variety, but at least the setting and lore are both well employed, with Undermountain, a massive dungeon beneath the city of Waterdeep, being a great location for a CRPG.

Composed of four hubs and several interconnected dungeons, Undermountain is filled with traps, hidden passages, optional areas, a great soundtrack and NPCs with unusual quests and dialogues. The dungeons are also well-done, although too reliant on illusory walls.

Sadly, any quality to *Descent to Undermountain* is buried deep beneath a barely working engine, game-breaking bugs, muddy graphics, tedious combat and many unfulfilled promises. **FE**



Combat is real-time, dull and mostly luck-based, as enemies can kill you in one or two hits – if they can roll past your Armour class.



Your main quest comes from Khelben Blackstaff in Waterdeep, but you'll find many creatures inside dungeons asking for help or offering rewards.

Final Fantasy VII



Squaresoft, 1997
Windows and PS1

Over twenty years since its original release, *Final Fantasy VII* remains the most popular entry in a very popular series. The game was a breakthrough hit, and maintains a broad fan base even today. In its own time, it was the console RPG for people who didn't play console RPGs, much the same way that the novels of George R.R. Martin became the fantasy novels for people who don't read that genre. (Indeed, the game was so popular that Squaresoft later commissioned an extremely rare PC port, which explains its inclusion in this book.)

In short, *Final Fantasy VII* was a cultural phenomenon around the world, and Squaresoft (now Square Enix) has never enjoyed the same measure of cultural penetration since.

In a sense, *Final Fantasy VII* deserves its special reputation, because it is unique in many ways. These days, dramatic stories and high-res cutscenes are ubiquitous in mainstream games. Moreover, many of those games are preceded by multi-million-dollar marketing campaigns. But, in 1997, *FFVII* was a pioneer in both of those things, and few people had ever seen anything like it.

***Final Fantasy VII* was one of the first JRPGs to be ported to Windows. It was released by Eidos in 1998 and became infamous for making odd changes, such as using low-quality MIDI music and adding mouths to the in-game models. Most of these were fixed in the 2012 re-release.**



Combat follows the traditional *Final Fantasy* formula, called Active Time Battle. The big change was the 3D graphics, which were impressive at the time.

FFVII also takes the sword-and-sorcery tropes for which RPGs were famous and replaces them with a futuristic dystopia. (It was hardly the first RPG to do this, but the console audience had yet to encounter games like *Fallout).* Gone are the wizards, knights and rogues of traditional RPGs. Instead, the player meets an aloof mercenary, an eco-terrorist, a bartender, a research specimen, an aviator, a vampire, a remote-controlled toy, and the world's last ninja.

The player's party doesn't fight against an evil empire either, but rather against a globe-spanning corporation with its own private army. The world is well-rendered, highly detailed, and deeply memorable. Years later, players of all tastes still find the gigantic metropolis of Midgar to be one of the most compelling settings they've encountered in a game.

In another sense, *FFVII* is not as remarkable as its reputation suggests, but instead is a direct continuation of trends which the series had been developing for years. Starting in *Final Fantasy V*, the series designers began to deprecate the role of traditional RPG job classes. This trend continues in *FFVII*, in which the statistical differences between characters were so small as to be imperceptible, except to master-level players. Only one character has a discernible job class – Aeris, who is clearly a white Mage – and her fate in the game can be taken as a kind of embedded critique of the meaningfulness of job classes in story-heavy RPGs.

But why does *Final Fantasy VII* get rid of character classes? By abandoning the tactical aspect of party composition, it allows the player to use whatever combination of characters he or she liked for story-related reasons. If the player thinks Cid is funny, that Red XIII is cute, or that Vincent is cool – well, they can bring those characters to any fight in the game!

"When a character in a video game dies, no one thinks it's that sad. They're just characters in a game, after all — you can just reset the game and try again, or you can always revive them somehow. I felt that their lives just didn't have much weight. With 'life' as our theme for *FFVII*, I thought we should try depicting a character who really dies for good, who can't come back. For that death to resonate, it needed to be an important character."

– Tetsuya Nomura, FFVII's character director



While the character models during combat and cutscenes were somewhat realistic, outside combat you control simple, stylised characters over pre-rendered backgrounds.

Tactical considerations always take a back seat, because storytelling was the primary concern of the developers. This is also the reason why the main quest is notoriously easy. Aside from two or three difficult bosses, the game presents few mandatory challenges. They did not want to alienate a core audience that was playing for the story and characters.

Like everything else in the game, *FFVII*'s story is remarkable in one sense, and in another sense it is completely normal for the series. As usual, an unlikely group of heroes bands together to save the world from a homicidal maniac. The real magic of the story is in how the characters react to their circumstances. Nearly all of the important characters in the game, including the antagonist, are survivors who have outlived the people, places and ideas that once defined them. The characters' maturely written internal struggles make the grandiose plot relevant to an audience that might otherwise have outgrown it.

Final Fantasy VII remains a fun game to play, as well. Although the main quest is easy and only replayable for its best story moments, the endgame is still quite engaging. To deliver a complex set of challenges without interfering with the story, most of the really interesting content is pushed towards the end of the game. All of *FFVII*'s most idiosyncratic features (like Chocobo breeding and complex Materia setups) only become available to the player after the 30-hour mark.

Overall, *Final Fantasy VII* is an excellent example of the subgenre retrospectively called the "JRPG." Enthusiasts of traditional PC or tabletop RPGs should be aware that linear storytelling is the primary concern, and the traditional moral and tactical choices are either omitted or relocated to places they might not expect them. But, if we assess it in the context of what it aims to accomplish, *Final Fantasy VII* remains an artistic triumph. **PNH**

Several mods were made for the PC port, improving the graphics, UI and music quality, as well as increasing the difficulty. Tifa's Bootleg is a handy mod manager that lists the improvements available and allows you to choose which to install.



The character system is based on equipping Materia, which provides stat bonus, skills, spells and summons.



Final Fantasy VII features over 40 minutes of pre-rendered cutscenes, something unheard of at the time.

Betrayal in Antara



Sierra On-Line, 1997
Windows

Betrayal at Krondor was a big hit back in 1993, so it was expected that a sequel would follow shortly. Especially since the game took place in Raymond E. Feist's world of Midkemia, a popular fantasy setting explored in over 20 novels.

A direct sequel by Dynamix was indeed in the works, titled *Thief of Dreams*, but a dispute between the developers and Sierra, their parent company, saw the game cancelled and the licence lost in 1994.



Antara's combat is slow, often challenging and way too frequent. Dispatching the armies of enemies blocking your path you take gets repetitive fast.



Characters' skills increase only by studying. You can select up to five skills to be studied at once, and set the percentage of time they will spend on each.

Later regretting this outcome, Sierra then made *Betrayal in Antara,* a "spiritual successor" (yes, decades before Kickstarter), re-using *Krondor's* engine in a new setting. The core gameplay is exactly the same: a party of three heroes travels across the world in a first-person view, fighting enemies in simple turn-based battles and dealing with the occasional puzzles, side-quests and overly talkative NPCs along the way.

However, not only was the setting was changed – the developers, writing and tone are also entirely different. Instead of emulating a novel with multiple playable characters, *Antara* is closer to a 90s' Saturday morning cartoon, as three clichéd teenagers – the rich, bold hero, the insecure wizard and "the girl" – band together to investigate a mystery, deal with stubborn grown-ups, spout witty lines and ultimately save the kingdom.

That could still be fun, if not for how crude the game itself is. While every element in *Krondor* worked together to form an engaging narrative, *Antara* feels barely glued together. The world is – and plays as – a bunch of towns with short linear paths between them, that one could cross in seconds if not for enemies blocking the road every five steps. Most of the game is spent in these filler battles, only so you can reach the next generic town and complete some of the laziest "go there, fetch this" quests in gaming that will have you aimlessly roaming the map for hours.

Even the underwhelming graphics heighten the barrenness of the world. While the hand-drawn art is charming, the aged engine can render only very limited 3D landscapes and muted, heavily dithered colours.

Overall, *Betrayal in Antara* is a simple game about following paths between towns, battling foes and then watching a badly voiced teenage cartoon adventure. Unless you're really starved for more of *Betrayal at Krondor's* gameplay, I'd suggest skipping this one. **FE**

Return to Krondor



PyroTechnix, 1998
Windows

After the cancellation of the original sequel to *Betrayal at Krondor – Thief of Dreams* – the PyroTechnix studio acquired the Midkemia setting's licence and began working with its author, Raymond E. Feist, on a new game – *Return to Krondor*.

In an ironic twist of fate, PyroTechnix's parent company sold the studio to Sierra, who then published the game as the official sequel to *Betrayal at Krondor*, less than a year after publishing their own "spiritual successor" to that game, *Betrayal in Antara*.

To add to the confusion, *Return to Krondor* has little in common with *Betrayal* besides the setting. A fully voiced third-person 3D point-and-click game mostly set inside a single city, it feels like an Adventure/RPG hybrid. It offers some investigative quests with multiple solutions and a few fun puzzles, but the overall gameplay is linear and strict, with rare side-quests, optional areas or character customisation options.

As the squire/reformed thief Jimmy "the Hand" (a returning character from *Betrayal at Krondor*), you must investigate a dangerous man who's been raiding the city of Krondor in search of a lost artefact. The story spans 11 chapters of varying length, with a cast of five heroes that come and go with the plot.

The combat is still turn-based, but was expanded with (poorly explained) features such as battle stances, full/half actions, quick casting, attacks of opportunity, weight penalties and random "fate" bonus each round. Most characters die in 2-3 hits, meaning having the initiative often decides the outcome of the battle.

The graphics follow the *Resident Evil* formula of pre-rendered backgrounds with fixed camera angles. Unfortunately, it often uses disorienting or distant cameras that make it difficult to see what's happening. The UI is also disappointing, featuring overdesigned visuals but poor usability, especially in combat.

If you come to *Return to Krondor* expecting a sequel to *Betrayal at Krondor*, you will be greatly disappointed. The story penned by Raymond E. Feist is good, but – like the game itself – it's also short, linear and unambitious, save for a few highlights.

Still, those willing to set the game's heritage aside and take *Return to Krondor* for what it is – a simple yet charming story-driven RPG with a great combat system on top – will likely have a good time. **FE**

Raymond E. Feist adapted *Return to Krondor*'s plot into a novel, named *Krondor: Tear of the Gods*. The ending teases a sequel, but Sierra had economical difficulties in 1999 and never made it.



The combat is the best in the series, with several tactical options and small nuances, even if impaired by the lacklustre UI.



The game's heroes all have strict classes and there isn't much equipment variety, so don't expect a deep character customisation.

Rage of Mages



Nival Entertainment, 1998
Windows

In both *Rage of Mages 1* and *2* you can change the resolution by editing its shortcut. If you add " -1024" at the end of the shortcut's "target" field, the game will run in 1024x768.

Before CDProjekt could sell millions with AAA games, back when the Polish company was just known for adapting Black Isle and BioWare classics to its domestic market, there was a time when Eastern European developers lived in the obscurity of low budget "shovelware" titles.

One of those studios was Mir Dialogue. Founded in 1996, it became one of the first game developers of the modern capitalist Russia. Soon the company became Nival, and its first game was an RTS/RPG hybrid called *Allods: The Seal of Mystery* – best known outside Russia as *Rage of Mages*.

You start the game by creating your character, which here just means choosing between the Wizard and Warrior class, then your name, gender and main skill. There are also four stats you can slightly alter, but they play a very small role.

There are no levels in *Rage of Mages*; your power is mainly defined by your equipment and skill level in five specialisations – Magic Schools for wizards, Weapons for warriors. As in the *Elder Scrolls* games, you improve these skills by simply using particular weapons or spells.



Wizards have five magic schools: Fire, Water, Air, Earth and Astral. They increase as you use them, but you'll only learn new spells by buying books.

In practice, however, choosing your character at the start is barely relevant. You will play with the four heroes (male/female Warrior and male/female Wizard) anyways, since the other three characters will appear later in the game and join you.

Your adventure starts in a swamp and you have to escort a woman to a nearby village. This basically means killing everyone in your way and not dying until you reach a certain point of the map. Then you achieve victory and go to the next map.

The maps are what anyone could expect from a 90s RTS; rectangles of undiscovered territory hidden by the fog of war. It has a graphic style reminiscent of a less cartoony *Warcraft II*, with more varied terrain, weather changes and a day-and-night cycle.

You'll eventually reach the city of Plagat, a greatly presented menu where you can buy equipment, talk with NPCs and companions, hire mercenaries, train you characters and start more missions.

As you start to hire more units, you'll truly notice the hybrid nature of the game. There's no resource management, base-building or unit-producing, but the basic and most important mechanic of the game is the micromanagement of units. It even has functions like assigning keyboard numbers to different groups of troops – though formations are sadly missing.

In every map you have some objectives to accomplish, usually killing some particular monsters or reaching a certain part of the map. There's no indications or marks on the map so exploration is necessary, which may lead to additional battles or hidden items.

You move your units, fight the enemies, usually using a lot of hit-and-run tactics, (don't feel guilty about it, enemies use it too) and little else. You have to be fast and skilled enough with your mouse since the game is hard and there's no way to pause and issue orders.

"[...] People had already begun to form stereotypes of genres, and each player saw (and played) the game through those stereotypes. So, strategy gamers played it as a strategy game, and, of course, it lacked some elements that had come to be considered standard for the genre – the same happened to RPG players. In the end, we weren't able to convince the hardcore fans of either genre that the mix worked, instead catching a smaller group in between."

– Serge Orlovsky, Nival Entertainment's CEO



The four main characters can improve their skills and change their equipment, but the rest of your troops are static mercenaries.

At stores you'll find an impressive amount of equipment to buy and sell. All humanoid enemies drop their equipment, so you'll get plenty of loot. However, you can only change the equipment of your heroes, and their role in the game decreases quickly.

You automatically fail a mission if a hero gets killed, so you will have to protect them and take them away from the front lines while the mercenaries do all the hard work. For some reason, your warrior heroes are weaker than the hired soldiers, so after a while only the two wizards will remain useful thanks to the variety of spells; there are 24 of them which can be absolutely determinant in a fight if you're quick enough to use them in the right moment.

The game is long, and while the first maps can be resolved in a few minutes, some of the last maps can be ridiculously huge and take hours to explore. Sometimes there are also scripted events, short dialogues or just really silly jokes. Those, along with pretty decent CG videos, carry the narrative of the game.

Rage of Mages also has a simple multiplayer mode, which basically consists of fighting and improving your character with other players on dedicated maps.

The game was followed by one direct sequel, *Rage of Mages 2: Necromancer* (1999), which added several improvements such as better AI, auto-casting and more side-quests, plus a map editor that earned it a small but loyal fan base, active for a few years. Later came a surprisingly good 3D spiritual successor called *Evil Islands: Curse of the Lost Soul* (2000), and the free-to-play MMORPG *Allods Online* (2011).

Rage of Mages could've been just another old low-budget title, buried among the many releases of the golden age of Western RPGs, but it still has an important place in recent Russian software history.

Even if you disregard its historical value, there's a certain naivety and fairy-tale feeling here that makes it quite charming. It's a nice little game, with a great presentation, that can provide hours of mouse action and treasure-hunting. **LEV**



Each mission you must hire mercenaries to join you. They come with their own equipment, which can't be changed.



Rage of Mages 2 is even harder than the first game, but plays better thanks to many gameplay improvements.

Dink Smallwood



Robinson Technologies, 1997
Windows, Linux, Mac, iOS and Android

A joyful blend of *Zelda* and *Monkey Island*, *Dink Smallwood* tells the story of a pig farmer still living with his mother, mocked by real adventures and rejected by women. When evil strikes, is up to him take up arms and begin his own epic quest.

Of course, the game's claim to fame is the humour, and Dink delivers a constant barrage of odd quips, cruel jokes and passive-aggressive dialogues. I advise attacking everything in sight, just to see his reaction.

Several versions of *Dink Smallwood* exist. The 2011 HD version has more features, but doesn't support all D-mods. You're best off with the FreeDink release, which runs perfectly on modern PCs.



Combat is real-time and somewhat *Diablo*-like, with a melee attack and a magic spell, but it's very simple.



A great deal of *Dink*'s humour comes from the dialogue choices, full of dirty jokes and edgy teenager lines.

The gameplay is simple – you travel through map screens, talking to NPCs and battling monsters, eventually levelling up your three stats – Attack, Defense and Magic – and finding new weapons and spells.

Sadly, the game's progression is often halted by quest items sold in stores at insane prices, forcing players to spend hours killing monsters. This destroys the flow of an otherwise short and sweet game.

By itself, *Dink* would be little more than a curiosity. But the game came with friendly mod tools, and, in 1999, the developers made the game free, later releasing the source code as well. This led to the rise of a passionate community creating "D-mods" – new adventure modules for *Dink Smallwood*.

Still active today, the "Dinkers" have produced hundreds of D-mods, ranging from epic adventures to short romps, one-screen mini-games and even educative modules that teach scripting.

These modules have long since surpassed the base game and are more than enough reason to own *Dink Smallwood*. Just head to www.dinknetwork.com and choose your next adventure. **FE**

Mods:

Mystery Island: An official sequel to *Dink Smallwood*, made by the original developers 13 years later.

Pilgrim's Quest: A lengthy adventure, with several new regions, weapons, spells, riddles and even boat sailing.

Lyna's Story: With Dink gone and the King's knights missing, it's up to Lyna to venture out and save the day.

Dink Goes Boating: An excellent tutorial for the game's modding, it carefully explains how scripting works.

Mayhem: A short time-attack module where you're a Black Knight that must pillage a village and get out.

Hexplore



Heliovisions Productions, 1998
Windows

Hexplore is an isometric, party-based RPG from France. It had a number of interesting technical aspects and gameplay solutions, but never achieved much success and is relatively unknown, even to veterans of the genre.

Set during the Crusades in a fantastic version of Earth, the game follows Mac Bride, an adventurer, as he tries to track down fellow missing knights and, of course, save the world in the process. During the first level he is joined by three other companions – an archer, warrior and sorcerer.

Each character has a unique set of weapons and utility items at their disposal. Mac is a generalist that uses bombs, melee and short-range weapons. The archer uses long-range weapons and can reveal hidden places on the map. The warrior uses a number of powerful melee weapons and explosives, while the wizard can heal, make the party invisible or rain fire from above. As the game progresses, characters gain access to three additional upgrades for each weapon which increase their damage/usefulness and even change the way they behave in some cases.

There are 12 huge levels spanning many open spaces and explorable interiors. Each level also features a number of puzzles where each character needs to use its unique skill (fit through a tight opening, operate mechanical devices, etc.) to complete it. Party members often need to split up in order to solve the puzzles, scout ahead or draw fire away from weaker allies. Managing the whole party is quite easy, thanks to a simple and efficient interface.

Unlike other isometric RPGs from the late 90s, *Hexplore* is fully 3D and allows you to freely rotate the camera – something you'll need to do a lot to uncover all the treasures, keys and secrets hidden in its cleverly constructed environments.

Hexplore is also one of the rare games that uses a voxel-based engine (instead of polygons). It was pretty fast for its time, but even then the graphics looked muddled. This was made up for somewhat with hand-drawn cutscenes and a memorable soundtrack.

The game also supported 4-player multiplayer, but it never became popular. Overall, *Hexplore* is a fun, niche game that didn't improve upon existing standards, but remains an interesting experiment. **OU**

To run *Hexplore* on modern PCs you're going to need the fan patch, otherwise the game will crash every few seconds.



The later areas of the game focus heavily on puzzles and exploration, with mazes full of traps, keys and secret switches.



Combat is simple, real-time and a bit *Diablo*-like. You can change the game's speed to plow through easy enemies or carefully battle tougher foes.

Baldur's Gate



BioWare, 1998
Windows, Linux, Mac, iOS and Android

Baldur's Gate was the first game to use the legendary Infinity Engine, which also powered the _Icewind Dale_ games and _Planescape: Torment_. In 2012 fans created GemRB, an open-source version of the engine.

It's often written about how *Final Fantasy VII* changed the fate of Japanese RPGs upon its release in 1997. Much less is written about how, one year later, *Baldur's Gate* revitalised the CRPG genre.

After the genre tapered off during the mid-90s, losing its appeal to "*Doom*-clones", RTS games and the rising popularity of consoles, some CRPG developers were left wondering if they had coded themselves into a corner. *Baldur's Gate*, though, managed to bring them back to the spotlight, selling two million copies worldwide and forever elevating the recently founded BioWare into a household name for CRPGs.

It's not that it was the only CRPG around. The revered *Fallout* series began a year before, to similar critical acclaim – but only a tiny fraction of the sales. Part of the appeal behind *Baldur's Gate* comes from the popular *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset, here applied to a friendly real-time-with-pause battle system that has since become one of the most beloved in the genre – think an RTS where the space bar pauses the action, providing players tight control over a party of six highly specialised characters.



Exploration is unique, as key locations are connected by "empty" roads and wilderness areas you must cross, making the world more immersive.

Battles are then seamlessly integrated into the exploration of the huge world, a vast region of Forgotten Realms composed of several interlocking maps – including the six-map wonder that is the eponymous city of Baldur's Gate – peppered with combat encounters of varying challenge levels.

While not strictly an open world, the way the maps interlocked with one another, and the fact that you could (mostly) freely explore them, made *Baldur's Gate* feel like one. There was an addictive feeling to mapping out the areas as you advanced and cleared the map's "fog of war", and exploration was rewarded often, but not often enough to make it feel that anywhere you went there were "shinnies" waiting for you.

In fact, *Baldur's Gate* is often a masterclass on the art of using useless space. Many buildings are enterable, but have little of interest inside. Many maps are just odd stretches of forest with little more than a couple of enemy encounters. The world, then, exists because the world does not solely exist, as in many moderns games, as a playground for the player. This makes it feel more real, and makes it feel more meaningful on the rare occasions when you do find something unique and useful to you.

Dungeons are ever-present, of course, littered with traps, if unfortunately light on puzzles. Dragons are notoriously absent, due to a hard level cap (often modded out by min-maxing players) that would make such encounters near impossible in accordance to the *AD&D* rules. Other than that, the game's enemy variety has seldom been surpassed.

The *AD&D* ruleset also powers a rich character creation system, offering players a lot of freedom to craft their own, unique protagonist – later joined by a colourful cast of companions which would set the foundation for BioWare's character writing.

"We looked at RTSs, such as *Command & Conquer* and *Warcraft*. You'd click on characters and they'd say something back to you, and it was a surprise. In *Jagged Alliance*, one character would take out a gun and start shooting the other because they'd had an argument. We wanted to make [the characters in *Baldur's Gate*] feel like real people, not NPCs who were AI-controlled. They really felt like they had personalities and came to life."

– Dr. Ray Muzyka, *BioWare's co-founder*



The main quest is fairly linear, but the side-quests often allow you to pick sides, such as helping Edwin to kill the witch Dynaheir, or joining Minsc to rescue her.

The excellent voice work and elegant mechanical quirks (the ranger Minsc has one quick-slot assigned to his pet hamster; the married couple, Khalid and Jaheira, will only stay in the party as a pair) gave these companions personality, while the fact that equipped weapons and armour were represented on the in-game models gave the player a way to make them his own.

Lest we forget, however, the *AD&D* system was created as a framework on top of which tabletop players would layer improvisation and role-playing, helped or thwarted by the all-seeing Dungeon Master player. No such flexibility exists here, resulting more often than not on unbalanced encounters that require one to rely on the dice as much as strategy – and sometimes on the saving graces of the save and load.

Followed by the solid *Tales of the Sword Coast* expansion and by an even better sequel, *Baldur's Gate* remains an often replayed classic, thanks to extensive curation, earlier on by fans and currently by Beamdog.

The company, formed by former Bioware staff, re-released the game and its sequel, adjusting them for modern computers (and tablets) and even adding some new content. As a result, *Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition* is accepted as the most complete out-of-the-box way to play this legendary game. And blissfully compatible with original mods – because you'll still want to unlock that level cap. **LM**

In 2016 Beamdog released *Baldur's Gate: Siege of Dragonspear*, an expansion pack for the Enhanced Edition of BG.

Mods:

Baldur's Gate Trilogy-WeiDU: An excellent fan-made alternative to the *Enhanced Edition*, it combines both *Baldur's Gate* games into one vastly improved game.

BG1 Tweak Pack: A pack of customisable changes and tweaks, like unlocking level caps or hiding helmets.

Unfinished Business: Restores a lot of cut content.

The Fields of the Dead: A huge mod that make rules more faithful to *AD&D* and adds a lot of content.



While combat was translated into real-time, BioWare kept an impressive amount of the *AD&D* ruleset's depth.



The charismatic companions, diverse equipment, iconic classes and efficient UI makes party-building a joy.

Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven



New World Computing, 1998
Windows

After releasing the *Xeen* duology, NWC created the *Heroes of Might and Magic* spin-off series, fantasy strategy games that over time became more popular than the main *M&M* RPG series itself.

After a five-year hiatus, New World Computing returns to *Might and Magic*, leaving behind the flat world of Xeen to bring the series to the three-dimensional continent of Enroth, home to the first two *Heroes of Might and Magic* games.

A radically different game, *Might and Magic VI* eschews the 2D, grid-based world of its predecessors in favour of a more modern 3D free-roaming world. Similar to early FPS titles like *Doom*, the engine renders 3D environments and 2D enemy sprites.

The game is primarily played in real time and features a day-and-night cycle, with an in-game minute passing every two seconds. Actions such as travel, rest and training advance the clock by hours or days at a time, and the game's shops, stables and ships abide by a rigid schedule: most businesses close overnight, and travel services only run their routes on specific days of the week. Your party will need to occasionally stop to rest and eat; they'll press on if you let them, but their condition will deteriorate over time, leading to exhaustion and even death! In spite of this, managing time in-game isn't difficult, and adds to a sense of immersion.



You can hire up to two NPCs to help you. They don't fight, but can offer spells, skills and passive bonuses. However, they'll take a percentage of all the money you find.

Combat in *Might and Magic VI* is a hybrid between real-time and turn-based gameplay, and generally takes place against dozens of enemies at a time. Real-time combat can be hectic, but exciting: a player might often find themselves running backwards, evading incoming projectiles while pumping spells and arrows into the advancing horde.

At any time, pressing Enter toggles a turn-based mode, leading to a more tactical experience. While turn-based mode is switched on, the party may not move, but the player has time to make more deliberate choices during combat. A player might find themselves gravitating to either real-time or turn-based combat, or mixing them: both modes have their advantages, and are viable in most situations.

Your party consists of four human adventurers, who can specialise in one of six different classes. *M&M VI* introduced the now-classic formula of seeking trainers to improve your skills, with the skill masters being hidden in obscure places. Characters are free to master any skill their class has access to, and can learn any spell in their available spell schools.

However, there are a significant number of spells which don't scale well into the later game, or simply don't work at all! Later *M&M* games fix these issues, but place more limits on which spells a class can learn, and which skills they can master. As a result, character classes in this game are less specialised and more homogeneous than in its sequels, but the player has more freedom to develop them as they see fit.

The balance tends to favour spell-casting classes, due in part to the raw power of Light and Dark magic and the sheer utility of Water and Air. Physical classes quickly drop off in power, but their survivability can save the party, and they tend to have more points to spend on non-combat skills like Repair.

"Although controversial, I feel the most important thing was the turn-based/real-time combat system. We really gave this a lot of thought, and I think this was the key to bringing *Might and Magic*'s party-based system into the post-*Doom* 3D world."

– *Jon Van Caneghem, Might and Magic's creator*



The dungeons are huge and filled with hordes of enemies. Luckily, the automap is excellent, and you can rest inside the dungeon if you find a safe area and have enough food remaining.

Your party will start out feeling rather weak, but will ramp up steadily in power as you play. It can be very satisfying to return to an area that once gave you trouble, and cut a swath of destruction through it!

Might and Magic VI takes place after the events of *Heroes of Might and Magic II*, but it does not follow a completely linear narrative – it is quite open-ended in its structure. While the starting town of New Sorpigal has a useful assortment of low-level quests and dungeons, most regions are accessible from the very beginning of the game, and many quests, even within the main quest line, can be completed in any order.

Dungeons are typically sizeable in scope and overflowing with enemies, and range from unremarkable caves and sewers to lavish ruins and high-tech control centres. The world itself is quite large, with about 15 large outdoor regions and over 30 dungeons. Locales include the snowy mountains of White Cap, the haunted Mire of the Damned, and Dragonsand, a desert unsurprisingly full of dragons.

There are plenty of ways to get around: regions can be reached either on foot or via ships or stables, which can quickly move a player between towns. A party with an advanced spellcaster has additional conveniences: for instance, a Water Master can save beacons to warp to at a later time, or instantly teleport the party to certain cities. Air magic's Fly spell is my personal favourite: your party gains the power to soar freely through the air, raining death onto any unsuspecting enemies below.

The new *M&M* engine and gameplay style would be used in two more games, *Might and Magic VII: For Blood and Honor* (1998) and *Might and Magic VIII: Day of the Destroyer* (2000). But while they add polish to the engine, they don't match *M&M VI*'s nearly 100 hours of gameplay, meaty dungeon crawls and emphasis on free-form exploration.

For these reasons and more, *Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven* may well be one of the best computer RPGs of its time. **DH**

The *GrayFace MM6 Patch* fixes many bugs and add new features like key re-mapping and mouselook. If you want more adventures, you can also try the *The Chaos Conspiracy mod*, a new fan-made campaign.



The inventory is now grid-based, with nice equipment artwork, a "paper doll" and – finally – item descriptions.



Dungeons are 3D, but shops, guilds, houses and other internal locations are shown through charming 2D art.

Fallout 2



Black Isle Studios, 1998
Windows and Mac

"You will be able to prostitute your spouse in New Reno!" Lost in the pages of a video game magazine, these few words were the first contact I had with *Fallout 2*. Needless to say, I was thoroughly delighted with this statement: I was young, my moral compass wasn't quite functional yet and – most of all – I did have hormonal disorders. The same kind that seems to plague most boys of my age. Naturally, I felt *Fallout 2* was made for me.

***Fallout 1* and *2* were both heavily censored in some countries. The UK and German releases removed all children from the games, making some side-quests impossible to complete.**

Walking in the footsteps of its big brother barely a year after its release, *Fallout 2* had to answer a lot of the player's expectations. It did so, but in quite an unexpected way.

First, you're not the Vault Dweller anymore, but his grandchild – a brahmin-herdin' gecko-hunting neo-tribal. As the "Chosen One", you must find the Garden of Eden Creation Kit, a terraforming pre-war device that can save your village from starvation. This GECK in itself is little more than a MacGuffin, a pretext to send you on a trip through the ruthless remnants of a post-nuclear West Coast. *Fallout*'s setting in itself has always been the true star of the show.



Fallout 2 has 14 recruitable NPCs and allows you some control over their tactics and equipment, but they are still very unreliable in some battles.

Black Isle's team made sure that you would roam the wasteland in the right conditions: the game is even more open than its predecessor and you will discover new locations as you go through the desert and talk to its denizens. The elusive nature of your quest will ensure that you will go through most of the West Coast and its broken, twisted communities before getting a lead on where the GECK is located. The order of the locations you visit is not set, and each town provides another viewpoint of the conflicts playing out.

Decades have passed since you walked the wasteland in the first game: communities have somewhat evolved and human societies had enough time to rebuild themselves. Though the rule of law now seemingly governs many of those settlements, you will quickly discover that these "laws" doesn't necessarily mean "greater good" and that man is still a wolf to man. You will encounter countless situations where slavery is perfectly accepted, and where people are experimented upon with drugs in so-called "stables."

When it comes to player freedom, open-worldness is not the only thing *Fallout 2* has going for it, for the game is tailored to reward you for going your own way. The early-game ammo scarcity, the frequency at which you'll end up outnumbered and outgunned, basically encourages you to find ways to get your first decent gear, often in undignified ways. Again, the world of *Fallout* is ruthless and you might just have to take sides in petty gang wars, pillage graves, sell slaves and rob honest people's homes in order to survive.

Always promoting the player's agenda, the way most of the skills are used is left to the player's discretion of when and how to use them. You're rarely prompted to use them at all, and no message will pop up on the screen to tell you which quest can be solved by sneaking into the criminal kingpin's office.

"I think it [New Reno] presents a lot of fun role-playing opportunities and things to do, no matter what 'type' of character you are. But does it fit in the setting? No, probably not. It's too sexually over-the-top, too much profanity, and the look and attitude of some of the characters is too modern-day to complement the feel of the *Fallout* world (...) But I still think it was fun to play, and it was fun to design."

– *Chris Avellone*, *Fallout 2's designer*



Fallout 2's humour is dark, witty and full of pop culture references. You'll talk like a smart-ass, make jokes on cannibalism, quote movies and may even pull out prank calls.

By giving the player as much freedom as possible, from the character creation screen to the quests and dialogue trees, the developers entrusted the players with crafting their own experience out of the game and play it the way they wanted – all the way down to the ending, which is intricately affected by their actions during the game.

As for the combat, the game abides by the same rules set by its predecessor: turn-based combat on a hexagonal map. Each turn, you are limited by a number of action points you must carefully distribute between firing, aiming, running (away) or accessing your inventory.

Fallout 2 proposes some tactical options but, in all honesty, the most satisfying experience you'll get from its combat system is blowing up your enemies' innards in a forceful shotgun blast and reading hilarious message feedbacks after *intentionally* popping up one of your enemies' gonads.



Guns, armour, drugs, explosives, sex toys, car parts and even your own body parts are some of the items you'll find.

Truth be said, humour is one of *Fallout 2*'s main guideline. While *Fallout 1* focused on delivering a minutely-crafted and focused experience, its sequel breaks a great deal of walls – fourth one included – in order to let the players frolic at their hearts content.

You can blow up a toilet and smear a town of starving farmers in shit, offer candy to a little boy, cut raiders in two with a laser mini-gun, grow a sixth toe, become a famous porn star, and get your ear bitten off during a boxing match. Through its great variety of locations and situations, *Fallout 2* will provide you with experiences, playlets and dialogue you'll never see in any other video game.

Even by today's standards, *Fallout 2* is too unique of an experience to pass up. It is not only an excellent RPG, it is also an exceptional game in itself. Its quirky writing, legendary setting and inviting gameplay will provide countless hours of entertainment, provided you're not adverse of wading through delicious post-apocalyptic filth. **BC**

In 2004, Russian fans created *FOnline*, an unofficial *Fallout* MMO engine. Several MMORPGs derived from it, such as *FOnline 2*, *FOnline: Reloaded* and *FO:Ashes of Phoenix*. You can play any of these for free.

Mods:

Killap's Fallout 2 patch: A must-have, fixes +800 bugs.

Fallout 2 Restoration Project: Restores a lot of content that was cut, including several locations and Kaga, your "rival" Chosen One. Just be aware that not all of it is great.

MIB88 Megamod: A mod pack that adds new areas, various features and allows you to visit *Fallout 1* areas.

Oblivion Lost: A Russian mod that blends *Fallout 2* with *STALKER: Shadows of Chernobyl*. It's quite funny.

Fallout 1.5: Resurrection: A critically acclaimed mod that offers a full 25-hour campaign. A great RPG in its own right, it's highly recommended.

Several total conversion mods for *Fallout 2* exist, such as *Olympus 2207*, *Shattered Destiny*, *Fallout: Nevada* and *Mutants Rising*. Sadly, most of them are only in Russian.

King's Quest: Mask of Eternity



Sierra On-Line, 1998
Windows

The fabled designer Roberta Williams had a big problem in the late 90s. The gaming market was booming, consoles and 3D action games titles were selling millions, but adventure games were considered a dead genre. 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 now Sierra's new owners were desperate for a big hit.



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.

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 armour and even a *Diablo*-like toolbar of magical potions.

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 dialogue 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 criticise 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-to-1.

Does that make it a good game? Definitely not, but serves as a cautionary tale about the whims of the game industry and its trends. **FE**

Septerra Core:
Legacy of the Creator



Valkyrie Studios, 1999
Windows, Linux and Mac

With the success of *Final Fantasy VII* in 1997, it was expected that companies would try to imitate its formula. *Sudeki, Anachronox, Silver* and even *Lord of The Rings: The Third Age* had strong JRPG influences, but no game came closer to a "Western-made *Final Fantasy VII*" than *Septerra Core*.

The game is set on Septerra, a planet composed of seven layers, each with unique characteristics. You play as Maya, a scavenger from the second layer who saw her city destroyed by a general from the first layer.

Her adventures follow a decidedly JRPG-like formula (especially those of the PS1 era) of gathering companions, visiting exotic towns, exploring dungeons, travelling across a large overworld and even acquiring a late-game airship that allows you to travel freely.

That's not to say there's nothing new – *Septerra* features adventure game elements, with topic-based dialogues and puzzles that require you to combine items in your inventory. Some are fun, but others are poorly presented or require items that are very easy to miss.

Combat is similar to *Final Fantasy*'s ATB system, where characters wait for a bar to charge so they can act. Here the bar is divided into three segments – you can act with just one segment, but more segments allow more powerful attacks (similar to what *FFXIII* would use). Sadly, combat is slow. Very, very slow.

However, what really exacerbates the flaws in both the combat and puzzles are the game's dungeons. They are massive, packed with enemies that respawn, and offer no challenge beyond pushing levers.

It combines terribly with the sluggish combat and confusing puzzles: some events can only be triggered by specific party members – going back to town to switch characters and returning can take a lot of time. And even if you know exactly what to do, you'll often be forced to cross the same dungeon multiple times.

All this stretches what could be a very enjoyable 20-30 hour game into almost 60 hours. To speed things up, you can cheat to instantly win battles (and honestly, I advise doing so) but, still, it's an endurance test.

Overall, *Septerra Core* is one of those games that those who found it in a bargain bin back then (and had nothing else to play) might have good memories of its flawed yet interesting story, but it's hard to justify spending so many hours on it today. **FE**



While the character's art feels like a poor emulation of the Japanese style, the pre-rendered backgrounds are nice and the game's dungeons are fully voiced.



Magic and Summons are cast by combining cards you find during the game. They require mana, which is shared between party members.

Jagged Alliance 2



Sir-Tech Canada, 1999
Windows, Linux (Mac and Android)*

*Since the release of the source code, dedicated modders have managed to create ports of the game for Mac and Android.

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 the immense arsenal available, expanded even further by mods. Others praise the game for a creative, alchemical approach to the RPG genre and its chess-like tactical depth. Some just love the characters.

Aye, *Jagged Alliance 2* is generous enough to allow you to enjoy it from all perspectives and playstyles. 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 this unique blend of strategy and role-playing game.



More than just fighting, you'll also have to talk to the locals and decide how to handle the issues they present.

You start by creating a custom avatar, then recruiting a minimal team of mercs – each with their own stats, gear, personalities and weekly salaries – then go straight to work. Your team is inserted into the Omerta village, where the army is about to assault the rebel hideout. You are to clear the initial sector, deliver your letter of credentials to Fatima, a local contact, and be led to meet the rebel leader.

Your dialogue skills will be used for the first time here, giving you the chance to recruit rebels into your squad and place the sector under your control, making it clear that *JA2* offers much more than "just" an incredibly deep tactical combat.

After Omerta, you gain acess to the world map and can plan your next steps. There's the "normal" route of liberating the town of Drassen, gaining control of its resources and assigning your mercs to train a militia that will defend it from Deidranna's army (you can also find the local helicopter pilot and weapons dealer there). But you can try alternative routes, especially during a replay. A 7.62 mm bullet might stop you, but the game won't.

In each of the main sectors you also get to indulge in a bit of RPG exploring and questing. Benefits can lie hidden in any cupboard or dialogue option. It's where the kindred spirit with the *Fallout* series is most evident in *JA2* – whether you fight for cash in San Mona or rescue a hooker from a brothel, quests are fun, rewarding and not at all politically correct.

Depending on how close you get to the capital, or how irate Deidranna gets with your actions, the game throws at you a range of enemies, rising in difficulty from "yellow shirts" – the local police –, to army "red shirt" regulars, and ending with the "black shirt" special forces, who bring everything to the table: snipers, LMGs, mortars, even tanks.

"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 theorise 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 control multiple squads at once, and train militias to defend liberated sectors once you've earned the support of the locals.

The final layer of the cake is the amazing turn-based combat. Powered by an elegant UI, a large pool of action points per unit and many nuances like cover, stances, aimed shots, morale, wounds, field of view, multiple ammo types and even destructable buildings, the wealth of options available is staggering.

The day-and-night cycle enhances stealth and the game provides both the tools (knives, camouflage, silenced weapons, wire cutters) and the skills required. If that's not your cup of tea, you can get a Dragunov sniper rifle and pop heads from across the map. Or set the world on fire with LAWs, mortars and LMGs. Or maybe play Ironman (and/or solo!) and try to carve your way to victory for massive bragging rights. *JA2* will keep bringing you back, no matter what.

Finally, if you're looking for an alternative twist, you can also activate the Sci-Fi mode, a special mode where a new faction of enemies is added to the mix – which can lead to chaotic 3-way battles.



More than just stats, gear and salaries, each unit has its unique personality, delivered via hundreds of voiced lines.

Two years after the game's release, we got the *JA2: Unfinished Business* expansion. Its new campaign was short and left you hungry for more, but the game also brought a map editor, giving the official blessing to a modding community that, many years after, still produces fresh content for the game.

The sales of *Unfinished Business* failed to keep Sir-Tech alive and ended prematurely one of the greatest TBS/RPG series ever made. Yet, like the bite of a vampire, it made the game immortal, leaving its future to be safeguarded by its dedicated fan community. **SH**

After Sir-Tech closed, many companies tried to make sequels to *JA2*, such as *JA: Back in Action*, *JA: Flashback* and *JA: Online*, but sadly none of them come close to *JA2* v1.13.

Mods for Jagged Alliance 2

JA2 v1.13: A must-have mod, v1.13 brings thousands of new features and items to the game, changing the AI and interface, adding weather, suppressing fire, etc. It transformed *JA2* into a mod-friendly game, leading to many impressive new features, such as multiplayer.

JA2 Urban Chaos: The very first fan-made sequel of *JA2* offers a completely new adventure in Danubia, with revolutionary changes to systems and tactics.

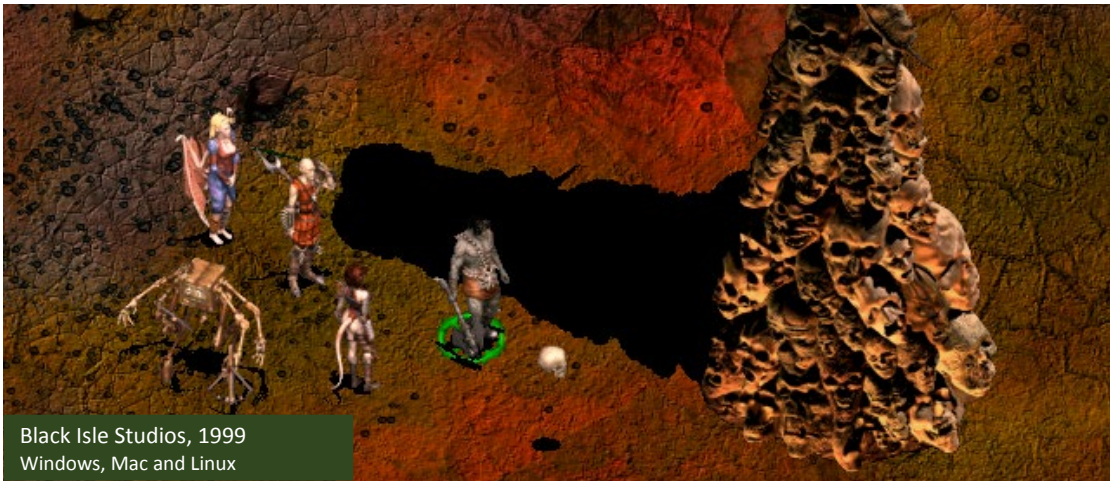
JA2 Stracciatella: An overhaul of the *JA2* source code, started by modder Tron, transforming the engine into a true platform-independent piece of software. It allowed ports of *JA2* to Linux, MacOS and Android.

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: This Russian mod turns *JA2:UB* into a whole new game, with new tactical map, new markets, new characters and new weapons.

Planescape: Torment



Black Isle Studios, 1999
Windows, Mac and Linux

***Planescape* is an award-winning *AD&D* setting written by David "Zeb" Cook and published in 1994. It deals with cosmic factions, multiple planes of existence and the city where they all meet – Sigil, the City of Doors.**

Most fantasy RPGs follow the tried and allegedly true formula, which strips them of anything "fantastic" and grounds them in the dull "reality" of the familiar. Sadly, the much coveted instant recognition usually means instantly forgettable. How many times should we save an utterly predictable and generic world before it gets really old? Why is that when we see a town on the horizon, it's not a place of wonder and strange customs, but a place to restock on a FEDEX quest and trade in your loot?

Now compare it to *Planescape: Torment*. You wake up in a mortuary. Dead. A gravity-defying skull starts chatting with you, making it clear that you aren't in fantasy Kansas anymore. The rules are completely different and you have no idea what they are yet. Where are the familiar elves and orcs – the foundation of quality storytelling? Why isn't an ancient evil stirring? Where is a kind lord of the realm to send you on a mission of great importance? Why isn't your character a dashing young hero, destined to be awesome, but a scarred, formaldehyde-soaked corpse, cursed with immortality?



The RTwP combat is the weakest aspect of the game, but the unique spells and the exotic monsters help keep it interesting.

You open the door. Zombies are crawling everywhere, yet it's not a zombie apocalypse. The zombies mind their own business; in fact, they are nothing but indentured workers whose bodies were sold to the Dustmen, one of the many colourful factions in the game. You can attack the zombies if you're a creature of habit, but you can also walk around, studying the undead, and even get very unusual items from them.

When you finally manage to leave the Mortuary, you find yourself in a most unusual city. It's a city of doors, filled with hidden portals that can take you anywhere, assuming you have the right key – which can be anything from a jewel to literally junk.

You make your way to a bar: a familiar place in this strange land. The very first thing you see is a burning (yet still alive) man floating in mid-air – a rather unusual conversation piece of decor. Some ugly looking demons are having a drink, greeting you as an old friend. The bartender casually informs you that he still has your eye – it's right there, floating in a jar like a pickled egg – and if you have some coins you can have it back.

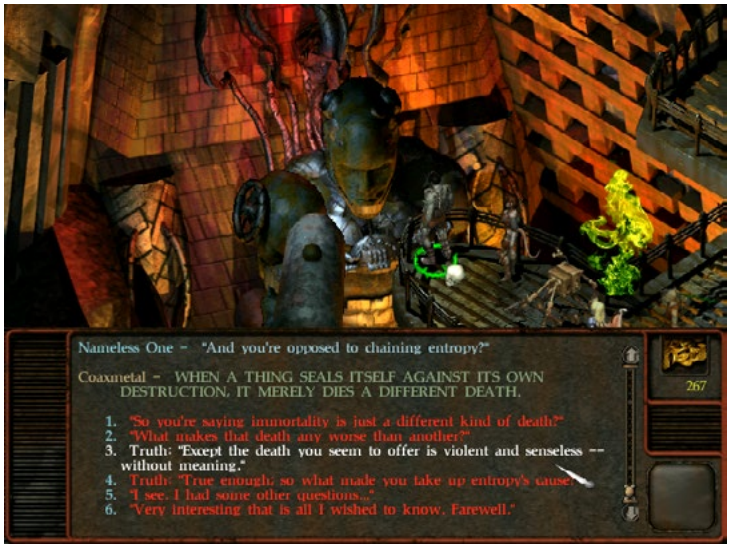
You buy the eye, not because you need it, but because it's so shockingly different from the usual selection of RPG goodies, wondering what the hell one does with an eye that belonged to your earlier incarnation. Guess what, you get an option to rip out one of your current, perfectly good eyeballs and replace it with the pickled one, because why not?

Somehow it works and your old memories start pouring in. At this point you're absolutely lost. You, the player, are a stranger in a strange land and that's a rare and precious moment in gaming.

Overall, *Planescape: Torment* is a beautifully written RPG that shines in every single area that involves writing.

"I looked at all the RPGs I had played up to that point, identified all the things I was tired of seeing and just looked for new ways to get around them. It just seemed like loading your game up after death was a huge waste of time. Ideally you just want the player to play until they feel like quitting, and so it occurred to me that if I made an immortal character, and made death a part of the game and mechanics, that it would be a more enjoyable experience for players instead of the standard save, die, and reload."

– *Chris Avellone*,
Torment's lead designer



Torment's writing is unrivalled in gaming, offering plenty of role-playing options, memorable moments, funny lines and overarching philosophical questions.

You'll travel an interesting world (while the setting is a licensed oddity, it takes considerable skills and talent to turn an obscure, dusty IP into a one-of-a-kind world ready to be explored). You'll read a great story with philosophical undertones – a rare treat in video games. You'll meet the best party members I've ever seen in a computer game, and you'll have fantastic dialogues and complex dialogue trees

On the downside, despite featuring over 800,000 words, you have to fight a lot because apparently killing things to level up (and grinding to put more points into Wisdom and Charisma to unlock more awesome dialogues) is what players can't get enough of.

All this mindless slaughter is powered up by a rather underwhelming RTwP system that comes with the Infinity Engine. On the plus side, it has spectacular spell animations inspired by *Final Fantasy VII*, so if you get bored watching toons whacking each other, cast one of the spells and watch the fireworks.

Speaking of *Final Fantasy*, it can be argued that *Planescape: Torment's*, um, homage to Japanese RPGs goes a bit deeper than the spell effects and that it is, in fact, a JRPG cleverly disguised as a WRPG to confuse players who are too cool to play console games.

Fortunately, the story, dialogues, and characters are so good that, even if you hate RTwP with passion or laugh at people who cried when Aeris died, you'll still love the game and wish you could lose your memories to experience it all over again for the first time. **VD**

Mods:

Ultimate WeiDU Fixpack: Fixes hundreds of bugs.

Bigg's Widescreen mod: Allows you to run the game in any resolution you desire. If you install this, then also get *Ghostdog's incredible UI* mod to fix the menus.

Qwinn's Unfinished Business: Restores several quests, items and dialogues that were cut during development.

Black Isle tried developing two other *Planescape* games, both of which were eventually cancelled. One of them would be a PlayStation game inspired by *King's Field*, to be directed by Colin McComb.



You won't buy armour in shops. Instead, you'll get tattoos, unlock memories, learn secrets and replace body parts.



It's advised you play as a wise and intelligent mage. Not because of his power, but because of his dialogues.

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 on 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.



Ultima IX's inventory is still based on multiple containers, but they are now grid-based, making them much easier to organise.

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 rewritten 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 criticised 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 rewritten, 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.

"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's 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 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. These are features that largely disappeared from 3D RPG design for about a 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 misfortunes that befell Britannia.



Combat in *Ultima IX* is simplistic; most of the time you'll just hit the left-mouse button as fast as you can.

Despite its reception, *Ultima IX* is not without a legacy. German RPG developers Piranha Bytes drew significant inspiration from the game whilst developing *Gothic* (2001) and, later, *Risen* (2009); both games improve upon the formula that Origin Systems never had the time to fully develop, and are classics in their own right.

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. **KE**

Mods:

Dialogue patch: A re-writing of the game's dialogue, 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 cut late in the game's production.

Beautiful Britannia: improves the game's textures and adds several areas that were cut from the game.



A screenshot of a modded *Ultima IX*, with enhanced graphics, wide-screen support and restored content.

Might and Magic VII: For Blood and Honor



New World Computing, 1999
Windows

A fan of *Might and Magic VII*, such as myself, might tell you that the game takes everything the previous game did and improves on it. Sculpting mechanics into perfection, tweaking the skill system, adding depth and polish – all within a world more vibrant and interesting than ever.

More traditionalist players will tell you that the decline of the series began here, because while *M&M VII* has more polished content, it also has less.

The *GrayFace MM7 patch* adds features like mouse-look, while the *Maestro mod* is a big pack with new quests, classes, races, bosses, HD textures and options for higher resolution.



Your faction choice greatly changes the game's second half, including its interface. Side with evil, and you can even become a lich!



The Arcomage card game was so popular it got a stand-alone release in 2000. It also inspired various open-source copies, such as *MArcomage*.

The game compromises on the magnificent dungeons of the previous game by making its own less prevalent and less sprawling. With less breadth of content comes more depth, however. Everything you do here is meatier, denser and more fine-tuned. There is more monster variety, more mechanical complexity, more diverse rewards for exploration and more ways to customise your party.

You begin the game as in *M&M6*, creating your blob of four adventurers, but with an expanded catalogue of classes, races and skills. Then comes a rare treat in an RPG: a genuinely interesting tutorial area that ties naturally into the rest of the game.

Rather than shove you down a content-tube, Emerald Island is a micro-cosmos of the actual game, with its own dangerous swamp, a small township, quests, dungeons, a choice that will affect you much later in the game and even a menacing dragon!

The game also features perhaps the best mini-game in RPG history. Before *Witcher 3*'s *Gwent* there was *Arcomage*, a decidedly deeper and more balanced trading card game that is still played in online, multiplayer lobbies today.

M&M7 even makes room for a bit of role-playing, among other things presenting you with a game-changing fork halfway through: join the angelic forces of Celeste or cast in your lot with the brutal fiends of The Pit. Depending on your choice, your characters earn different promotions and abilities, and the main quest line changes completely. Even the game's UI alters to reflect your decision.

In short, *Might and Magic VII: For Blood and Honor* might be the point where cracks start to show in the series, but it is also the series at its peak, developed using every lesson learned over the 10 years since it began. **CG**

Gorky 17



Metropolis Software, 1999
Windows, OS X and Linux

Gorky 17 (also known as *Odium* on American shores) is a title I didn't mind replaying in order to write this review. The primary reason being that it's a short and sweet game.

The game places you in command of three NATO Soldiers who are dropped in a secret military complex somewhere in Poland, with limited supplies and unsure about what they are getting 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 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.

Many objects can explode or be pushed to form makeshift barricades, and the player must also consider factors such as obstacles, armour 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 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.

Outside of combat, the emphasis is on semi-linear exploration, character banter and item-collecting, as you solve light puzzles to move forward or reach hidden loot caches. Battles and events are all scripted, triggered at certain locations, and resources were balanced to be scarce, making exploration rewarding.

Your characters becomes more proficient the more they use a weapon, and every experience level grants five points to distribute in a handful of stats but, unfortunately, there isn't much gameplay deviation.

Still, *Gorky 17* offers a creative mix that few game publishers would dare nowadays, blending survival horror, light puzzles, RPG elements and old-school tactical combat in one tough, unforgiving package. Definitely worth the 20-hour playthrough. **MS**

Two other *Gorky* games exist: *Gorky Zero* and *Gorky Zero 2*. Both are a third-person stealth action games, set around characters from *Gorky 17*.



The game has several special boss enemies, all who have unique abilities and require thoughtful approach.



The mix of pre-rendered backgrounds, light puzzles and horrible monsters gives *Gorky 17* a very *Resident Evil*-like tone.

Omikron: The Nomad Soul



Quantic Dream, 1999
Windows and Dreamcast

David Bowie and Reeves Gabrels composed *Omikron*'s soundtrack, then later included some of the tracks in Bowie's 1999 album "Hours...".

The names of David Cage and Quantic Dream games nowadays are deeply tied to "cinematic experiences" – games like *Fahrenheit* (2005), *Heavy Rain* (2010) *and Beyond: Two Souls* (2013), a style of game so heavily focused on storytelling that the gameplay almost vanishes, being mostly limited to QTEs and similarly discreet player inputs.

A shame, really, for what's arguably David Cage's finest offering lies in the exact opposite direction – in his very first game, *Omikron: The Nomad Soul*. An extremely ambitious amalgamation of several different gameplay modes, it's a title as bold as it's flawed.

Omikron begins with a police officer shattering the fourth wall and addressing the player directly. He is Kay'l, and he begs for help, asking you to send your soul through the computer to take over his body and help him save the dystopian city of Omikron.

As soon as you agree (because why not?), you enter the body of Kay'l and are transported to a dark alley – then instantly attacked by a demon. Barely surviving the assault, it's your task to figure out what the hell is going on around here.



The city of Omikron is divided into gated districts, but each area is large and full of locations to explore.

Stepping out of the alley, players are met by the cyberpunk vision of Omikron – a large, open city, complete with apartments and stores you can enter, driveable cars and even taxis – all this months before *Shenmue* and two years before *GTA III*.

As players try to take this all in, the opening credits begin to play, the camera travelling around the city, accompanied by David Bowie's eerie singing – a small taste of the excellent soundtrack he and Reeves Gabrels composed for the game.

While this all sounds ambitious enough already, *Omikron* goes much deeper. At first it plays like a 3D adventure game – you walk around the city, visiting your apartment and other locations in search for clues, trying to understand what's going on.

You'll talk to people, collect several items and solve a few puzzles. Then you'll be called to investigate a robbery in a supermarket, and, as soon as you enter it, the game shifts into a first-person shooter, with several weapon types, medpacks and a mini-map.

As you make your way through the robbers, you finally reach their boss – who disarms you, the game suddenly changing into a *Street Fighter*-like hand-to-hand fighting game, with combos and everything.

If fighting is too difficult, you can train at home, fight in arenas or buy potions to increase your stats. Moreover, the game's initial "soul transfer" isn't just a silly throwaway. You'll later unlock the ability to freely transfer you soul into the body of over 20 characters across the city, each with their own stats, items (such as their apartment keys) and usefulness.

For example, cyborg mercenary Jorg 722 might be great for combat sections, but only Kay'l can freely walk around the police station. The game also attempts some moral dilemmas: as a soul in the body of Kay'l, is it right for you to have sex with his girlfriend?

"Those [mixed gameplay genres] were a young game designer's stupidities. Someone who had never made a game before and who thought: 'Might as well do everything, why wouldn't we do everything?' That's because we had never done it ourselves so we didn't realise the scale of what we were writing, because we just didn't have the experience. So it was an extremely ambitious game, which was incredibly painful to create – in totally, totally unreasonable proportions."

– *David Cage, Omikron's director*



While some dialogue choices may impact future events and dialogues, most of the choices are purely for flavour.

This unique soul mechanic is even used to avoid Game Overs. Dying does not mean losing the game, as you can often possess other characters to continue. In fact, there are certain characters that can only be obtained by dying in certain events.

Speaking of events, players exploring the city's many pubs might come across a virtual David Bowie performing in choreographed concerts, singing songs such as Survive and Something in the Air.

Together with great music, David Cage's passion for cinematography is already on full display, as the game's dynamic camera angles used during cutscenes and dialogues feel very "cinematic", ahead of its time.

Unfortunately, behind such a massive project lie equally large flaws. *Omikron* has several gameplay modes, but none of them is well-developed. The fighting and shooting sections quickly grow repetitive, while the adventure parts are too simplistic and fail to explore the game's soul-transfer mechanic.

While the presentation still holds, in part due to the excellent voice acting, the controls and interface are horribly dated. Mouse control is limited to the FPS sections, leaving you with "tank-controls" and a clunky keyboard-driven inventory for most of the game.

In usual Quantic Dream fashion, the story starts out interesting, but eventually becomes an unintelligible mess, adding to the disappointment later in the game.

As such, *Omikron*'s reception was lukewarm, with critics enjoying its concept but not its execution. David Cage was also frustrated by how people had difficulty adapting to the multiple gameplay modes, especially those new to gaming – a critical fact in his subsequent decision to create accessible games.

Overall, *Omikron* is somewhat akin to *Ultima I* – a passionate developer throwing everything he loves into a game, pushing the boundaries of the medium. While the end result many not be deep or cohesive, it's still a unique experience worth having. **FE**

A sequel to *Omikron* has supposedly been under production since 2002, but few details are know apart from the fact it would be set "100 cycles" after the first game.



The FPS gameplay is very crude, with several different weapon types but only two that are really useful.



Besides fighting for your life against faceless demons, you can also put your fists to the test in arena battles.

System Shock 2



Looking Glass Studios and Irrational Games, 1999
Windows, Mac and Linux

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.

Who could forget playing *System Shock 2*? Who could ever 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.



Besides shooting, you'll also have to hack, repair, modify and even research stuff you find.

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's 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 tech-savvy navy hacker. Throughout the game the player can customise 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.

"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 unrivalled 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 a writer and level designer for Looking Glass, but was also part of an early 90s rock band named *Tribe*.

Mods:

An active community at www.systemshock.org still offers advice and releases mods. Here's a selection:

Shock Community Patch: A big collection of fixes from the community. Highly recommended.

TF's Secmod: Rebalance things, change enemy position and add new content. Great for a replay.

System Shock Fan Missions: Fan-made adventures that range from *SS2* sequels to exploring medieval crypts. 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 90s was 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 reshaped 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 sixth console generation and breaking all sales records, eventually becoming the best-selling console of all time. But the development costs for fancy 3D graphics still kept rising at an alarming pace – making games was a highly profitable, but also extremely risky business.

While home computers were more popular than ever before, their games were outshined by the outstanding success of the PS2. A few PC companies like Maxis, Valve and Blizzard struck gold with hits such as *The Sims*, *Counter-Strike* and *Diablo II*, but the top-selling list was entirely dominated by consoles and handhelds.

Former PC giants like Sierra, Brøderbund and Origin had already been sold in the late 90s, and the harsh climate of the early 00s saw the demise of Interplay, SSI, Westwood Studios, DreamForge, Infogrames, MicroProse, Acclaim and the 3DO Company, among many others.

EA and Activision acquired many of these, further consolidating their position as rulers of the US market, while others had no choice but to close their doors and declare bankruptcy. Many analysts weaved grim prophecies about the "Death of PC Gaming" at the time, and while PC games didn't die, they definitely suffered in the 2000s.

In Japan, Square would merge with Enix and become Square Enix, a attempt to fight the ever-increasing development costs. Even on the hardware side things were getting tighter, with 3dfx suffering from bad decisions and being acquired by Nvidia, leaving the graphics 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.

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, 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 it.

Signalling the start of a new era, the early 2000s was a time of change, and companies either adapted or died.

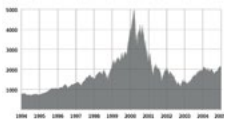
Trends:

Casual Games: The Internet proved itself the "killer app" for PCs, finally providing the perfect reason for every house to own a computer. Now people with no previous background in games or technology had access to one – and they were playing! PC titles like *The Sims* and *RollerCoaster Tycoon* were massive hits among casual gamers, but even bigger were online communities like *Neopets, Habbo Hotel* and *Club Penguin*, as well as browser games like *Travian*, *Bejeweled* and several hidden object games.



Neopets is a virtual pet website that was launched in 1999 and quickly grew popular, reaching 35 million users in 2005.

The Dot-com Bubble: This is a tangential subject, but key to understanding the insecurity that loomed over the early 2000s. With the birth and popularisation of the Internet, several companies appeared out of nowhere and made billions, such as Yahoo, Amazon and Google. Many tried to follow, creating online companies as a sure-fire path to quick money. When the bubble burst in 2000, countless companies went broke, money vanished and investors became weary of technological "gold mines" – such as video games.



The NASDAQ index spiked in early 2000, fuelled by speculation over online companies, then fell sharply.

Handheld Consoles: After *Pokémon*'s success revitalised the decade-old Game Boy, Nintendo started to quickly develop new handhelds. The Game Boy Colour came in 1998, followed by the Game Boy Advance in 2001. While these were successful, their big hit was the Nintendo DS, released in 2004 and to date the best-selling handheld console of all time. In 2004 Sony also released its PlayStation Portable – the PSP –, starting a rivalry that continued with their successors, the 3DS and the short-lived PS Vita.



All Nintendo DS models combined have sold over 150 million units, making it second only to the PS2 in popularity.



The PlayStation 2 is released. It dominated the 2000s 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 revolutionise the gaming scenario in the US and sell 24 million units.

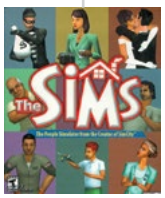


Facebook is launched. Initially only for students, it opened up in 2006 and became the world's largest social network, with over 1.8 billion users.



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, popularising 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 leads to popular mods, such as *Garry's Mod*.

Deus Ex



Ion Storm, 2000
Windows, Mac, PS2 and PSN

Warren Spector began planning *Deus Ex* in 1993, first under the title *Troubleshooter* at Origin, than later as *Junction Point* at Looking Glass Studios. The game only took off when John Romero invited Spector to join Ion Storm and "make the game of his dreams".

I'll start with a confession: I didn't play *Deus Ex* until many years after its release. And, even after I discovered it, I was skeptical at first. After all, it's an unattractive game with drab aesthetics, awkward animations and uneven voice acting.

The first steps taken and first shots fired feel clunky, and there's a gentle irony about how a game featuring brilliant AIs has NPCs that routinely run into walls like mindless wind-up toys. And yet, like its powerful nano-augmentations, *Deus Ex* has a habit of getting under one's skin and staying there.

I first tried *Deus Ex* out of historic curiosity, but its dusty appearance belied a game that was (and still is) vibrant and fresh. An immersive sim developed by former Looking Glass employees, the game has much in common with classics like *Thief* and *System Shock,* yet *Deus Ex* remains one of a kind. But pinning down exactly why it's so compelling and relevant isn't easy.

You may have heard fans talk about the game's player agency – the freedom to do things your way. To my mind, however, this freedom is just one of many features that contribute to what distinguishes *Deus Ex* most: its verisimilitude.



Not only will you have to choose how to spend money, mods and upgrades, but the inventory itself offers limited storage, forcing you to pick your gear wisely.

Despite its low fidelity and awkward character AI, I have never played a game in which the player's presence in a virtual world feels this authentic. Hub areas such as Hell's Kitchen and Hong Kong are rich microcosms. These places may seem small in comparison to open-world games, but they are dense with detail in the form of secrets, newspapers and data cubes to discover and study, as well as inhabitants that philosophise, ask for your help, try to manipulate you, and take note of your actions.

The game's unmatched reactivity makes these characters seem real. Rather than ignoring your agency until some Big Binary Plot Decision like most games, the denizens of *Deus Ex* will react to your most minute actions and comment on the places you visited, the problems you solved and the manner in which you solved them, the people you met, killed, or let live.

The scale and complexity of the main missions' maps is often mind-boggling; the plethora of ways to move through them almost overwhelming. You can blow up a door and go in, guns blazing; pick a lock and sneak inside; stack crates or use your jump augmentation to reach a high window or roof; crawl through twisting systems of vents; hack security panels to turn the enemy's robots against them, etc.

Affordances depend on your character build and inventory. Skill points are awarded for completing objectives or finding secrets and can be invested in weapon handling, hacking, lock-picking, swimming, and more. Augmentation canisters target specific body parts and offer a binary choice: do you want to move quietly or quicker? Do you want to hit harder with melee weapons or lift heavy objects? These augmentations can then be levelled up, allowing further specialisation, while weapon mods can add scopes, increase accuracy or reduce recoil.

"*Deus Ex* was conceived with the idea that we'd accept players as our collaborators, that we'd put power back in their hands, ask them to make choices, and let them deal with the consequences of those choices. It was designed, from the start, as a game about player expression, not about how clever we were as designers, programmers, artists, or storytellers."

– *Warren Spector, Deus Ex's project director*



From small environmental details to side characters that comment on your actions and grow as the game progresses, *Deus Ex*'s world feels alive and real.

Replaying the game with different augmentations and skills will show you new and surprising facets of familiar places, yet, unlike spiritual successors such as *Dishonored*, these decisions never restrict you to either a stealth or combat-only playstyle. Instead, your choices allow for new and interesting approaches to each individual obstacle.

The missions you undertake and places you explore are meaningfully embedded in a world and story no less rich than these individual spaces. As J.C. Denton, valuable asset of UNATCO with his superior nano-technological augmentations, it's your task to untangle a web of conspiracies and lies in a world suffering from widespread terrorism, political oppression and a mysterious plague epidemic. Despite its bleakness, *Deus Ex* deals neither in moral absolutes nor cynicism. Instead, it offers an uncommonly differentiated world where the lines between good and evil are present but contested.



Instead of just offering dialog choices, *Deus Ex* reacts to player's actions, shaping the narrative around them.

Your enemies retain their humanity, and the motivations of allies are never above suspicion. Gunther Hermann, struggling against his outdated augmentations, is a brilliant example of effective characterisation through broad strokes. And if you wish to go deep, you can read and discuss political philosophy, religion, history and transhumanism.

The game's central themes of paranoia, hunger for power and thirst for knowledge are not only talked about, but also evoked by the gameplay itself. World, story and mechanics mesh elegantly, and playing the game is an all-round cerebral and coherent experience. *Deus Ex* is a vibrant masterpiece that not only achieves what few games – then or now – dare to attempt, but also makes it seem easy. **AI**

Mods:

The Nameless Mod: A long and elaborate campaign, featuring great level design and two separate storylines. A great experience, even if the setting is a bit silly.

2027: A fan-made prequel to *Deus Ex*, very faithful in terms of gameplay, exploration and setting.

ZODIAC: An excellent set of six missions where you play as Paul Denton, uncovering the game's mysteries.

Deus Ex: Nihilum: Another great fan-made campaign.

GMDX: An award-winning mod that enhances the AI, graphics, augs, skills, perks and difficulty, while staying as faithful as possible to the original game.

Deus Ex: Revision: Similar to *GMDX*, but it takes more "liberties" with its gameplay changes. Available on Steam.

HDTP/New Vision: Two mods that update the game's graphics. They are featured in both *Revision* and *GMDX*.

Shifter/BioMod: Two rather controversial mods that make radical rebalancing and gameplay changes.

Baldur's Gate II:
Shadows of Amn



BioWare, 2000
Windows, Mac (iOS and Android)*

Baldur's Gate II: Shadow of Amn for me was more than a game; it was an unforgettable journey throughout the world of Faêrun 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 offspring 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, mirrored by the villain.



Dream sequences allow you to interact with the villain, offering insight into his views and atmosphere to the game.

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 banter with you or with each other, which was the 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 statuses 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 incorporate 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 Enhanced Edition of *Baldur's Gate II*, released by Overhaul Games in 2013, adds new content, wide-screen support, bug fixes and new ports.**

"I have two primary memories from the *Baldur's Gate* days. The first is the horror of crunch. *Shadows of Amn* was an enormous game with so many characters, plots, items, spells and places that it took a lot of work and passion to get that beast out the door. That leads to the second memory: creative fulfilment. I think the stars aligned for *Baldur's Gate II* in a way that they probably won't again. We had a finished engine that allowed us to focus on content rather than basic functionality."

– James Ohlen,
Co-lead designer of Baldur's Gate II



Baldur's Gate 2 uses the Infinity Engine, featuring gorgeous 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 can cast per day can turn a nasty beating into a thrilling victory.

For the non-casting classes, there is a huge range of weapons available. The majority of weapons come with their own history and lore (or sometimes humorous conversations!), which are 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:

Baldur's Gate Trilogy-WeiDU: An excellent fan-made alternative to the *Enhanced Edition*, it combines both *Baldur's Gate* games into one vastly improved game.

Sword Coast Stratagems: An elaborate tactical/AI mod that makes combat really challenging.

Spell Revisions: Fixes and balances the game's spells.

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.

Big World Project: A massive compatibility guide on how to install over 500 mods for BG without issues. Comes with a handy automatic setup tool.

Siege of Avalon

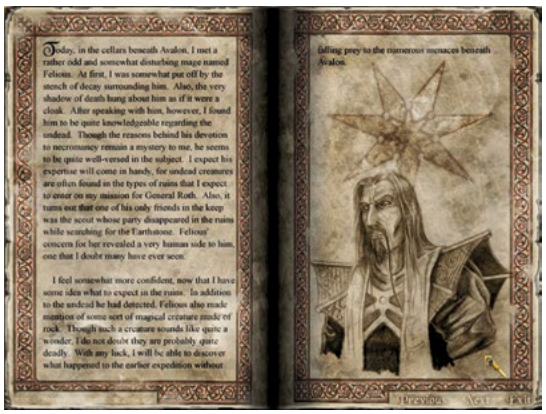


Digital Tome, 2000
Windows

Years before Telltale Games became famous for its episodic adventure games, a small studio called Digital Tome created *Siege of Avalon*, an "Episodic Computer Game Novel" told in six chapters.

The game is set in a generic fantasy world, but under unusual circumstances: you're trapped inside a massive castle under siege. And despite being an Action RPG, the focus here is on the characters and story. Or at least that was the initial concept.

The first chapter of *Siege of Avalon* was released in April 2000 as shareware, while later chapters were regularly made available for download at $9.95 each. The final one was released in June 2001.



The game prides itself on being text-heavy. Your character himself writes a detailed journal describing his adventures.



The inventory is arguably the game's best part. There are 12 layers of armour, and you must manage defense, movement restriction and damage absorption.

As you start the game, you'll choose between three classes: Fighter, Scout and Magician. Instead of levelling up, you earn training points which can be used to increase stats and skills or spent with trainers to purchase spells and special passive bonuses.

The first chapter starts slowly, but is intriguing. As a lowly peasant trying to learn the fate of your brother, you'll explore the castle, meet its many inhabitants and trade favours until you're given some answers, enemies appear and the killing begins.

Combat, however, is the game's worst part. Enemies are mindless, path-finding is non-existent, luck is far too important and there are huge balance issues, such as archers dealing absurd amounts of damage. You can later recruit up to two AI-controlled companions, but they are equally stupid and easily killed – permanently! As such, combat is usually won by employing cheesy tactics and many, many reloads.

This wouldn't be such a big problem in a story-focused game, but, after a good start, *Siege of Avalon* loses its bearing and becomes a combat-focused title. Chapter 2 is just a dull dungeon crawl inside a cave, Chapter 3, 4 and 5 are optional and focus on one class playstyle each (but aren't exclusive) while Chapter 6 is the final showdown. They're all mostly just combat.

There are satisfying moments, such as sneaking into the enemy's camp to spy, hunting rare gear and a few branching quests, but it's all buried under hours of frustrating combat and excessive backtracking. Worst yet, the initial tension of living under siege quickly vanishes and NPCs become souless quest-givers.

Siege of Avalon's concept was great, but its glaring flaws and lack of focus made it a hard sell, especially at a time when people still weren't used to episodic games – or buying them online. And it surely didn't help that *Diablo II* came out right after *SoA*'s first chapter. **FE**

Might and Magic VIII: Day of the Destroyer



New World Computing, 2000
Windows and PS2

Might and Magic VIII tells of two doomsday stories. The player's in-game goal is to thwart Escaton, an ancient planeswalker intent on destroying the world. However, the game's flaws and rushed production schedule were early signs of another tragedy – the bankruptcy of New World Computing and its new parent company, 3DO, just a few years later.

The third *Might and Magic* title in less than three years, *MM8* would be the last game to use the ageing *MM6* engine, sporting an updated UI but few changes to the graphics or gameplay of its predecessors.

The biggest difference is how party composition works: instead of managing a fixed party, you create a single main character at the start of the game, then hire up to four additional NPCs to fill out your ranks. Unfortunately for min-maxers, the initial attributes, skills and appearance of these hirelings cannot be customised without a save editor.

While previous games kept to a mostly generic fantasy setting with some sci-fi elements, you now go to Jadame, a continent populated by monstrous, albeit well-meaning races. For instance, in the starting area, Dagger Wound Island, you find yourself defending a town of friendly lizardmen from human marauders. Additionally, many traditional classes such as Archer, Paladin and Sorcerer are replaced by Dark Elves, Vampires, Necromancers and even Dragons!

However, the game's new party system presents some balance issues: a few overlevelled hirelings can be obtained at an early stage in the game, and Dragon characters are powerful enough to trivialise much of the game's content – they require no equipment, breathe fire and can learn to fly, carrying the entire party on their backs! On the other hand, some of the new classes are underwhelming, offering little to differentiate themselves from previous *M&M* classes.

New World Computing tried to give more focus to storytelling, but the plot itself is not that interesting and there's no sense of urgency. Mid-game you're asked to make some choices when forming an alliance, but they ultimately don't make much of a difference.

While it's not the strongest entry in the series, *Might and Magic VIII* is still a good game that scratches the same itch as *MM6* or *MM7* – a fan of those games would most likely enjoy this one as well. **DH**

As in *MM6* and 7, GrayFace's patch fixes bugs and adds features like mouselook, while the Choose Party mod allows you to start with any party setup you wish, and it's great for solo players as well.



The interface was improved upon previous games, but the graphics remained mostly the same, looking outdated next to other games released in 2000.



Party size was expanded to five characters, but now you only create one at the start – the others must be recruited. Yet, despite being pre-made, these characters have little personality.

Diablo II



Blizzard North, 2000
Windows and Mac

Blizzard still provides support for *Diablo II*, and in 2016 they patched it to run better on modern computers.

Released in June of 2000, *Diablo II* was the highly anticipated sequel to the successful PC Action RPG, , *Diablo*. All that anticipation was well-rewarded, as *Diablo II* delivered a massively expanded experience of the original game, including five new character classes (seven, with 2001's *Lord of Destruction* expansion) and numerous features which became ubiquitous to Action RPGs, such as Skill Trees and the coloured Item Quality tiers (white for common, blue for magical, yellow for rare, etc.).

Diablo II was a tremendous success, selling more than 10 million copies across the early 2000s. It was a pioneer of online multiplayer, taking advantage of Blizzard Entertainment's popular Battle.net service. It also introduced an entire generation to the niche roguelike genre, and to the concept of procedural generation, an idea which has become massively popular in contemporary games.

Like many iconic games that came out of the 1990s, the *Diablo* series was born of the collision of multiple genres – mainly roguelikes and early Action RPG titles like *Ultima VIII: Pagan*.



Diablo II took the concept of magical items from roguelikes and expanded it, creating the now-famous coloured rarity tiers.

In the early 1980s, the cult game *Rogue* radically reinterpreted the RPG genre. Rather than trying to recreate the massive possibility space of tabletop RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Rogue* sought to strip them down to just a few core ideas. Plot, towns and NPCs were all removed or greatly reduced so that the player could immediately start exploring a procedurally generated dungeon. An entire sub-genre sprang up from this model, in which players challenge an endless variety of dungeons, dying suddenly, dying often, and sometimes finding an amazing piece of treasure.

In the mid-1990s, *Diablo* creators David Brevik, Max Schaefer and Erik Schaefer set out to create a roguelike, but design compromises crept in almost immediately. Their publisher, Blizzard, told them that their game had to operate in real time – serendipitously giving *Diablo* the frantic combat for which it is known. The designers also added other non-traditional elements to its roguelike core, such as character classes and multiplayer support. The result of all these design compromises is a strange and beautiful game, part roguelike, part hack-and-slash, and entirely addictive.

Diablo II represents a refinement and expansion of the original *Diablo*. All of the same core ideas reappear, but the UI and core loop are streamlined. Virtually every part of the game is greatly expanded, as well. Instead of four dungeons spanning 16 levels, *Diablo II* features dozens of sprawling dungeons, taking place across five large "acts". Instead of a few dozen unique items to find, the loot tables contain hundreds of them. The frantic action of the first game reappears, as players hack their way through thousands of monsters and five extra-tough, unique bosses. Multiplayer returns, and raises the party size from four to eight players. Indeed, multiplayer is the place where the real magic of the game happens.

"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 waypoint almost reached, an experience level almost achieved, and a dungeon nearly cleared out."

– *Erich Schaefer, Diablo II's project and design lead*



Diablo II's classes go beyond the classic Warrior, Mage and Thief trifecta, with Paladins enhanced by powerful auras and Necromancers that can summon armies of minions.

Diablo II was on the forefront of a new wave in RPG design. The game takes players through five acts and three difficulty settings. For casual, mainstream gamers this amount of content is plenty. But, for the truly devoted, the real game begins only after the player beats the final boss on the hardest difficulty.

Loot is procedurally generated, augmented by hundreds of rare, unique equipment pieces, meaning the game can go on indefinitely. Even to this day, *Diablo II* fans still spend hundreds – or even thousands – of hours online with their friends, killing bosses and clearing endgame levels. They search for the best and rarest items, or the even rarer runes, which can be assembled into equipment so powerful (and so full of new, strange abilities) that it can change the experience of the game entirely. And if a player's sorceress finds a few pieces of high-end barbarian gear, that player can trade it – or decide to play a barbarian, gaining a fresh perspective on the game.

In this, *Diablo II* prefigures the kind of long endgame that would become the norm in *World of Warcraft* and many other MMORPGs. A veteran player will spend far more time playing max-level content than they will in getting to that point, and only a very small group will ever get up to the character level-cap. The endgame of *Diablo II* recalls the ultra-hardcore roguelikes the developers enjoyed, especially *Angband* and *Moria*. Yet, it still allows for more casual gamers to squeeze some extra enjoyment out of the endgame without having to commit to weeks of repetition.

The best judgment that a reviewer can offer about *Diablo II* is simply to echo history's own judgement. It introduced an entire generation of players to both the hack-and-slash RPG and the roguelike. If the sales figures and continued enthusiasm for the game are any measure, the game has something in it for every kind of player. Most games cannot say the same about one genre, let alone two. **PNH**



Inspired by *Civilization II*'s tech trees, *Diablo II* created skill trees, providing three specialisations to each class.

Mods:

Back to Hellfire: Aims to recreate the experience of the original *Diablo*, changing classes, skills, music, etc.

Le Royaume des Ombres: A huge, total modification, it offers a new world to explore, new skills, quests, monsters, crafting recipes and over 2,000 new items.

Hell Unleashed: Enhances the game, increasing the size of dungeons, adding new tougher enemies and making boss fights more complex.

Median XL: One of the most popular *Diablo II* mods, it completely change the skills, adds various new monsters with reworked AI and new unique items, plus "uberquests" and challenges for veteran players.

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 Software was able to build beautiful environments and a compelling story.

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 straightforward but the unique setting created by White Wolf is well-explained and keeps its density.



Christof and an ally battle Cappadocians inside the catacombs of medieval Prague.

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 and 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.

"The game is scaled back from the very early designs (as any game is), but storyteller mode was not something that we would have considered cutting. This was something that we wanted to introduce to the RPG world, and there's no better property for this type of moderated gameplay than *Vampire: The Masquerade*."

– Ray Gresko, *Redemption's project lead*



Storyteller mode allows for multiplayer campaigns controlled by a human GM, in a throwback to the tabletop games.

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. You get wolf form, fireballs, invisibility, summoning, celerity, cauldron of blood, etc. Combinations are pretty fun, and tailoring the disciplines used by your characters usually ends up being as important as the weapon they use, maybe more.

Items 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 and 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 game offers a wild variety of powers, armour, weapons and companions, both medieval and modern.

The polarising 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 rely on techno and rap vibes.

Only experienced by a few people, *Redemption's* multiplayer was extremely original. More than a year before *Neverwinter 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-out 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**

Mods:

The Age of Redemption 2014: Allows you to play the game's single-player campaign in multiplayer.

Within the Darkness: A huge mod that attempts to be more faithful to the source tabletop game.

More mods can be found 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, it's easy to dismiss *Soulbringer* as a yet another *Diablo*-clone. You couldn't be further from the truth, however.

While combat is real-time, it isn't anywhere near the frantic click-fest you'd expect from an Action RPG. It actually strives for the very opposite – to make its melee combat as tactical as it can.



At the right of the screen there are eight slots where you can assign combos, even mixing spells and melee attacks.



The interface is overdesigned and looks very confusing, but it's easy to use once you're used to it.

Each weapon has up to five possible attacks, that differ in a variety of areas like speed, reach, damage type, etc. You can also combine those attacks into combos, presumably tailored 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 precisely, 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 path-finding, 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 five standard elements which 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 – 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.

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**

Grandia II



Game Arts, 2000
Windows, Dreamcast and PS2

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 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 reaches 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 does it feel 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 in 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 out 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 and 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.

Breath of Fire IV



Capcom, 2000
Windows, PS1, PS3, PSP and PS Vita

The *Breath of Fire* series began back in 1993, gaining a lot of popularity among JRPG fans in the SNES and PS1 eras. It then faded away in the 00s after *Breath of Fire V: Dragon Quarter*, a highly controversial (and innovative) tactical RPG designed around dying and restarting multiple times.

Every game in the *BoF* series follows a similar formula: a silent protagonist named Ryu – who can transform into dragons – runs into a cast of colourful anthropomorphic characters and embarks on an epic adventure. However, *Breath of Fire IV* adds a novel element: a parallel plot where you play as Fou-Lu, a powerful ancient warrior who awakens from a long sleep to retake his throne as Emperor.

While the story can be predictable sometimes, especially the way Ryu and Fou-Lu's fates intertwine, it still offers a few surprises (some quite grim).

The graphics go in the opposite direction of most PS1-era games, featuring animated 2D sprites over 3D environments. This allows players to rotate the camera 360° – which can be used to find hidden items, but is quite troublesome in dense areas.

***Breath of Fire IV*'s Windows port was released only in 2003 and can be hard to run on some modern computers. If you're having issues, try using DxWnd.**



The game's narrative is split between Ryu's adventures and Fou-Lu's story, offering a heavy change of tone.

At first glance, *BoF4's* combat is standard JRPG fare, but it has quite a few unique characteristics. Only three characters fight at the front line, but the other characters stay in the back, recovering magic points. You can instantly switch their positions, juggling the party during combat to adapt to various situations.

This is especially important due to the combo system, which allows you to chain attacks to create more powerful spells – e.g. casting an Earth spell and a Fire spell results in the mighty Eruption spell.

Speaking of magic, characters can acquire new skills from enemies. When you defend certain attacks, there's a chance that character will learn to use them. But there's a catch: each skill can only be "equipped" by one party member at a time, so you'll have to choose who can make the most out of it.

Another interesting aspect is how many enemies have "gimmicks" to them, such as shields that must be broken, immunities to certain elements and even pacifist enemies that help you if you don't attack. Some foes can also change forms when hit by certain attacks – a haunted tree stump will catch fire and become more powerful when hit by fire spells.

Character customisation is also deep, especially for a JRPG. You can assign your characters to train under 12 masters hidden across the game. Each one teaches new skills, offers a powerful passive bonus and, most importantly, changes the stat growth on level-ups, allowing you to customise your party. But beware – some masters may decrease defence or HP, turning your characters into glass cannons.

Each master must be found before agreeing to teach you, and they often demand certain feats to be performed, such as dealing more than 1500 damage, chaining a 12-hit combo, donating all your money or finding a secret treasure.



There are many masters your characters can train under, each offering new abilities and stats change at level-ups.



The first hours are very linear, but after a while the map opens up and you can freely travel between regions.



Each new area usually presents a unique challenge, which can either be quickly solved or fully explored for treasures.



In combat the three front characters act while the back ones rest, but you can instantly switch their positions.

Side-goals like those help to hide the linearity of the game. The first few hours are straightforward, but it opens up after a while, allowing players to freely explore the (somewhat small) world, revisit locations and engage in numerous mini-games.

These range from fishing, loading crates and serving food to captaining a ship and races across the desert. There's even a mini-game where you manage a village of fairies, ordering fairies to gather food, chop trees, build houses and shops – like a simplistic RTS –, which unlocks new equipment for sale and even more mini-games to play inside said shops!

Oddly, these serve a bigger purpose, as you gain Game Points for performing well at the mini-games, and these are used to evolve Ryu's dragon forms.

All this is mostly optional, as *BoF4* is designed to offer a pleasing pace, always fresh and free of grinds or halts. Dungeons are a good example: they are quick to explore and usually feature a unique mechanic or puzzle, which can either be solved quickly to proceed or throughly explored in exchange for extra loot.

Judging *Breath of Fire IV* is complicated. In the context of the *Breath of Fire* series, it falls a bit flat next to the excellent previous games. Some characters are memorable, but the world feels dull and a lot was cut or streamlined, from the dragon forms to the dungeon's complexity and even the overall game length.

However, on its own, *BoF4* is a solid game that adds some twists to the traditional JRPG formula and keeps the pace always flowing, never overextending its stay. The narrative split between two points of view is also a novel feature that makes it stands out, even if it surely could've been explored more.

Sadly, the Western releases suffered censorship, with a few scenes removed. Other details were also altered: Scias, the dog-like samurai, is an alcoholic in the original – so drunk he can barely speak – but the translations made him a simple stutterer instead.

Still, being chronologically the first game in the series and the only one available on PC, *Breath of Fire IV* is an easy recommendation to JRPG fans – just be sure to check the rest of the series later. **FE**

***Breath of Fire IV*'s story was adapted into a manga by Ichimura Hitoshi, released in 2008 only in Japan.**

Evil Islands: Curse of the Lost Soul



Nival Interactive, 2000
Windows

***Evil Islands: Lost in Astral* is a stand-alone expansion to *Evil Islands*, released in 2006 by Matilda Entertainment. It was very poorly received in Russia and never released in English.**

Like their earlier games, *Rage of Mages 1* and *2*, Nival's *Evil Islands* is an RTS/RPG hybrid (or "Role-Playing Strategy", as they called it), this time leaning more towards the RPG side.

The game opens with Zak, our protagonist, waking up amidst ruins on a mysterious island. Having no recollection of his past, armed only with a simple bronze dagger, he sets off to discover what happened to him. He soon comes across a village whose residents, awed by his metal dagger, proclaim him to be the Chosen One foretold by legend.

The tutorial area does a good job of explaining the mechanics behind *Evil Islands* – the combat system is real-time-with-pause, with a heavy emphasis on stealth. There are several kinds of movement: walking, the default normal speed; running, which quickly drains your stamina; sneaking and crawling, both of which conceal you from most enemies – provided you don't get too close to their line of sight. Moving stealthily also allows you to perform devastating backstabs, essential for taking out solitary guards and more powerful foes.



Combat can be very difficult, as a lucky critical hit from an enemy can kill a character. Since death is permanent for your companions, you'll reload often.

Many quests in the game hinge on you sneaking past enemies that can kill you in a few hits, so taking note of their positions and patrol routes is the key to victory. However, this doesn't mean the game is all about evading fights. When attacking, you are given a choice of targeting specific body parts: the head gives you a big damage bonus, but is the most difficult to hit; the torso is easier to hit but does little damage; the arms decrease attack and the legs decrease speed.

Health and stamina – used both for running as well as magic – regenerate over time and increase as you gain XP by defeating enemies and completing quests. The game use a classless character system, where XP is used to buy skills, ranging from melee, archery, magic, to speeding up health regeneration, seeing better in the dark, being able to carry more weight, etc. There are three levels to each skill, and when you purchase one, all the other skills will increase in cost, so it's important to plan out what kind of character you want to build.

Evil Islands features a robust crafting system that will allow you to create your own gear and spells from schematics and keystones. The quality of equipment created depends on what kind of materials – bought or gathered from defeated creatures – were used in their construction. Crafted items can also be permanently enchanted with spells, such as Haste or Night Vision.

The Spell Maker allows you to alter the effects of spells, such as empowering them by adding runes that will give them extra duration and extra range, or changing them to only target enemy units, at the cost of making them harder and more expensive to cast.

Unlike many RPGs where you're soon drowning in gold, money remains an issue up until the very end, so making use of custom-made items can be vital, especially if you are playing on the harder difficulty.

"*Rage of Mages* taught us one important thing: that we tried to pack it equally with both role-playing and strategy elements but found out that many people thought of the game as 'a man between two chairs, which didn't have enough of either in it. As a result, we learned that we should stress one element, e.g. role-playing, and enhance it with several elements of other genres, which would make its gameplay innovative and more immersive."

– *Dmitry Zakharov*, *Evil Islands'* lead designer



Quests will often send you to deal with much stronger enemies. You'll have to steal items from them or sneak past them – something rare in RPGs.

Evil Islands' world is divided into several large and interconnected areas. They reset every time you leave them, but some actions – such as killing a key NPC – are permanent. The trick is that you can only change equipment and party members, craft or level up between areas, so you'll have to prepare yourself before heading out, then later head back to reap the rewards.

Over the course of the game, you will visit three distinct islands in search of your identity – primitive Gipath, snowy Ingos and desert-covered Suslanger. Each island also offers several companions that might join you, up to two at a time. Just beware that they won't follow you between islands and can die permanently.

While role-playing options are very limited, the quests are varied and involve, for example, stealing a Lizardmen holy relic, killing off a Cyclops's pigs so he will leave the area, charming a dragon to clear out a nest of harpies for you, stealing a foreman's ledger so you can blackmail a trader, and many more.

This is helped in no small part by the quaint writing – characters all speak in an over-dramatised manner, and behave as if they are in a 1980s cartoon. The voice acting is generally quite good and fitting, with the unfortunate exception of the main character, whose overenthusiastic and strange delivery will probably soon start to grate on your nerves.

The graphics are clear and distinguished-looking, feature a dynamic weather system, day-and-night cycle, wounds that are visible on the character's model and tracks left behind by enemies so you can see which direction they are heading. Overall, it still holds up today.

Even when released, there were objectively better RPGs than *Evil Islands*. While there is nothing revolutionary, it offers a vast, enjoyable world to explore, many hours of gameplay, a challenging combat system, and, most importantly, a fun-loving adventure when games could still be whimsical without being ironic. **VL**



The core gameplay centres around acquiring quests in town and then travelling to their specific areas to complete them.



Evil Islands also has a multiplayer mode, which allows you to create a hero and do random quests with five friends.

Icewind Dale



Black Isle Studios, 2000
Windows and Mac

Playing a CRPG based on *Dungeons & Dragons* is reason enough to make me smile. That's exactly the case with *Icewind Dale*, member of a great Infinity Engine family of outstanding games.

Despite having the same name, and setting, the game bears no relation with R.A. Salvatore's *The Icewind Dale Trilogy* novels staring Drizzt Do'Urden.

It's impossible to talk about *Icewind Dale* without mentioning the *Baldur's Gate* series. I first played *IWD* days after finishing *BG* and *BG2*, two games that completely changed my criteria and forged me as a gamer. Believe me, playing a good game shortly after experiencing two of the best games of all time makes a lot of difference. But make no mistake, despite being eclipsed by *Baldur's Gate II,* which was released in the same year (and by *Diablo II,* released on the exact same day), *Icewind Dale* manages to hold its own.

The game employs an enhanced version of the successful Infinity Engine – sporting some impressive areas and enemies – makes thoughtful use of the rich Forgotten Realms lore and offers players a full party to customise. The campaign lasts from 60 to 80 hours, with a new random loot system encouraging replays and an elaborate story gracefully ornated by Jeremy Soule's soundtrack – one of the best in gaming.



You'll visit many unique locations, from slave pens and a cursed fortress to a gnome village and a giant magical tree.

Instead of customising the main character and playing the role of Bhaal's child (like in *Baldur's Gate*), *Icewind Dale* gives you the opportunity to create and customise your entire group of adventurers – again a party of six characters. This apparently simple change has a deep impact on how the entire game flows – sometimes for better, others for worse. The best thing is the freedom to combine any classes and races you want – for more strategic players, this is heaven. And come on, isn't it fun (and challenging) to play with an entire group of spellcasters?

However, there's a trade off. To offer this level of freedom the designers sacrificed the personal touch of playing a bigger role with the protagonist. Since the entire party plays the main role, there's no room for a single character stand in the centre of the storyline. Plus, the fun of finding new companions and trying to make them happy is also gone. Of course, this doesn't ruin the game at all, but is something to be aware of. The game is clearly more focused towards dungeon-crawling, and works beautifully in this regard.

The game's journey takes place at the eponymous Icewind Dale, a sub-arctic region on the northernmost part of the Sword Coast. It's located near the Spine of the World, a massive mountain range known as a cold, deadly and evil-creatures-infested place. Your party begins in the city of Easthaven, where you join an expedition to investigate some strange happenings in the eastern city of Kuldahar.

It doesn't take long for the first of many unpleasant surprises: the expedition is ambushed by Storm Giants, who create an avalanche that kills the entire company, except for the player's party. The path back to Easthaven is blocked, forcing the party to venture forth to Kuldahar and start the main quest, given by Arundel, an Archdruid.

"*Icewind Dale* was fantastic for me because I had somehow stumbled into my dream job. I didn't know anything about CRPG development, but I knew more about *AD&D* and the Forgotten Realms than anyone outside of TSR/WotC should. We didn't have any leads on the original title, so we sort of just... did things... with Chris Parker [the game's producer] telling us when we were being dumb."

– *Josh Sawyer, Icewind Dale's designer*



Icewind Dale focuses heavily on dungeon-crawling, with huge multi-level areas and over a hundred unique enemies and spells.

Arundel is the first "mentor" found in the game, an important character responsible for almost every quest in the early chapters of the storyline. You'll also come across other interesting characters, like Revered Brother Poquelin, the demon Yxunomei and the Tempus Priest Everard.

Overall, the Forgotten Realms lore is very well explored and, for *D&D* fans, it's incredibly delightful to travel between locations. Some places I just loved, like the Severed Hand – not every game let you visit a cursed ruined fortress that represents an unsuccessful alliance between elves and dwarves.

The *Heart of Winter* expansion was released a few months later, sending players to stop a barbarian horde led by an undead warrior. The expansion added a few new features, such as the "Heart of Fury" difficulty setting, designed for hardcore players, and a few rule tweaks inspired by the 3rd edition of *D&D*, which had just been released.



Icewind Dale doesn't have recruitable NPCs – instead, it tasks players with creating a full of party of six characters.

While *Heart of the Winter* was well-received, fans complained its campaign was too short. So Black Isle released *Trials of the Luremaster,* a free downloadable expansion. A radical departure from the icy regions, it sent players to solve the mysteries of a large haunted castle located in the Anauroch desert.

What stands out as one of the highlights of *Icewind Dale* is the excellent choice of locations and also the way the game makes you travel between interesting places, exploring an amazing region of Faerûn.

That's the main reason for me to play *Icewind Dale* again. But it's far from the only reason why you should play it – the teams at Black Isle and BioWare were like the mythic King Midas: everything they touched was transmuted into gold. **AO**

In 2014, Beamdog released *Icewind Dale: Enhanced Edition*, a remake of the game for modern computers, with new features, widescreen support and an iOS port.

Mods:

Icewind Dale Fixpack: Fix various bugs that weren't addressed by the official patches. Highly recommended.

Icewind Dale Tweak Pack: Contains a series of small changes, from cosmetic details like hiding helmets to various rule changes and new ease-of-use features.

Widescreen Mod: Allows resolutions over 800x600.

Unfinished Business: Restores content that was cut from the game, including dialogue, quests and items.

Auril's Bane: Adds a lot of new content, such as spells, items, creatures, AI scripts, stores and a new quest.

Item Upgrade for Icewind Dale: Allows you to upgrade some of the items in the game, like in *BG2.*

Icewind Dale in Baldur's Gate II: A conversion project that allows you to play *Icewind Dale* using the more popular *Baldur's Gate II* engine.

Summoner



Volition, 2000
Windows, Mac and PS2

Summoner was a launch title for the PS2 and was later ported to PC and Mac. Its 2002 sequel, _Summoner 2_, only came out for the PS2 and GameCube.

The first RPG developed by Volition – known today for their *Red Faction* and *Saint's Row* series –, *Summoner* is rather obscure and forgotten for a variety of reasons. The game has long loading times, awkward combat, flawed AI, unfinished and unbalanced systems and not exactly impressive graphics. However, the setting, story and soundtrack reward you for getting through the long and clunky introduction.



Combat is real-time-with-pause, but based around timing your mouse clicks and key strikes to chain attacks.



Each character has a variety of attacks and spells, but some also have unique skills, such as Joseph's summoning and Flece's sneaking and lock-picking.

The game takes place on two different continents: Medeva (inspired by medieval Europe) and Orenia (reminiscent of China/Japan of the same period). Instead of creating yet another Tolkien-inspired fantasy setting, Volition tried to create its own, and while certain races and designs resemble the familiar concept, the rest of the lore remains rather original, which motivates you to explore the world and learn about its history, events and everyday lives of its characters.

Summoner's story is centred on a young farmer named Joseph. Nine years after accidentally destroying his home village and promising to never use his summoning powers again, Joseph is living a peaceful life in the village of Masad. However, Orenian troops attack the village in search of a boy with a mark of a summoner. With his attempt to escape the village and find his old friend, Yago, begins Joseph's saga, filled with enough twists to keep you entertained until the final credits. Even if the story provides some genuine "I've seen this before" moments, it uses them wisely and sometimes pulls off rather unpredictable situations.

Even though the game is very linear and doesn't offer a lot of choices (which makes it feel like a JRPG sometimes), it offers surprisingly good side-quests. Some require thinking outside the box, and quite a few lead to additional lore details, surprising outcomes and hilarious situations, so don't hesitate to take your time and explore the world around you.

And last, but not least, *Summoner* moves away from traditional fantasy RPGs by replacing orchestral scores with an exciting electronic soundtrack.

If you can look past the exploitable combat system, poor AI and a number of annoying bugs, then give *Summoner* a chance. Its unique setting, interesting story, inspiring soundtrack and well-designed side-quests will pay off any frustration. **ZZ**

Wizards & Warriors



Heuristic Park, 2000
Windows

When D.W. Bradley, the architect behind *Wizardry V-VII*, left Sir-Tech and formed his own company, Heuristic Park, the first thing he released was *Wizards & Warriors,* his preemptive response to the upcoming *Wizardry 8*.

Both games are very similar in many ways – strong, traditional class-based character building, an open world full of dungeons to explore, quests to perform, characters to interact with and phase-based combat. The differences are in the details, but those details are what make these games.

The game's dungeons are excellent, some of the best ever designed and certainly far better than any in *Wizardry 8*. There are so many memorable and cleverly designed areas, some favourites being the Serpent Temple, Shurugeon Castle and the Boogre Lair (which features a thrilling prison breakout).

The combat, a mix of turn-based and real-time, is a fantastic answer to *Wizardry 8*'s unbearably cumbersome, fully turn-based phase system. You can freely act or walk around and enemies' turns will happen concurrently. For everyone who's ever gotten frustrated with *Wizardry*'s painfully slow battles, *Wizards & Warriors* will be a revelation.

The most frustrating quality of the game is its world structure. The game presents large, non-linear areas that the player is free to explore as they want – until you end up where the game doesn't want you yet. *Wizards & Warriors* gates off huge areas until you've progressed far enough in the story to enter them, similar to how the *Grand Theft Auto* games play, a big step back from *Wizardry VII*'s fully open world.

The other major issue lies not in the game itself, but in the difficulty in getting it to run on modern computers – several steps are necessary, including re-encoding its video files. It begs for a re-release.

Regardless, with great combat and level design, a satisfying class and character customisation system (earn advanced classes by performing quests – why don't more games do this?) and a compelling, whimsical world with charming characters, it's at least as good as its nearest neighbour.

Don't overlook *Wizards & Warriors* just because *Wizardry 8* gets all the attention – you'll be surprised at how frequently *Wizardry* gets shown up! **ES**

Getting the game to run on modern PCs is a bit tricky. Install the Unofficial Patch, the *Town AVI Fix* and use dgVoodoo2.



The excellent combat system blends turn-based actions with real-time movement, being both tactical and fast-paced.



There are ten races and four basic classes to create your party from, plus 11 hidden classes you can unlock by completing certain quests or acting in a certain way.

Wizardry 8



Sir-Tech Canada, 2001
Windows and Mac

Sir-Tech couldn't find a publisher for *Wizardry 8*, so they made an exclusivity deal with EB Games: the game was only sold at their stores, which severely limited its reach.

The release of *Wizardry VII* in 1992 was a high point for the series, but also the beginning of Sir-Tech's downfall. Andrew Greenberg, one of *Wizardry*'s creators, sued the company over unpaid royalties – and the aftermath was chaotic.

Sir-Tech closed down and reopened in Canada, while David W. Bradley left the company. A *Wizardry* sequel started to be developed in Australia under the name *Stones of Arnhem,* but the project got cancelled. They then tried to diversify, publishing titles such as *Armed & Delirious* and the *Realms of Arkania* series, as well as creating *Nemesis: The Wizardry Adventure* (1996) – a mediocre multimedia Adventure/RPG that was *Wizardry* in name only. Things kept going badly, and by 1998 Sir-Tech was nearly bankrupt. They closed their publishing branch and kept working on two games: *Jagged Alliance 2* and a new, fully 3D *Wizardry* game.

The concept of a 3D *Wizardry* game – without its original creators or Bradley – seemed doomed to fail. Worse, the game was delayed for years, unable to secure a publisher. Sir-Tech was so starved for funds that they added in-game ads: every time you close *Wizardry 8*, an ad for Falcon Northwest Computers appears.



Wizardry 8 offers a rarely seen depth in its character creation, and its personality system makes the custom characters more unique and memorable than many companions in modern RPGs.

Somehow, despite all this, *Wizardry 8* is amazing. You start by creating a party of six characters, using an upgraded version of *Wizardry VII*'s already excellent system. With 11 races, 15 classes, 40 skills and over 100 spells, it allows for countless party builds. It also removed the need for dice-rolls – you just pick a race, a class and then assign stats and skill points.

But what really sets character creation apart is the personality system. RPGs like *Baldur's Gate* allow you to pick voices for your characters, but *Wizardry 8* offers 36 personalities to choose from – such as Loner, Kind, Burly, Chaotic, etc. You can, for example, make an Eccentric Samurai Elf that talks in third-person, as if he was the narrator of the story. And he'll act that way during the entire game, reacting to battles, events, areas, deaths, etc. – all fully voiced! It's an amazing solution to allow custom yet memorable characters.

Once the game starts, you'll see that *Wizardry 8*'s transition to 3D was similar to *Might and Magic VI's*: the party now moves freely across a large 3D world and enemies are visible in the distance, yet the game still plays like a "blobber", with the party moving as a single unit. However, there's now a formation system, which greatly affects combat – if you place all your fighters at the front, the party's casters will be open to attacks from the sides or the rear. And that will happen often; true to its heritage, *Wizardry 8* is unapologetically hard.

The first few hours, where you create your party and explore the initial dungeon, are easily among the best starting hours in any RPG. The atmosphere is great, party banter is amusing, battles are challenging and the dungeon is filled with traps and secrets that feel natural in this new 3D presentation.

Sadly, as soon as you step out of the dungeon into the infamous Arnika Road, the game's biggest flaw will hit you right in the face: the filler combat.

"We regularly sacrifice *Wizardry* virgins here at the office to test out new theories on them. Do they get it? Do they understand what we're trying to do? Is this easy for them or would it take 40 pages of a manual's help to comprehend? So far in our design, the game is clearly a *Wizardry*, believe me, Linda [Currie] and I would be super vocal if it weren't, but it does have new things, new touches, that people have wanted for years."

– *Brenda Romero, Wizardry 8's designer*



The dialogue system is one of the richest in all RPG history. It's based on keywords that you can type in, factors in your reputations, allows you to trade, charm, steal or recruit NPCs and it's fully voiced.

The game's large, open world is connected by several roads and paths, crawling with monsters that not only respawn, but also scale to your level.

Moreover, while the phase-based combat does a great job at updating the series' formula, its animations are excruciatingly slow. Do not play *Wizardry 8* without using mods to hasten the animations, or you'll want to rage-quit every time a large group of enemies appear.

These flaws, combined with a spike in difficulty, is why many players never managed to cross Arnika Road. A shame, as *Wizardry 8* quickly recovers its brilliance.

Your goal is to reach the legendary Cosmic Forge (a story that began back in *Wizardry VI*), and this can be achieved by yourself or with the aid of some of the NPCs and warring factions that inhabit the world. Many quests offer multiple solutions, and the game's rich dialogue system provides plenty of flexibility – you can even recruit friendly NPCs, expanding your party up to eight characters. Just remember that they each have their own personalities and objectives.

Wizardry 8 offers, but also demands, a lot from players – if you're clever, you can form a large alliance or play as a double-agent; if you're foolish, you might end up hated by everyone and be forced to fight your way through. It's not easy, but it's very rewarding.

Thus, *Wizardry 8* was praised by critics and loved by old-school fans, but never got popular. Regardless, it was too late – Sir-Tech had dissolved. More than a commercial title, the game became a farewell to fans.

For them, developers showed a great deal of care: you could import your party from *Wizardry VII*, starting in different areas depending on how you finished that game. It even ties loose ends for those who carried their party all the way from *Wizardry VI* – a game released over a decade earlier!

While series like *Ultima* and *Might and Magic* ended on a sour note, *Wizardry 8* is for many players the best entry in an already venerable series. It remains a lone star – no other RPG ever followed in its footsteps – but that only makes it shine even more brightly. **FE**

Several mods for *Wizardry 8* were made using the Cosmic Forge tool. We recommend starting with the *Wizardry 8* Enhancements mod, as it fixes animation speed and improves the overall balance of the game.



Combat feels like a natural evolution of *Wizardry*, adding formations, movement and a much more agile interface.



Wizardry 8 gives detailed information to its players, with inventory, stats, spells and skills spread across four pages.

Anachronox



Ion Storm, 2001
Windows

***Anachronox* has such striking storytelling that its cinematic director, Jake Hughes, later edited all the game's cutscenes into a two-hour machinima movie, named *Anachronox: The Movie*.**

Is uncontrollable babbling a viable combat option? Can a planetary object be a viable party member? Is male exotic dancing a reliable way to earn money in RPGs? How come one of the best Japanese RPGs was developed in the West? Play *Anachronox* and all of the above will be answered.

Released by Ion Storm studios right after *Daikatana*'s massive failure and *Deus Ex*'s huge critical success, *Anachronox* never got the attention it deserved, despite the fact that it's the second (and, sadly, last) great game developed by the studio. Designed and directed by Tom Hall, *Anachronox* is a story- and character-driven Adventure/RPG with a lot of humour, emphasis on exploration, and combat reminiscent of Japanese console RPGs.

The game was built on the *Quake II* engine, which was already outdated by 2002 and the character progression system is nothing to write home about, yet somehow *Anachronox* is one of my most memorable experiences in gaming.

Why is that, you ask? Because interacting with the world and its various characters is nothing short of delightful.



Customising your characters comes down to the use of accessories and, more importantly, equipping MysTech, which provides unique and powerful abilities.

As soon as I entered the universe of *Anachronox* I was swept into an unforgettable cyberpunk world, where danger, action and humour go hand-in-hand. The presentation and art direction are excellent. Areas ooze with atmosphere and variety. The camera work is exceptional and certainly groundbreaking for the time, while the moody electronic music offers some really memorable tracks.

You play as Sylvester "Sly Boots" Bucelli, once a hotshot PI, now a down-on-his-luck drunkard, owing a big debt to the local crime lord. His only companions are his deceased secretary (digitised into a flying assistant, which also doubles as part of the UI) and a robotic sidekick without batteries.

Trying to find a job worthy of his deductive skills (and to prove that he's more than just a bum with a storage space for an office) he stumbles upon the elusive MysTech, a technology left behind by an ancient alien race. Along the way, Sly will meet a grumpy old man, a heretic scientist, an old flame, an alcoholic ex-hero and other, even more exotic characters.

The writing is brilliant, with enough science-fiction discussions to spur my curiosity about the theories mentioned. More importantly, *Anachronox* is one of the funniest games ever created, but it knows when to break the chuckles up with its fair share of heart-wrenching tragedy. The game's biggest accomplishment is that it manages to strike a sublime balance between humour, cyberpunk-noir intrigue, and dramatic space opera.

From the start you feel part of a grand space adventure, where even the most improbable people and places are believable. The depth of the characters and lore are remarkable, especially for a game that at the same time manages to make you chuckle or laugh out loud every two minutes or so.

"I wanted to bring strong characters and a bizarre epic story onto the PC, really, a console-style RPG to the PC. I was strongly influenced by *Chrono Trigger* – a classic game. I wanted the characters to really have things happen that were important to them, and to create a new, consistent universe."

– Tom Hall, Anachronox's creator



The combat system is heavily inspired by JRPGs, but places a great deal of importance on movement. For example, melee characters must move near enemies to attack.

Instead of random encounters, battles are all scripted and tied to a believable world. The combat system should be familiar to anyone who has played Japanese RPGs, with characters facing off against enemies on a separate field. There is a small bit of tactical thought involved, since movement is hindered by the limited size of the combat board.

An initiative bar gradually builds up for each character and they can act once it's full, just like the classic *Final Fantasy* ATB system. Possible actions include attacks, special skills or magic, the use of items, moving to a different spot on the board or, in some rare cases, manipulating the environment to your advantage. There is hardly any enemy AI to speak about, but it is still a great idea to protect your weaker characters.

Outside combat, you explore the multiple worlds of *Anachronox* from a third-person view, interacting with its various seedy residents to receive information, quests and lots of verbal abuse.

As you gather more companions you'll find out that each one has its own special abilities, which can be used in combat, quest-solving and uncovering secret areas. Lock-picking, hacking and aggressive jabbering are only few of the skills that will be at your disposal. These unique skills can be upgraded if the right trainers/means are discovered.

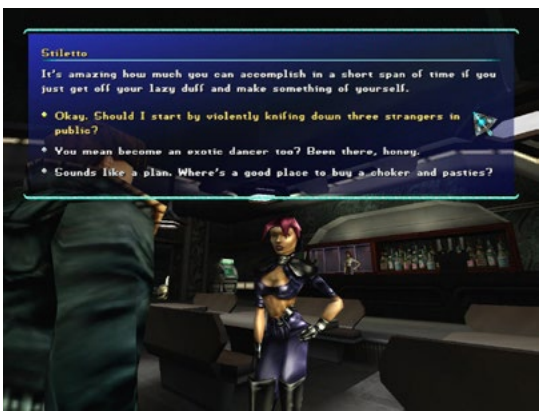
Like any decent PI, you'll also have to use your camera to photograph clues and evidence needed for your assignments. *Anachronox* is big and ripe for exploration and as you move on through the game you'll eventually get access to space travel and other planets. The game offers a huge world with a lot of content and nary a dull moment.

It is obvious that *Anachronox* was a labour of love, created under circumstances that allowed free reign of creativity and encouraged ambitious goals. It's one of those unique games that takes you into its world and leaves a lasting impression. In conclusion, this is a fun experience you shouldn't miss. **GD**

***Anachronox*'s storyline ends in a cliffhanger of sorts, as the game was planned to be longer, but had to be cut due to time constraints. A sequel/expansion was planned, but the game's sales were poor. Tom Hall still often talks about returning to finish it.**



You'll come across several mini-games. Some are tied to skills, like lock-picking, but others are much more usual.



Anachronox's writing manages to achieve a great mix of humour, drama, hard sci-fi and epic space opera.

Arcanum:

Of Steamworks & Magick Obscura



Troika, 2001
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 fewer than eight 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 flavour 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's monster with huge bonuses and penalties across multiple stats and skills.



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.

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 rumours as well, that serve both as leads into obscure side-quests and as subtle hints about future areas and the game's antagonist.

"Leonard [Boyarsky], Jason [Anderson], and I had made character systems before, but, in the case of *Arcanum*, we wanted the system to reflect the setting. This meant that not only would there need to be magic spells and technological skills of some kind, but there would need to be a mechanic that measured the character's aptitude with each. We wanted the struggle between the magic and tech that was taking place in the world to exist within every character as 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".

Arcanum's setting is quite unusual for a CRPG. It is high fantasy set during the Industrial Revolution, resulting in a widespread conflict – the dichotomy between Magic and Technology. This conflict is the lens through which much of the game's content is seen and it is reinforced within the gameplay itself; your dwarven technologist might craft swords and pistols from scrap, but magic spells and potions aren't going to have much effect on him; and your highly magical half-elf better learn to teleport, because he won't be allowed to board trains anymore.

The scope and scale of *Arcanum* is astounding, and so it's hardly surprising that it was 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 a result, combat is quite unsatisfactory and unbalanced, becoming a chore during some of the larger, combat-filled dungeons.

On the bright side, Sierra did supply Troika with the talents of Ben Houge, who composed one of the most memorable, sophisticated and thoughtful soundtracks ever produced for a game. His string quartet pieces set a relaxed pace while managing to capture a sense of the grand scale of *Arcanum*. This, married with the 19th-century steampunk aesthetic, creates a thoroughly enjoyable atmosphere.

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, *Arcanum* 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**

The *Arcanum Multiverse Edition* is a massive mod pack with some of the best fixes and changes made by fans. It's highly recommended, even for a first playthrough.



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.

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 setting and story, since it's essentially "*Escape from New York*... with swords!". You're just a bloke, who's nameless for all intents and purposes because nobody even lets you introduce yourself. You're thrown into a prison mining colony surrounded by a one-way-entry forcefield, where the prisoners managed to rebel and take over the whole establishment. After that, you are beaten senseless ("baptised") by a bunch of guards 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 emphasised the dichotomy between the vulgar and the fantastical very well, as you'd be coming across various really colourful 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 handcrafted, 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 if 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 thriving 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 adopt 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 fairy-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 levelled up, essentially nothing happened. You only got a bunch of skill points that required visits to 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 levelling 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 be lying 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, new models and UI. It's currently in development.**

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 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.

Diccuric: A huge mod with an entirely new campaign and world, both about the same size as the original game. Uses 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-and-slash game, with a very strict sense of timing and a high difficulty, and 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 in 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 specialise 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 armour in the game. The sluggish Barbarian is a powerhouse using gigantic two-handed swords and has 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.



The lighting engine remains impressive to this day, a great accomplishment for a small independent Spanish studio.

On 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-and-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 notwithstanding.

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 armour are hidden through the levels, making your character a bit harder to kill. A small inventory allows you to stock a handful of health and power-up potions for the most difficult passages. The RPG aspect is limited to a levelling up system automatically boosting your life, power and unlocking new combos. Levelling up also refills your life bar making it a godsend 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, with some levels being pretty labyrinthine while others are just a succession of arenas. Fortunately, the general aesthetic is much better.

"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, where 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 [...]"

- José Luis Vaello, Severance's lead artist



The combat will feel familiar to *Dark Souls* fans, but Severance adds combos, breakable shields, weapon throwing, mutilations and blood galore.

The game will send you to very different and exotic places such as Arabic oases, abandoned fortresses and deep wilderness. Doors, gates and various mechanisms will always bar your way so you will spend 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 makes 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 litres of blood. Characters can be brutally dismembered, and you can then use the body parts lying around as weapons. It's pretty satisfying and completely ridiculous at the same time.

Mixing classic deathtraps of games like *Dungeon Master* with hack-and-slash mechanics, *Severance* was reconsidered these last years in light of the *Demons/Dark Souls* series. While I doubt that there was 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 great 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 must fight increasingly powerful enemies. Highly customisable and replayable, with various maps. A must-play.

Fugitive: An excellent multi-chapter campaign, has amazing level design and adds new RPG elements.

Dwarf Wars: You must protect a large 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.

Geneforge



Spiderweb Software, 2001
Windows and Mac

The gorgeous illustrations featured in the game (such as the one above) are done by 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, what you have is a personal experience, something built by the choices you have made.

The first few steps in *Geneforge* did not 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 continue throughout the series, and to my dissatisfaction, is never resolved in black-and-white fashion.



The writing in *Geneforge* is solid, and choices you'll face never have obvious answers.

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 favourite, 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 battles can get repetitive, there's a nice feeling of the progression which I feel an RPG needs. As the games progresses, the battles will play out differently depending on your character build.

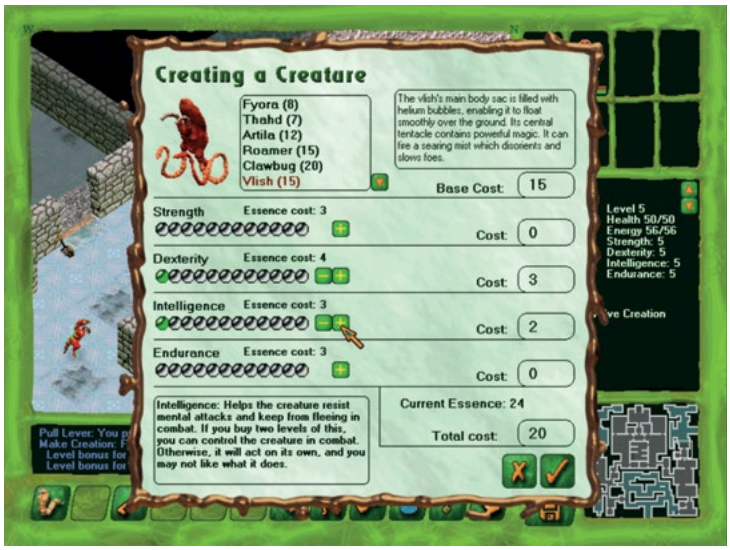
Shaping is what differentiates *Geneforge* from a typical fantasy setting; you are creating and toying with life, and, as the series progresses, the story reveals a more technological approach to creating creatures. The "art" of shaping often blurs the line between sci-fi and fantasy. Shaping could be 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 spell-casting 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 defined by the prowess of your character and the allies you have made.

"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 fashion 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 costs, 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 a 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 outcome that you might think.

For me, the first game was just a starting point of 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 five-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**

The *Graphics Enhancement mod* replaces *Geneforge*'s amateurish UI, fixes graphical inconsistencies and updates some of its sprites.



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.

Pool of Radiance:
Ruins of Myth Drannor



Stormfront Studios, 2001
Windows

If you're willing to try the game, be sure to patch it to version 1.4 and install the Speed Control Utility.

Search for the worst CRPG ever made and you'll likely find *Ruins of Myth Drannor*. As Ubisoft's attempt to ride on the success of *Baldur's Gate*, this infamous game promised to take the Infinity Engine formula forward by employing 3D graphics and the recently released *D&D 3rd Edition* ruleset.

Plus, it was developed by a team of Gold Box veterans – titled and advertised as a fully turn-based successor to the beloved classic *Pool of Radiance*!



Combat includes features such as attacks of opportunity, feats and even morale checks, but the slow speed and bad UI remove most fun out of it.



Even looting is a dull process, as items all look the same and rarely offer anything besides a small armour, stat or damage increase.

Sadly, excitement became disappointment when the game was released. You start by creating a party of four characters (two extra NPCs can later be added), but the *D&D 3rd Edition* rules are heavily defaced – you can't play as Gnome, classes like Bard, Druid and Wizard are missing and the few skills and feats available are all automatically chosen based on your class.

Set in the ruins of the long-lost Elven city of Myth Drannor, the game doesn't have many role-playing options. It's a combat-focused dungeon crawl, with some of the largest dungeon floors you'll see. But while there are some nice outdoor areas later on, the game first forces you to explore extremely dull underground mazes, filled with hordes of the same few monsters.

Combat is a decent translation of *D&D*, crippled by a horrible interface. You can't see nor control the character's path, the AI is unstable and there's a short time limit on each character's turn – a useful feature in multiplayer, but a sin in single-player mode.

To make matters worse, the game plays glacially slow. Characters all take forever to walk, cast or attack (an undead group can take multiple minutes per turn) and you'll spend hours slowly backtracking gigantic mazes with unreliable maps and even worst path-finding.

Luckily, fans managed to create a handy mod to increase the game's speed. With it, *Ruins of Myth Drannor* becomes an actually playable experience, and those desperate for a turn-based *D&D* dungeon crawl might even find some enjoyment here – if they can endure the sheer boredom of the initial dungeon.

To crown its reputation, *RoMD* came with a wide range of bugs, including a legendary one: uninstalling the unpatched game could erase some of your system files, forcing you to reinstall Windows.

Objectively, there are worst CRPGs. But few can rival the disappointment – or dullness – seen here. **FE**

ZanZarah: The Hidden Portal



Funatics Development, 2002
Windows

Have you ever imagined a cross between *Quake* and *Pokémon?* I bet not. And you probably also never heard of *ZanZarah*, an obscure German game about a teenage girl visiting a land of fairies. What these things have in common? Well, everything.

In *ZanZarah* you play as Amy, who goes from London to a magical land of fairies, elves and wonder. This enchanted world is threatened by an ancient evil, your arrival was foretold by a prophecy, and all that. Your quest here is to explore the land, help the locals and gather a party of magical creatures to save the world. To recruit these creatures you must first weaken one in combat and then throw a special ball to capture it. That sounds very familiar, no?

And it doesn't stop there. *ZanZarah* offers over 70 magical creatures – including animals, dragons and demons – spread into 12 types: Fire, Water, Nature, Air, Stone, Ice, Chaos, Energy, Psi, Metal, Dark and Light. Their attacks have the classic effective/non-effective relationships, and in true *Pokémon* fashion you also get to choose your initial fairy from three types. They even evolve after reaching a certain level.

But here's the big twist: unlike *Pokémon*, you won't battle in turn-based combat, but rather in FPS arenas with elaborate layouts, firing magic blasts at enemies while strafing, dodging and flying!

There are no guns, but each fairy can equip up to four different spells – two offensive and two passive. The game features 120 spells with a wide range of effects, damage, fire rate and mana pool. Spells must be charged before firing – some allow for quick bursts, others are very slow – but charge too much and it will backfire. All of this keeps battles interesting, as you'll have to figure out the best loadout to use depending on the arena layout or the enemy type you face.

To crown everything, the soundtrack is great. Composed by King Einstein, the combat music is exciting, the exploration music is charming and the main theme is a nice melody sung by Karina Gretere.

ZanZarah is a very obscure game, somewhat hard to run on modern computers, and its mix of FPS arena combat and fairies is so odd that is hard to say what audience it's aimed at. Regardless, whoever decides to give it a try is likely to find something to enjoy. **FE**

***ZanZarah*'s soundtrack is freely available for download at the game's website www.zanzarah.de**



Wild fairies can suddenly appear while you explore the colourful world, and locals may give quests or challenge you to a duel.



Your party can hold up to five fairies, and each can have four spells equipped, that have varying requirements and affinities. Some fairies can also equip spells from multiple elements.

Divine Divinity



Larian Studios, 2002
Windows and Mac

Larian's first RPG was an called *The Lady, the Mage & the Knight*, developed in partnership with Attic Entertainment. It was cancelled in 1999 and salvaged as *Divine Divinity*. An early demo and design documents were released as extras on the *Divinity Anthology*.

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-and-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 finding them. The easiest one to notice is the character system, which is much more RPG-y than your average hack-and-slash. 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.



Combat is very similar to *Diablo*, but you can pause at any time.

The game also tracks your reputation (influenced 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.

"[...] The RPGs I enjoy the most are all about good character development. To achieve that I figured certain things need to be in place – the freedom to develop your character in a way that fits your preferred playing style (Freedom), motivation to invest yourself in that character (Motivation) and an environment that reacts in a fitting way to how you developed your character (Universe/Enemies)."

– Swen Vincke, Larian's founder and CEO



The writing is always amusing, and has grown to become one of Larian's trademarks.

Everything is not just generally well-written, but the dialogues are often 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-and-slash combat, *Divinity* might not be up your alley. I did like, however, how it can even get pretty challenging at times, 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 addictive!".

It's also the start of the whole *Divinity* series. *Beyond Divinity* (2004) was a mediocre sequel, but the next titles are definitely worth more than a casual look (especially *Divinity 2* and *Divinity: Original Sin*). 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 was composed by Kirill Pokrovsky, the late Russian musician, whose mix of orchestrations and new age electronics made 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.



Beyond Divinity had your hero soul-bound to a sarcastic Death Knight, with you both having to cooperate to survive.

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 hangouts 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 any detail. Administrative businesses, libraries, treasuries and offices take up space next to the rowdy taverns and ghastly magic shops.

OpenMW is a project seeking to recreate *Morrowind* in a new open engine, allowing for more mods, improvements and Linux and Mac versions. You can follow them at www.openmw.org



The interface is the last in the series made with PCs in mind, making great use of tooltips and multiple resizeable windows.

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 a 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 armour, and it's only flavour 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 flavour text the player can skip. But what this massive amount of detail does do well (and indeed, its very purpose in 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 build-up for a divine pay-off 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.

"I often liken *Morrowind* to *Moby Dick*, while *Oblivion* is *Titanic*, the movie. *Morrowind* was a vast, overly ambitious project, but glorious in many ways — but tragically inaccessible as a result. It had a much smaller audience because it was odder and less generic and less what people expect. With *Oblivion*, we knew what people expected and deliberately made our product a lot more comfortable for them."

– Ken Rolston,
Morrowind's lead designer



Morrowind's dialogue 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 organised 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 Vvadenfell. Eventually some overpowering stat progression happens after Level 10 that makes combat and walking much faster, and during that time your understanding of Vvardenfell will also increase immensely. You'll 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 flavour 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 *The Elder Scrolls III: 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**

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 bundled into a convenient install pack.



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.

Arx Fatalis



Arkane Studios, 2002
Windows and Xbox (Linux and Mac)*

Originally pitched as *Ultima Underworld 3* by one Raphael Conlantonio and rejected by EA, *Arx Fatalis* was the result of Mr. Conlantonio founding Arkane Studios to bring his pitch to life.

Much like its inspiration, the game takes place entirely underground in an eight-level dungeon involving both traditional dungeon-crawling and social interactions in populated locations. The reason for this particular setup is that an ice age forced the survivors of this fantasy world to take shelter in underground enclaves that hold what is left of civilisation. Arx, a converted mine with many politically divided species crammed together, is one such place and the centre of the game's narrative.

The early levels of *Arx Fatalis* emphasise politics and investigative quests, such as dealing with goblins and their troll workers, while later levels offer adventurous dungeon-delving, such as a huge crypt that manages to deliver a surprisingly tense atmosphere. There's even a level where the game takes a trip into survival horror territory.



The character system is simple, employing four stats and nine skills. There isn't much equipment variety, but you can enchant your weapons.

The quest design is sparse, with only a handful of contextual side content, but with many non-specified goals, like robbing a bank or following cryptic scavenger hunts – player agency and exploration being emphasised instead of direct instructions.

All of this results in an eclectic pacing which means that, while the game is short for an RPG, clocking in at about 20 hours, there is a great deal of variation. This is reflected in the progress system as well, only three of the nine skills that define the player's avatar being decidedly combat-focused. Since these can be increased without any restriction, versatility is heavily encouraged.

Balance leaves a lot to be desired though; Ethereal Link shows enemy statistics and boosts your magical power regeneration, but, given the simple combat and the high amount of potions available, it can be safely ignored. In dire contrast, the indispensable Object Knowledge is the only way to create, enchant, repair and even identify items, which cannot be used otherwise.

While *Arx Fatalis* isn't overly combat focused, the moments where it does feature fighting for extensive periods of time are decidedly one of its weaker parts. Melee and range combat are decidedly mediocre but stealth is surprisingly well-done with it having a shadow-based detection gradient. A clear nod to *Thief* by Looking Glass, the same studio that made *Ultima Underworld*. Sadly the game in no way supports a pure stealth approach. Still, skulking through the shadows can be a pretty tense experience, especially at early levels.

Now onto one of the game's best aspects: the magic system. Each spell is cast by using specific runes, which need to be manually drawn using the mouse, similar to Peter Molyneux's *Black & White*. The effects that can be achieved are quite numerous and frankly outstanding considering this a studio's first game.

***In 2011 Arkane Studios released the source code of *Arx Fatalis* as free software. From it was created *Arx Libertatis*, a cross-platform, open-source port of the game, with various bug fixes.**

"Extreme honour is definitely what we feel whenever *Arx* is mentioned as the successor to the [*Ultima*] *Underworld* series. We've always had a lot of admiration for the Looking Glass spirit, so the connection with *Arx* is not an accident at all."

– Raphael Colantonio, Arx Fatalis project director and Arkane Studios' CEO



Arx Fatalis is not your standard, combat-focused dungeon crawler. You'll spend a lot of time dealing with the various races, solving puzzles and exploring.

Levitation, telekinesis, invisibility, ignite/douse fire, confuse, summon demon, create food and an invisible eye to scout ahead are just a few of the spells. In fact, there are so many such effects that the content can't match up to support their use – the game can be finished using only the fireball spell and that is a damn shame considering how much work must have gone into making the 40-something spells, especially since many of them are non-combat oriented.

What holds all these elements together is the environmental manipulation that in many ways defines *Arx Fatalis*. You can take flour, add water and then put it near a fire which will cause it to rise, thus making bread. Words cannot describe the child-like sense of wonder this inspired. The interface recalls adventure games, meaning that most interaction is done by directly clicking on the environment, not navigating abstract menus. This does wonders for making the world feel like something that the player must actually engage with.

One particular quest remains memorable to me due, where you have to go through a multi-step process to make a sword, from mining the ore, getting it to the smelter and then having to operate all sorts of machinery to get the job done. The important aspect of this type of interaction is not realism, since dough doesn't turn into bread in five seconds, but verisimilitude. Players understand the world by interacting with it.

Arx Fatalis is a love letter to Looking Glass and *Ultima Underworld*, with Arkane wearing their influence on their sleeves. The financial risks and challenges of starting a studio from the ground up makes Mr. Conlanonio's journey to create this game all the more commendable.

It is hard to say what is sadder: that *Arx Fatalis* is one of the last design-focused representatives from arguably the best period of PC gaming, or that more that, a decade since its release, it remains unmatched in certain depths. Regardless, it remains a must-play hidden gem. **LL**

***Arx - End Of Sun* is a free, fan-made prequel to *Arx Fatalis*, currently under development.**



The game employs a simulationist approach, where you use anvils to repair items, mix ingredients to cook, etc...



Spells are cast by drawing runes with the mouse, but you can memorize some and instantly cast them later.

Icewind Dale II



Black Isle Studios, 2002
Windows and Mac

There aren't huge mods for *IWD2*, but Almateria's *IWD2 Fixpack* solves some bugs, and the *Tweak Pack* adds some improvements such as infinite stacking and extra merchants.

Icewind Dale II was the last of the Infinity Engine games, and one of the last titles published by Interplay, developed during a time when the company was imploding due to poor business choices.

The whole project was allowed just ten months of development time, and, according to lead designer Josh Sawyer, just two days to develop the story and plot. Under these conditions, it's quite a wonder that such a complete product was ever shipped.



Enemies make much better use of tactics, building barricades, setting traps and even riding worgs into battle.



The 3rd edition *D&D* ruleset adds many changes including the ability to play as sub-races like the Drow, which are more powerful but have other disadvantages.

As the swansong of the Infinity Engine, *IWD2* was (surprisingly) designed not for a new potential audience but for experienced players, featuring a pleasing difficulty level. Most encounters are challenging and well-crafted, making clever use of spells, terrain, abilities and positioning.

As in the previous *Icewind Dale*, you create a party of up to six heroes, but *IWD2* is one of the first games to use the (then new) 3rd edition *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset, rather than the *AD&D* 2nd Edition rules that had been featured in every other IE game. This includes the addition of a more flexible multi-classing system, sub-races, feats and skills – including dialogue skills such as Intimidate and Bluff.

Given the development schedule this seems more foolish than ambitious, but the change was well implemented and gameplay remains just as smooth and intuitive as the previous iterations.

The story begins in the harbour of Targos, one of the Ten Towns of Icewind Dale, as your party joins in the defence of the town against a siege by goblins. From there, the adventurers will set out on a quest to defeat the Legion of the Chimera, and restore peace to the Dale, finding that the shadows of the past rest uneasily in these harsh lands.

The detailed artwork of the game is brought to life and enhanced by an evocative Inon Zur soundtrack, which at points matches Jeremy Soules's masterful work on the original, and the atmosphere of the game at points also matches its prequel.

Icewind Dale II is a flawed game of highs and lows. The siege of Targos is definitely the former, but there is a tiresome grind through the middle levels of this game, which might be explained as padding put there to assure longevity of play time. This remains, however, a fitting goodbye to the Infinity Engine. **NT**

Might and Magic IX



New World Computing, 2002
Windows

A game is only as good as the ones you compare it to. Nothing could be truer for *Might and Magic IX*, a game I nearly overlooked due to overwhelmingly negative reviews. I'm glad I didn't!

To be clear: *M&M9* is by no means the best game in the series. Nearing bankruptcy, 3DO rushed out of the door what lead designer Timothy Lang himself described as "pre-alpha at best". Bugs and crashes were so frequent that it was almost unplayable, while the game's shift to fully 3D graphics lacked polish and detail, with repetitive models and weird mirrored textures. Nevertheless, it did many things right.

First thing you'll notice is the new class system. At character creation you can only choose between Fighter or Adept, but 12 specialised classes are later available by completing special quests. Skills and abilities are still acquired via trainers scattered around the world, but now some spells require two (or even three!) different skills to be cast. Although the levelling system is artificially capped at around Level 140 (as training becomes too expensive), it worked well enough to keep me motivated to grind on and reach insane levels of power, *Might and Magic*-style.

Combat was likewise overhauled. Gone are the legions of goblins and other critters forming lines to kill you. *M&M9* focuses on smaller encounters, with fewer enemies. As such, the AI is vastly improved: flying enemies will circle around you, Grunts will throw daggers, while stronger enemies revive their fallen comrades. Most are simple, but still distinctive.

While the initial dungeons are forgettable, later ones range from good to borderline great. One late-game dungeon is especially memorable, with armies of liches giving you a run for your money. Also, the game features a huge array of new weapons, with all kinds of status effects to equip and use.

There are also some funny side-quests, and the non-existing story is almost *Monty Python*-esque in its randomness, with an old hag casually giving you a world-saving quest without any further explanation.

So, is *Might and Magic IX* worth a shot? That depends. If you only play polished RPGs then no, there are much better games out there. If, however, you want to experience what the *M&M* series could have become, then by all means give it a try. **DF**

Fans created the *1.3 community patch* to fix *M&M9*. While the patch is excellent, some of the game's issues remain unsolved.



Combat can be played either in real-time or in turn-based mode. While both are agile, casting various spells or using items is cumbersome.



You're limited to two classes at character creation, but can later specialise into 12 other classes by performing special quests.

Neverwinter Nights



BioWare, 2002
Windows, Mac and Linux

Beamdog released the *Neverwinter Nights: Enhanced* Edition in 2018, adding improved graphics, better compatibility with modern PCs and promises of constant updates over time.

BioWare carved its name in history with the creation of *Baldur's Gate I* and *II*, which are frequently brought up as the best of examples of transitioning RPGs from tabletops to computers.

Naturally, this lead to a great deal of expectations when *Neverwinter Nights* was announced, especially since it was another fantasy RPG, based on the 3rd edition of *D&D* this time around. Most people assumed it would be the successor to the venerable *Baldur's Gate*, but when the game launched it quickly became apparent things weren't so simple.

The mainstream saw it as BioWare's greatest achievement to date, streamlining gameplay for accessibility while retaining what makes *D&D* great. On the other hand, a large part of the RPG community found it to be a dumbed-down sham which didn't only fail as a successor to BioWare's previous works but was a terrible game all around. To understand these two perspectives a step back is required.

Parties are a core aspect of most tabletop RPGs. Usually each player controls a single character, with the exception of the Dungeon Master who controls as many as needed for each scenario.



The game uses the 3rd edition *D&D* ruleset and offers an extensive range of races, classes, spells, weapons, armour and items for players to experiment with.

Since the majority of CRPGs are single-player experiences, they solved this by placing the player in charge of multiple characters at once. He/she is all heroes at once, controlling them as they go through the content made by the developers – which could be considered an inflexible Dungeon Master.

Not every CRPG is like this but most are, especially in the West. *Baldur's Gate* falls squarely in this category. *Neverwinter Nights* does not.

In *NWN* the player only controls a single character. Combat is still real-time-with-pause, just like in *Baldur's Gate*, but companions are restricted to one at a time (two with the expansions) and can only be given general orders, which is more akin to shouting directions than taking direct control.

The reason for this controversial change was the ambition to emulate the true pen-and-paper experience by creating of a multiplayer-focused RPG engine.

The project was built around the idea that the player would make a character and go online, joining a module where other players would meet and form a party, while a human Dungeon Master controlled their adventures. It was meant to be a 1:1 conversion of physical role-playing games into digital form.

To make this possible, the tools not only had to be powerful, but also simple to use. Anyone should be capable of running a campaign, editing the content on-the-fly and even creating entirely new campaigns.

This lead to an incredible engine with amazing modding capability. Players could play with a handful of friends online, but also create "permanent worlds" – customisable micro-MMOs with up to 96 players. Meanwhile, the Aurora Toolset allowed anyone to create their own adventures, something which can be attested by the absolutely stunning amount (and quality) of mods that were made over the years.

"The toolset has affected many, many decisions along the way. Tiles. The entire reason to use a tile-based system was for the toolset, for ease of use in creation. We don't want people to have to learn to use an app like *3D Studio Max* if they want to create an adventure. We want people to go in, create an adventure, jump, test it and have fun."

– *Trent Oster, NWN's lead designer*



While the graphics have aged significantly, *NWN*'s camera and interface are still quite efficient – an impressive feat for an early 3D game.

But all of this came at a cost – most of the five years of development was spent on the engine itself rather than the content. The result was that the game's campaign was phoned in, to say the least.

The story revolves around a devastating plague gripping the city of Neverwinter – you must find the culprits and defeat the mandatory ancient evil at the end. The whole thing feels like a starting *D&D* module that drags on for far too long, aggressively ordering you to collect countless McGuffins. Combine this with some absolutely abysmal encounter design, where the vast majority of combat can only be described as filler, and you have something closer to a tech demo.

Fortunately, BioWare released two expansions in 2003 which showed them getting better at creating quality content. *Shadows of Undrentide* begins a new Level 1 adventure, as you hunt for a series of artefacts stolen from your tutor. Competent but nothing special. *Hordes of the Underdark* pits you against a Drow army invasion lead by their queen, the Valsharess.

HotU can easily be described as one of BioWare's best works – each chapter is laser focused, whether it's dungeon-crawling through the legendary *D&D* location Undermountain or exploring the mysterious Underdark and its terrible denizens.

If you take the launch version of *Neverwinter Nights*, bereft of all the content that came afterwards, then it's clear that it's an underwhelming product. But BioWare aggressively advertised that you weren't buying a simple game inside a box – *NWN* is above all a platform for countless adventures.

And it paid off. While the original campaign is best ignored, playing *Shadows of Undrentide* and *Hordes of the Underdark* back-to-back will give a more than satisfying journey from Level 1 to godhood. From there you can jump to the smaller premium modules or try some of the greatest mods ever made.

Just keep something in mind: they are that good in part because BioWare sacrificed so much for them to be possible. **LL**

Financial issues at Interplay made BioWare change publishers to Atari. This led to big changes in the game's plot. A leaked document shows it was much more ambitious, with a madness meter, class-specific tutorials and an epic scope.

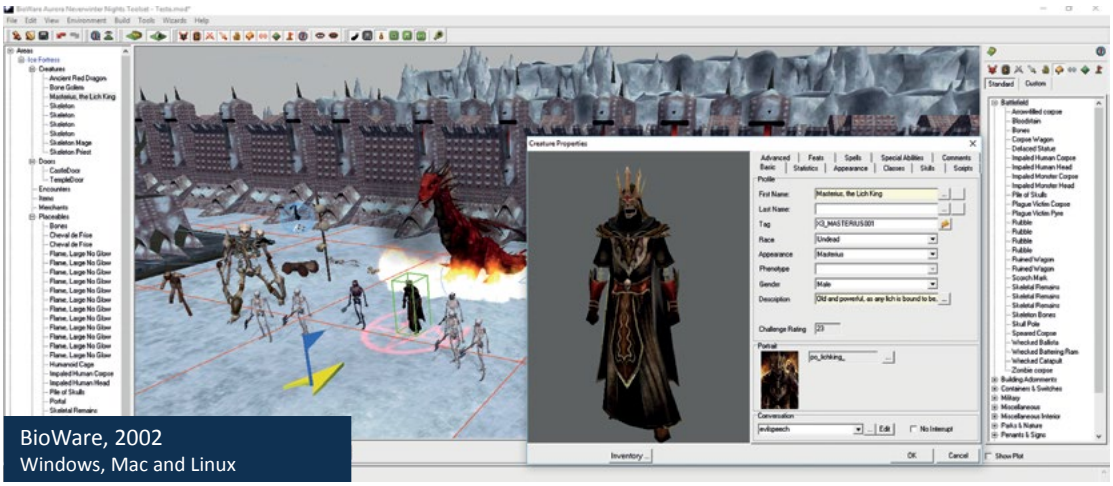


Fully employing *D&D*'s magic system, *NWN* has almost 300 spells, plus meta-magic feats and a few Epic Spells.



Combat is RTwP, as in *Baldur's Gate*, but the 3rd ed. *D&D* rules offer many new abilities, accessed via a radial menu.

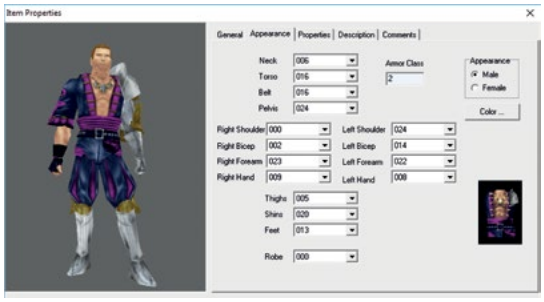
Neverwinter Nights: Aurora Toolset & Modules



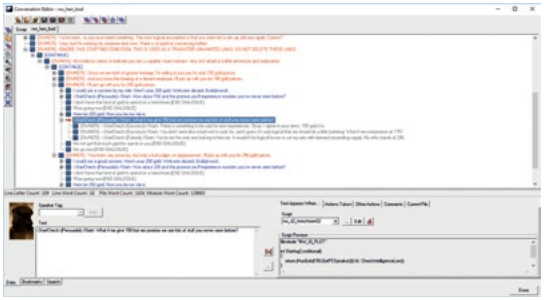
BioWare, 2002
Windows, Mac and Linux

Neverwinter Nights included a long campaign, but also, and more importantly, the exact toolset used by BioWare to make that campaign. This was highly significant, but its importance would be easy to overlook. It meant that owners of the game were being given all the tools they needed to make a professional quality RPG of their own, if they had the talent and were able to devote the time.

In the years since, many have done just that, producing thousands of modules, of which dozens (at least) of the best compare quite favourably to professionally produced RPGs. This makes the purchase of *NWN* perhaps the best deal in the history of RPGs since, by obtaining this one game, one gains the ability to play a huge and still expanding number of high-quality RPG campaigns.



The powerful item editor allows you to mix and match several pieces of armour or weapons to create unique equipment, then customise all its stats and powers.



Part of what makes the *Aurora Toolset* special is how it offers powerful professional tools that are easy to use, such as its Conversation Editor.

Of course *NWN* is hardly the only game to include some sort of toolset, map editor, or the like. Frequently, however, these editors are too limited in what they can do, not allowing users to make fully fledged campaigns with all the features the professionals can include. Others are too difficult to use, requiring either greater technical skills or a larger team than the typical amateur modder can be expected to possess.

NWN managed to avoid both these extremes. On the one hand, it was an enormously powerful tool allowing one to do everything BioWare did to make its campaigns, as well as making it fairly easy to alter many aspects of play to create campaigns of a very different type as well. On the other, learning how to use it is relatively easy. This ease of use also extends to the speed with which one can make content with it, another crucially important, and easily overlooked, feature for amateurs with limited time to devote to what is after all a hobby, and not a full-time job.

The *NWN* toolset does of course have some limitations, as, though extensive modifications can be made, any modules made with it will at their core be using the same fundamental system, one based on 3rd Edition *Dungeon & Dragons* rules. Therefore, for someone with creative game-related aspirations attempting to make a fully fledged indie game would certainly be an alternative to consider. *NWN* does offer two advantages over such a course, however.

First is the aforementioned speed with which a skilled toolset user can make content. In my own case, this factor in particular was a crucial consideration. I had ambitions to make a large, complex RPG campaign, comparable in length and scale to major commercial games, and I also wanted to release something this decade.

The Neverwinter Vault:

The official Neverwinter Nights Vault was hosted by IGN since 2002, but was shut down without warning in 2014. Thousands of mods, modules and fan-made content hosted there were only saved by the effort of a group of fans, who now host them at the new Neverwinter Vault – an invaluable resource, full of excellent fan-made adventures. Here are some of the best mods and modules you can play today:

Pretty Good Character Creator (PGC3) This handy trainer allow you to freely level up, equip and customise your character, testing it and preparing for other modules.

Aribeth's Redemption by Daniel Muth is kind of a sequel to *NWN*'s OC, focusing on Lady Aribeth. An example of how RPG romances should be written.

Almraiven and **Shadewood** by Fester Pot are extraordinary modules designed specifically for mages.

The Aielund Saga by Savant is a six-part epic module. The *NWN* OCs should have been something like this.

Black Thorn by El Dano represents an innovative use of the *NWN* toolset to make a murder mystery game.

Revenant by McV is another innovative, high-quality module in which one plays as an undead revenant attempting to solve his own murder.

Cave of Songs, Honor among Thieves and **The Prophet Trilogy** by Baldecaran includes some of the best (if usually grim and tragic) storytelling in *NWN* modules, and are generally among the best the Vault has to offer.

Sands of Fate by John McA is a trilogy for epic characters, which will take you from Level 25+ all the way to 40. Great for those who completed *Hordes of the Underdark*, or some other series taking you to the beginnings of epic levels, and are wondering what to do with their epic-level character.

Tales of Arterra by Kevin Chan is a high-quality two-part module series, with many allusions to classic RPGs like *Baldur's Gate* and *Planescape: Torment*.

Swordflight by Rogueknight333 is an ambitious, ongoing series featuring challenging tactical combat, old-school dungeon-crawling, extensive content and side-quests specific to class, race, and alignment, and numerous role-playing opportunities.

Defense of Fort Tremagne by Guthlac is an excellent module combining good combat and role-playing.

Saleron's Gambit by Tiberius209 is a series of five high-quality modules for low-level characters, notable for its "low magic" approach. It is filled with Forgotten Realms lore and allusions of other classic games in that setting such as *Baldur's Gate*.

Alazander's three modules should also not be overlooked by fans of the Forgotten Realms, with the second in the series, **Crimson Tides of Tethyr**, probably being the best.

The **Blackguard** series by Steve B., **Sapphire Star** by Yaballa, **Shadows of Darkmoon** by Commche, and **A Peremptory Summons** and **Siege of the Heavens** by Balkoth offer some very challenging combat to players looking to test their tactical skills.

Numerous P&P modules have also been converted into *NWN* modules. If there is a P&P adventure of which you have fond memories, there are good odds of finding an *NWN* version of it. Some of the best conversions are **C2: The Ghost Tower of Inverness** and **S4: The Lost Caverns of Tsojcanth** by SirOtus, **N1: Against the Cult of the Reptile God** by Rich Barker, **UK2: The Sentinel**, by Heresiologist, and **S1: Tomb of Horrors** by Ghool.

Persistent Worlds:

Some of *NWN*'s modules are designed to run online, like a small-scale MMO, with up to 96 players and a team of GMs that continuously directs play, adds new quests and expands the game. These are called persistent worlds. While it's been over 10 years since *NWN*'s release, there are still many persistent worlds around. You can find a listing and status of all active ones here: www.nwnlist.com

If you need help installing *Neverwinter Nights* and its mods, or want further module recommendations, then check Lilura's excellent intro guide and blog posts.

Had I been making an indie game, those would, realistically, have been mutually exclusive goals. Using the *NWN* toolset allowed me to spend my limited time working on the actual "meat" of the game, designing quests and encounters, writing dialogue, etc., and not waste it reinventing the wheel by designing a basic game system from scratch.

Second is the existence of an established community of players and modders who provide a ready-made audience and source of feedback for *NWN* toolset products, including many *D&D* players who are accustomed to playing a modular and customisable game.

This community is, alas, not as large these days as it once was, but still has the potential to greatly simplify the task of actually finding players for one's experiments in game-making. Players, too, can benefit from having an established and well-documented game system that does not require them to learn a completely new set of rules every time they start a new game.

The toolset is, in short, an extraordinary tool that has produced extraordinary results. You do not need to take my word for this, as countless high-quality modules can be found on the Neverwinter Vault. **RK**

Freedom Force



Irrational Games, 2002
Windows and OS X

From January to June 2005, the story of the first *Freedom Force* game was retold in a six-issue comic book miniseries published by Image Comics.

In the early 2000s, superheroes and comic books were an almost unexplored genres for computer games. There had been a few lacklustre releases, but they had failed to impress. All this changed with the release of *Freedom Force*.

Published by Electronic Arts and Crave Entertainments, it was developed by Irrational Games, the team behind *System Shock 2*, featuring veterans of Looking Glass Studios, as well as the Australian side of the team who would co-develop it. The game would be a moderate success in terms of sales but break the "superhero game curse" and pave the way for much more successful ventures in the field.

A blatant homage and love letter to the Silver Age of comic books, *Freedom Force* featured a vibrant, colourful, and extremely ambitious engine, and a storyline that trod the well-travelled paths of comic book conventions. The characters introduced were based on classic archetypes from both the Marvel and DC universes, simple heroes acting out heroic fantasies where the good guys and the bad guys were clearly defined and there were no blurred lines.



The campaign progresses through several missions, with every three or four featuring a new "villain of the week".

The storyline introduction will be familiar to anyone who has watched Flash Gordon: the evil alien emperor Lord Dominion contaminates Earth with Energy X, a power source that grants amazing superhuman abilities to anyone who is exposed to its radiation. As Energy X canisters fall over Patriot City, an age of superheroes and villains is born.

In terms of gameplay, *Freedom Force* features an intuitive and accessible real-time-with-pause system, with a variety of powers at the player's disposal: one can use basic melee attacks, area effects, projectiles and beam attacks, as well as a number of special powers. Each of these came with its own animations and effect bubbles – POW, WHACK, WHOOSH, etc. – making combat a colourful, exciting and instantly gratifying experience.

More than just performing fancy attacks, heroes can also fly, levitate, teleport, jump onto roofs, lift cars and throw them at enemies, etc. "Do whatever a superhero can do" kind of sums up the gameplay

The game is further enhanced by the addition of the Prestige mechanic – a simple system where doing good deeds and side-objectives like protecting citizens and bringing the guilty to justice earns favour with fellow heroes, allowing the player to recruit a larger roster of superheroes, each with their own unique abilities and uses. There are many little instances of these objectives hidden away on every map, and they add life and depth to the gameplay.

The imperative to protect the city and its inhabitants while pursuing the villains and main objectives also adds a pleasing level of complication and difficulty to the game, with the player having to split up their teams of heroes and oversee different events on different parts of the maps, as well as find the canisters of Energy X that litter the city.

"I think one of the most gratifying things about *Freedom Force* was the mod community, because it was insane! I always wanted to do something that was bigger than we could track. We never had that before, and it just got to become this thing that stood on its own. People made thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of characters!"

– Ken Levine, *Freedom Force's writer*



Each hero has unique powers, but some can cost energy to be used. Once or twice per mission, heroes can use their heroic will to restore energy or health.

Included with the game was an intuitive tool for creating custom superheroes that could be used in the main campaign, taken online or used in the game's challenge maps. The game was also released with a suite of robust modding tools, leading to a massive frenzy of content creation by the dedicated fans of the comic book genre. Hundreds of Marvel and DC superheroes were brought to life, and ambitious projects began to appear on numerous fan-sites, featuring custom animations, original maps, complete modifications and entirely new campaigns.

The future seemed assured for the franchise, however, as so often happens in this industry, legal complications arose as to who owned the rights of the intellectual property, the publishers or the developers, and there was a delay with the release of the sequel.

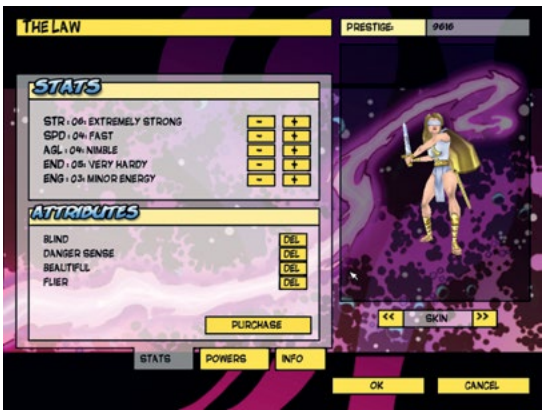
In the meantime, *City of Heroes* was released, a game covering much of the ground *Freedom Force* had trail-blazed and stealing some of its glory.

In 2005, the legal disputes were finally settled and *Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich* was released. A homage to the Golden Age of comics books, it featured a time-travelling plot where the heroes of the first game had to face the villains of the Axis powers. The game was self-published by Irrational themselves, but unfortunately failed to sell well, reputedly moving only about 40,000 copies.

Who can say why sales were so disappointing? The game improved on many aspects of the original, but a lot of the difficulty and little charming touches were lost. Maps became less interesting and objectives not so punishing or complicated, while combat played a much larger role and heroics less of one.

While the second game ended on an intriguing cliffhanger and concept art was made for a possible third game set in a more complex Bronze or Iron Age setting, to this day we still eagerly await the return of Patriot City's mightiest heroes. **NT**

Fans not only created thousands of custom hero skins, but also huge mods with new campaigns based on the *Justice League*, *Suicide Squad* and the other IPs. A good resource for them is Alex's Freedom Fortress.

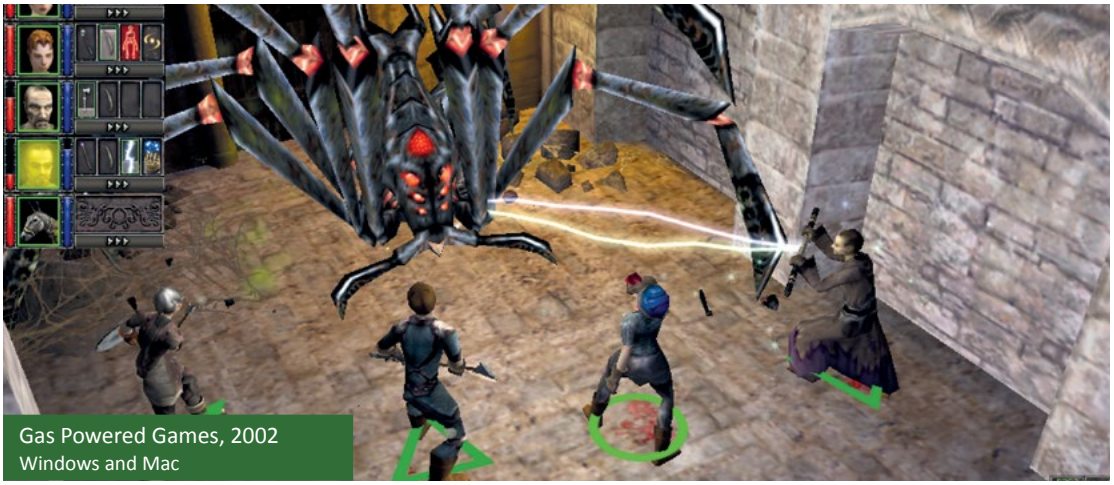


Character customisation uses a clever point-buy system with attributes, disadvantages and customisable powers.



Freedom Force vs the Third Reich further expanded the modding support, allowing for crazier superhero teams.

Dungeon Siege



Gas Powered Games, 2002
Windows and Mac

Now a mostly forgotten game, it's amusing to recall that *Dungeon Siege* was an eagerly awaited blockbuster back in the early 2000s – a "*Diablo*-killer", made by Chris Taylor, the man behind the legendary RTS *Total Annihilation*.

Taylor's pitch was powerful: an epic Action RPG set in an huge, seamless world, with cutting-edge 3D graphics and a large party of characters, but with an intuitive RTS-like control that's accessible to anyone – be it a hardcore RPG fan or a total beginner.

Published by Microsoft Studios and promoted by a massive marketing campaign, it was met with very positive reviews upon release and sold almost two million copies – an impressive feat in 2002.

So why isn't *Dungeon Siege* celebrated among the pantheon of classic RPGs? How can such a commercially and critically successful title fall into history's limbo?

The answer is simple: *Dungeon Siege* indeed had great graphics, amazing soundtrack and was easy for anyone to play – but it's also a generic, repetitive and utterly forgettable game that lasts so long and stretches itself so thin that few players endure finishing it.

***Dungeon Siege I* and *II* are both available on Steam, but their expansions and multiplayer modes were removed. Guides can be found on the Steam Community Forum to enable them and also play in higher resolutions.**



Characters in Dungeon Siege will usually just keep using the same attack or spell in every battle. While this makes the game very accessible, the player is left with little to do.

You start the game by naming your character. There are no races, classes or even experience points; everything revolves around three stats – Intelligence, Strength and Dexterity. They increase as you use them: fire a lot of arrows and your Dexterity will go up, boosting damage and allowing you to use better bows.

The much-lauded seamless world is impressive; you travel from forests to towns to mines without a single loading screen. Sadly, you'll soon realise the world is a long and narrow corridor – you'll just keep marching in one direction and fighting for 40 hours. The *Legends of Aranna* expansion only made things worse, adding even more length instead of depth.

You'll meet a few recruitable NPCs as you travel, gathering a party of up to eight heroes. Sadly, they're all devoid of personality or relevance to the barely there plot – even the main hero can be safely dismissed or left for dead. The most memorable characters in *Dungeon Siege* are the pack mules: they follow the party around, carrying loot and kicking enemies.

Despite the large party size, combat is mostly automatic. Due to the improve-by-use system, your characters play limited roles – those with a bow will just keep shooting arrows, while melee warriors will always hack-and-slash. With no skills or special abilities to manage, there's little to do besides repositioning characters and healing them with spells or potions.

The game has a multiplayer mode where you can play with up to seven friends, each controlling one character – which makes combat even duller. Oddly, it takes place in an entirely new area that's not only bigger, but non-linear! It's such a step up that mods were created to make it playable in single-player. Speaking of mods, the game had a powerful editor tool, leading to many fan-made modules (called "siegelets"), including the famous U*ltima V* and *VI* remakes.

"We failed to understand the economics of game development. Our budget was okay, but it wasn't the budget of the products we were competing against. What happens is that the quality of the experience gets thin, you start to phone it in a little bit on some of the levels because there's just not enough time to do it right. We should have done a shorter game – have people get through the game, then say, 'OK, I'm done. I had a great time, now I'm ready for the next one'."

– *Chris Taylor, Dungeon Siege's project lead*



While the game was streamlined to be accessible, the large party and the lack of town portals means players will spend a lot of time managing several small inventories.

Dungeon Siege II arrived in 2005, adding a much-needed depth – it has several races to choose from, classes, skill trees, item sets, pets, enchanting, puzzles, town portals, side-quests, dialogue trees, companions with more personalties, smarter enemies, etc.

Now there's enough side-quests, magical items and secret areas to make exploration worthwhile, and the player has a more active role in combat, thanks to special abilities. Sadly, the party size was reduced to four heroes, but can grow to six if you finish the game and start again in a higher difficulty – or use mods.

The game still suffers from a generic setting and remains shallow next to rivals like *Diablo II* or *Sacred,* but the pleasure of sending your heroes bulldozing through armies of enemies reached its apex here.

While *Dungeon Siege 2* is easily the best game in the series, it failed to replicate its predecessor's impact. Microsoft dropped it, so Gas Powered Games signed with 2K Games for *Dungeon Siege II: Broken World*, a lacklustre expansion pack. After it, the series jumped between various developers, abandoning the "party-based *Diablo*" aspect that made it unique.

Dungeon Siege: Throne of Agony (2007) was a hack-and-slash for the PSP, similar to titles like *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance.* Then came *Space Siege* (2008), a sci-fi spin-off that tried to be "*Diablo* with guns". It offered the choice of remaining human or slowly replacing body parts with cybernetic upgrades, but its combat never went beyond "stand still and shoot".

Lastly we have *Dungeon Siege III* (2011), developed by Obsidian Entertainment. An Action RPG designed for consoles, it allowed you to play as a fighter, mage, fire elemental or gunslinger. While not a bad game, it stands as Obsidian's least interesting title – just another entry in a series now synonymous with bland Action RPGs. **FE**

In 2007 infamous movie director Uwe Boll made *In the Name of the King: A Dungeon Siege Tale*, a movie staring Jason Statham and loosely based on the plot of the first game. It was followed by two direct-to-video sequels.

Mods:

Dungeon Siege had hundreds of siegelets and mods, but many were lost when the official website went offline. Fans still host several of them at www.ds.gemsite.org

We suggest the *Lands of Hyperborea* and *Mageworld* siegelets, the *Monty Haul* mod, the *Ultima V* and *VI* remakes and the *Dungeon Siege II Legendary Mod*.



Dungeon Siege II is still somewhat bland but adds depth to the systems, delivering a satisfying party-based *Diablo*-like.



A console-oriented single-character RPG made by Obsidian, *Dungeon Siege III* has little to do with the first two games.

Gothic II



Piranha Bytes, 2002
Windows

Gothic II was voted RPG of the Year by German magazines like 4players and GameStar, but the game was heavily criticised in the US for its graphics, difficulty and slower pace.

I will never forget reaching the city of Khorinis for the first time and asking a local for directions. The busy craftsmen, bored patrolling guards, drunken layabouts and preaching mage made a simple walk from the town hall to the harbour a lifelong memory.

Piranha Bytes already set a new standard for what open-world Action RPGs could be with *Gothic,* and the sequel took it further. From the mundane animations of the urban inhabitants to the warning growls animals give before becoming aggressive, the *Gothic* formula has always been about creating atmosphere through subtlety.

The game shows its dedication to this concept by how spartan its details are. The minimalistic HUD only has a health and mana bar at the bottom of the screen, interaction cues are a floating name with a simple brightening effect, while the inventory only takes a small part of the screen and does not pause the game.

There is no flourish, only straightforward clean function, because the world of *Gothic II* can speak for itself. And what it reveals is a deadly world where going from zero to hero has never been as satisfying.



You are free to side with whoever you want, rob or even kill them, but there will be consequences: they might refuse to trade or train you, and some will attack you on sight.

Your character is a nobody that can barely take on some oversized rodents, thus people will harass or try to rob you, while running headlong into the wilderness will result in an early grave. The solution to this is to fight smarter, not harder.

Most of the early game takes place in the aforementioned city of Khorinis and its urban quests allow for different approaches. Impressing an influential craftsmen by retrieving an Orc weapon sounds impossible given the power of these creatures, but going on a forest trip with a skilled hunter or investigating the rumour about a limping Orc that's hiding in a cave after being shot by the guards might reveal new solutions that weren't apparent at first. These alternatives are not hinted by original quest givers, thus giving a wonderful sense of interconnectedness to the entire experience.

Stumbling into new quests that are linked with old or unknown ones makes the world of *Gothic II* feels like a tightly knit believable adventure, rather than the disjointed theme park with no quest overlap that most RPGs indulge in. This is further reinforced by the faction dynamic between the militia of the city, the landowners' mercenaries and the mage's monastery. All of this is complemented by the dry German dialogue that, while no literary masterpiece, does wonders when it comes to taming the generally sanguine elements fantasy stories love to indulge in.

Just as the quests demand more from the player than just following instructions from point A to B, so does the combat encourage attention and observation rather than button-mashing perseverance. Both the player's attack and defensive options are timing-based, your block move only lasts for a fraction of a second and attacks must be chained based on timed clicks for a combo to be pulled off.

"The world of *Gothic* is much closer to reality – the way people talk, their motivations and surroundings, even down to the colour palette we choose, is all about creating a world that is a step away from the high-fantasy fare that we see so often in the genre."

– *Kai Rosenkranz, Gothic II's artist and composer*



The ***Gothic*** series has less combat than most other RPGs, but every single enemy is meaningful and can be deadly. They are used as objectives or obstacles, not as cannon fodder.

Given the diverse number of enemies, each with their own animation sets, learning to duel successfully feels like an earned skill by the end rather than a reward for your avatar's numbers going up. Of course, the combat wouldn't be half as effective at feeling rewarding if it wasn't for the world being filled with expertly crafted locations and hand-placed loot that makes it all the more satisfying when you finally beat that enemy that blocked the path 20 hours ago.

Magic sidesteps a lot of the combat's complexity, usually devolving into slinging your favourite damage spell or summoning an army of undead critters if you want to avoid fighting altogether.

However, its merits lies in world-building and presentation. You don't just pick the Mage class and start shooting fireballs left and right; you have to go to their monastery, pay an exorbitant entrance fee and then spend your time doing mundane quests before being allowed to practise the mystical arts.

Just like its predecessor, *Gothic II* goes to great lengths to instil the mysterious and esoteric nature of magic and that it's something that needs to be earned.

A word of warning: every English release of *Gothic II* comes with the *Night of the Raven* expansion. It adds a new region and quite a few quality quests to the base game, but also raises the difficulty significantly in response to fan complaints. Newcomers should be aware that perseverance is key in the early parts.

I'd lying if I said that *Gothic II* maintains its level of quality throughout; indeed, many fans like me bemoan the fact the end tends to degenerate into mediocre dungeon-crawling and exploration is a lot less satisfying. But even with that in mind, the game is still more than worthy of being experienced from start to finish for its still-unmatched, harsh-but-fair exercise in open-world design. One can only wonder how open-world RPGs would look like today if *Gothic* instead of *The Elder Scrolls* had shaped their progress. **LL**

There's a large community of *Gothic* players creating mods, but most are in German, at www.worldofgothic.de



Gothic II keeps its predecessor's unique character system. You'll have to find trainers to improve your stats and skills.

Mods:

SystemPack: A patch that updates the *Gothic* engine, allowing for better draw distances, higher resolutions, more stability and the use of several mods.

D3D11-Renderer: A huge graphical update to the engine, adding more vegetation, dynamic shadows, better performance and other improvements.

L'Hiver: A large mod pack that adds new items, enemies, HD textures, tweaks and features like hunger/thirst. It brings some heavy changes to the game, so might be better if kept for a second playthrough.

Velaya - Tale of a Warrior: A popular fan-made adventure set after the events of *Gothic II*. It tells the story of a women in search of glory and lasts about 40 hours.

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, has 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.



The crafting system is very unique. There are only five types of ingredients, but each type features a wide variety of items and abilities.

Exploration is interesting since the enemies are fairly diverse up through the middle of the game, and many of the side-quests 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 forces player to think about the consequences of the 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 manoeuvres, 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, criticising 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 behaviour 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 story offers a glimpse into Chinese culture, but the translation is wonky and the voice acting is quite bad.



Classes have a linear progression, but there's a bit of wiggle room to customise your attributes and skills.



It's important to carefully consider the elements of each character and enemy, as they'll heavily impact battles.



In *Seal of Evil*, the prequel, you play as Lan Wei, who must find who killed her father and stop an impending war.

The game features an excellent crafting system in which Fu Su can produce magic-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 artefacts, 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 specialises 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.

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.

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 an MMO-like fashion. Its success, mainly in China, led to the release of the online-only stand-alone expansion *Prince of Qin Online - The Overlord of Conquerors* (2003) – later renamed *World of Qin*.

Object Software would still release 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 fully fledged MMO. **DT**

Star Wars:

Knights of the Old Republic



BioWare, 2003
Windows, OS X and Xbox

***SW:KotOR* was first released for the Xbox. It was the fastest selling game for that console at the time. The PC port came out five months later.**

Knights of the Old Republic not only is the first *Star Wars* CRPG, but is also a turning point for BioWare. It's the moment when it abandoned its PC roots in favour of more console-oriented games, which led to deep changes and simplifications – from the controls and UI to the combat and level design.

Thankfully, despite some rather awkward design choices, *KotOR* provides ample entertainment with its enjoyable story, teeming with a sense of an adventure.

The game takes place roughly 4,000 years before the movies, an era documented in the *Tales of the Jedi* comics. Here, the Republic is slowly losing the war against the Sith Empire – led by Darth Malak. It's an exciting setting, but it's unfortunate that BioWare chose to use the modern *Star Wars* look seen in the movies, instead of the brilliant, rustic aesthetic of the comics.

The player, a Republic soldier who discovers in himself an affinity to use the Force, goes on a journey during which the fate of the war will be decided. The game is particularly famous for its plot twist, although I think BioWare has failed to realise the full potential of it, as it can feel underdeveloped.



Combat is real-time-with-pause and allows you to queue a set of actions for each character.

Regardless, the plot and side-quests are great. *KotOR* delivers that overall feeling of a *Star Wars* adventure, both in content and themes, and does it gracefully, offering many choices which move you towards either the Light or Dark Side of the Force – ultimately resulting in a change of appearance and stats.

During his adventures, the player will gather nine companions, with whom he'll travel the galaxy aboard the starship Ebon Hawk – albeit only two of them can accompany him at a time. The prologue and the ending are linear, but the game opens up in between, giving players the opportunity to visit four planets and complete their quests in any order.

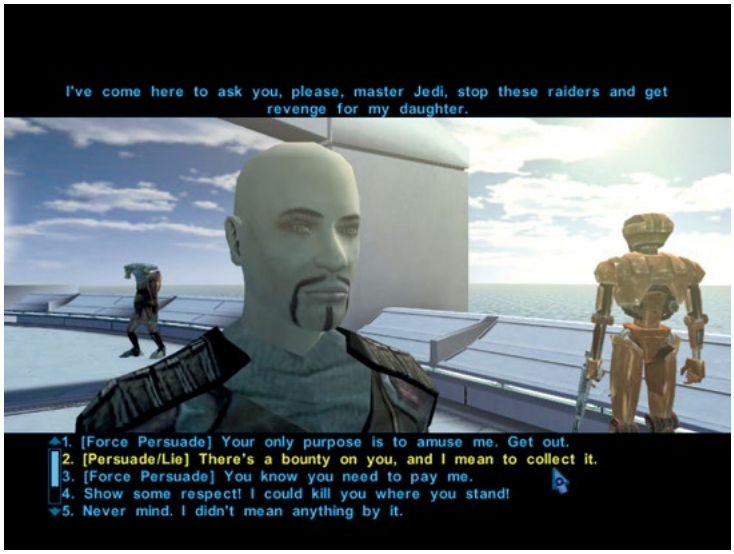
The game offers many interesting places, like the planet Manaan, whose inhabitants are getting wealthy from exporting medical resources to both sides of the war. Fearful of showing any sign which may be seen as a preference for either of them, they desperately try to stay neutral in the ongoing conflict. We'll also visit the Sith Academy on Korriban, where every student learns to betray another and those more advanced ones take courses in the fleeting art of double-crossing.

Among your party members, certainly the most interesting is the old, former Jedi, Jolee Bindo. His positive attitude, wit, cynicism and wisdom comes out as a perfect mixture for an engaging companion. A fan favourite, the Assassin droid HK-47 is also enjoyable, although in this first game he feels a little like a one-trick pony. However, the main bad guy, Darth Malak, rings hollow, like some expendable villain of the week.

Sadly, the combat is *KotOR's* weakest aspect. It features real-time-with-pause battles, which allow you to queue actions for each party member – but anyone expecting complexity or tactical challenge similar to *Baldur's Gate II* will be gravely disappointed.

"I thought we managed to pull off a twist that almost had the same impact as when Darth Vader revealed to Luke that he was his father. We used *The Sixth Sense* as a guide for how a good twist was pulled off. One of the lessons from that movie was that you had to leave enough clues that a sizeable percentage of the audience would figure out the twist before you revealed it. If you didn't leave enough clues, then the twist would ring false."

– James Ohlen, Star Wars:KotOR's lead designer



The role-playing options are some of the best among BioWare's games, especially once you learn how to use the Force.

The game offers a few different skills, but their choice is irrelevant, as any will work well enough against the enemies, who lack strong resistances or hard counters. Thus, there's no need for a change of tactics during encounters, and only sporadically will you use some healing. All encounters practically play themselves until the final boss, when there's a radical spike in difficulty. Keeping all weakness in mind, the sword/lightsaber fighting animations are top-notch – definitely combat's strongest aspect.

The soundtrack was composed by the famous Jeremy Soule and it's full of pathos, yet subtly melodic. It's fitting for the game and manages to touch player emotions while feeling very *Star Wars*-y.

Overall, *KotOR* achieves everything it wanted to achieve. We may sometimes be disappointed that it didn't aim higher, but that would be foolish, as it does provides a great experience. Besides, any desire for something more ambitious can be sated by its sequel.

The feeling of *Star Wars* is very strong with this one, and it's a game I highly recommend for anyone who prioritises story and dialogue above combat. *Knights of the Old Republic* also serves quite well as a first RPG, gently introducing new players to the genre conventions and sensibilities. **JMR**

Mods:

Brotherhood of Shadow - Solomon's Revenge: An amazing fan-made expansion, adds tons of new content, such as items, quests and even a companion.

Yavin IV Planet Mod: Adds a new planet for you to explore, with a new dedicated storyline and quests.

Grif Vindh's Roleplay Padawan Mod: Allows you to start the game as a Jedi Padawan and skip a good chunk of the game's long tutorial. Great for a replay.

Lightsaber Forms: Adds the seven lightsaber combat styles to the game, each with unique advantages.



The game is based on the *Star Wars Role-playing Game* and uses *D&D*'s d20 system, plus a morality bar.



There are three mini-games in *SW:KotOR:* swoop racing, space turret battles and the popular Pazaak card game.

The Battle for Wesnoth



You can read more about *The Battle for Wesnoth* and freely download at www.wesnoth.org

In 2003, David White released the first version of *The Battle for Westnoth*. Inspired by two Japanese titles, *Master of Monsters* and *Warsong*, White's goal was to create a free and open-source turn-based strategy RPG with simple mechanics but deep gameplay.

Since then, the project received contributions from hundreds of people, improving and adding to all aspects of the game, from the engine, to musical scores, art and several fully fledged campaigns.



Attacks in *Wesnoth* have a controversially high-percentage chance of missing, which forces you to adopt tactics constantly but might frustrate some players.



Recent fan-made campaigns such as 2018's *To Lands Unknown* greatly expand the game, adding new assets, rules and innovative mission types.

The secret behind *Wesnoth* is its deceivingly simple gameplay. Units move in a hexagonal grid, can only attack adjacent enemies and the game has just one resource – money, which you gain each turn by controlling locations and use to recruit troops.

Depth comes from the underlying nuances. There are terrain bonuses, multiple types of attacks and damage, unique attributes and alignments effects affected by the time of day. Units level up and can graduate to advanced classes, and the player is generally able to carry these units across multiple scenarios in a campaign – provided they survive. Maps are well-designed and offer surprises, challenging limitations and optional objectives. It's an easy-to-learn game, but very challenging to master.

Wesnoth currently offers 16 "official" campaigns with over 200 scenarios, all set in the same timeline but varying in difficulty and player perspective. For example, In *Heir to the Throne* you take on the role of Konrad, a young prince fighting for his life and the restoration of his kingdom. In the difficult but rewarding *Son of the Black-Eye* campaign you play as Kapou'e, an Orc chieftain. And in *Under the Burning Suns* you travel to Wesnoth's far future in and guide your Elvish cohorts to a new home as they struggle to survive the rigours and danger of a hostile land.

The game also has a very large and active multiplayer community and a truly immense collection of user-made content: original campaigns, custom factions, diverse multiplayer maps, etc. All these can be downloaded directly via the game's built-in browser, although some content might require special setups.

For its accessibility, content, price (free!) and support, *The Battle for Wesnoth* is a unique gem in the crown of CRPGs and a must-have for any fan of turn-based strategy RPGs or strategy titles in general. **ZT**

Lionheart: Legacy of the Crusader



Reflexive Entertainment, 2003
Windows

Lionheart was the last RPG published by Black Isle Studios, and many CRPG fans also know it as the only other game to be based around *Fallout*'s SPECIAL ruleset, but those are just some of the unusual things about *Lionheart*.

The game is set in an alternate reality where the execution of 3,000 prisoners by King Richard during the Crusades caused the "Disjunction", a dimensional rift that brought magic and demons to our world.

The story itself begins much later, in the 16th century. After being arrested by the Inquisition for possessing magic, the player is attacked by assassins, then saved by none other than Leonardo da Vinci, here an Inventor/Wizard who shares a bond with you.

Indeed, the game used historical figures as NPCs in crazy ways long before *Assassin's Creed* made it popular. Da Vinci is just one of them – Galileo, Shakespeare, Machiavelli, Cervantes, Nostradamus, Joan of Arc and many others make an appearance.

Players are eventually taken to New Barcelona, where they'll meet the four main factions: the Knights Templar, the Inquisition, the Knights of Saladin and the Wielders. As you decide which one to join, their unique quests will allow you to briefly interact with this rather unusual world, exploring its oddities.

It's after the player leaves New Barcelona that the game takes a turn for the worse. Everything becomes a lot more linear, with the main quest turning into a series of dungeons and repetitive battles.

Combat is real-time, similar to *Diablo*, but it's very simplistic and can be a hurdle for those who didn't carefully create their characters. This, combined with poor level and quest design, makes the game's second half a boring path to a rushed conclusion.

So what is good? The soundtrack is great, and the unique and beautiful art adds a lot to the atmosphere. But it's the game world that seals the deal for those who enjoyed at least some portions of the game. Even after the rise of Kickstarter and indie games, *Lionheart* remains one of the wackiest CRPGs I've ever played.

Regardless, *Lionheart* is not a great game. It's not a good one either. It feels like a cancelled title that somehow was released. Those with zero expectations may be able to find some enjoyment, as I did, but it's not a game I'd recommend anyone. **FAX**

Modders made a widescreen patch for *Lionheart*, and those experiencing graphical glitches can use DxWnd to solve them.



The unusual alternate history setting is rich and filled with historical figures. While dialogues have many choices at first, the game later descends into mindless killing.



The game is based on *Fallout*'s SPECIAL ruleset, with similar stats and perks, but removes most non-combat skills, and adds magic and four races.

TRON 2.0



Monolith Productions, 2003
Windows, Mac and Xbox

***TRON 2.0* was intended as the official sequel to the original *TRON*. However, Disney later released the *TRON Legacy* film sequel and tie-in *TRON Evolution* game, declaring *TRON 2.0* to now be an alternate universe story.**

TRON is a film that – despite being released in the summer of 1982, during a time crowded by other memorable science-fiction films and only being a moderate success – has endured for decades, inspiring many to become programmers, 3D visual artists and, of course, game designers. It was no surprise then when Disney used the 20th Anniversary DVD release of *TRON* to tease a follow-up to the movie – this time as a video game.

TRON 2.0 places you in the role of Jethro "Jet" Bradley, son of Alan Bradley from the original movie. Like Kevin Flynn, Jet is digitised by a laser and sent into the electronic world, where he must learn to survive this new environment while helping Ma3a, the program responsible for digitising him.

Developed by the FPS veterans at Monolith (*Blood, No One Lives Forever, F.E.A.R.*) most of the game plays as an FPS, with the player using the iconic Identity Disc and a variety of imaginative analogues to the standard weaponry – shotgun, sniper rifle, grenade launcher, sub-machine gun, etc. – all based on geometric primitives (Disc, Rod, Ball, Mesh).



Apart from the Identity Disc, all weapons use energy to shoot, requiring some extra tactics and thought when using them.

The Identity Disc stands out among the other weapons – it ricochets, can block enemies' discs and the player is able to finely control it with the mouse, guiding its launch and return paths, and how quickly it returns. This allows for many satisfying trick shots.

The other defining feature of *TRON 2.0* is the character upgrade system. It introduces a role-playing element, and often has fans referring to the game as a "*Deus Ex*-lite". As you play, you'll come across subroutines – the *TRON 2.0* version of upgrades – which can be placed in Jet's "memory block" slots.

These subroutines range from protective armour to new weapons, weapon modifiers (throw multiple discs, drain health, deal poison damage, etc.) or even utility skills (jump higher, walk silently, scan enemies, etc.). Each requires a set number of memory slots, but can be upgraded (from Alpha to Beta to Gold), becoming more efficient and smaller in size.

Jet's memory block slots constantly reconfigure themselves in arrangement and capacity as he travels through various systems, forcing players to strategise and adapt their skills as they play. New subroutines can be incompatible, empty blocks can become corrupt and there's always the danger of a virus infection attacking them. To solve this, you can port, defrag and disinfect the subroutines – all which takes time and can be decisive during a firefight.

As Jet completes objectives, he continually earns build points (the game's version of XP). At every milestone of 100 build points earned, Jet gains a version number and the player can improve his performance: increasing his health, energy, weapon efficiency, processor (port, disinfect, defrag speed) and transfer rate – the speed in which he downloads permissions (keys), e-mails (that flesh out the story), subroutines, health and energy from various sources.

"Without a doubt, the artists and level designers on the *TRON 2.0* team successfully captured the essence of *TRON*. Not only do the characters and environments look like those found in the movie, but in some cases surpass them. The art direction of *TRON 2.0* really stands out as one of the primary attributes of the game, especially with the recent trend toward hyper-realistic military games. *TRON 2.0* is a fresh alternative."

– Frank Rooke, TRON 2.0's lead game designer



Everything in *TRON 2.0* is well-tied to the theme. Instead of looting items, you download them from archive bins at the cost of energy. Some of those can even contain a virus.

The continuous FPS action is occasionally broken up by Light Cycle races that very closely emulate the ones seen in the *TRON* movies. But it introduces power-ups that can be picked up by the player on the grid, adding new elements of strategy and luck in helping to defeat AI Light Cycle opponents.

The environments brilliantly walk the fine line between paying homage to classic *TRON*, while at the same time updating them with a richer, more detailed look. Monolith's pioneering and extensive use of Bloom here is more than just a gimmick, reproducing the neon glow the film is known for. Two conceptual artists from the original *TRON* movie, Richard Taylor and Syd Mead, were consulted; and the movie's director, Steven Lisberger, had an (uncredited) involvement in the creation of the game's story.

The excellent soundtrack is also quite faithful, with themes that use the work of *TRON*'s original composer, Wendy Carlos, as a motif.

So if you're looking for a title that's not quite an FPS, not quite an RPG – and a love letter to the original *TRON* in every way – give *TRON 2.0* a try. Littered with computer jargon, clever puns and direct references to the film, it's a fondly remembered favourite with most fans. Furthermore, thanks to its setting and art style, it hasn't aged or become dated in the same way many other titles do. **RTR**

Mods:

The site www.ldso.net hosts a community forum, and their team creates many of the mods for *TRON 2.0* – both for Steam and the original retail release.

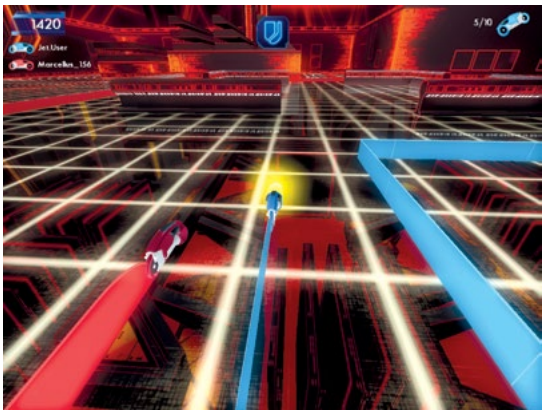
Killer App Mod: Adds widescreen resolutions, restores the broken online multiplayer, and many other features, including content that was exclusive to the Xbox.

User Error: A fan-made series of original single-player missions with new stories and protagonists.

An expansion for *TRON 2.0* and a *TRON 3.0* game were planned, but later cancelled in favour of the *TRON Legacy* movie and its tie-in game.



The System Memory screen, where subroutines are managed and your stats are increased.



Light Cycle races are part of the campaign, but can also be played in tournaments with customisable rules.

Temple of Elemental Evil



Troika, 2003
Windows and Mac

Troika proposed a sequel to *ToEE* based on the *Queen of the Spiders* super module, as well as licensing the game's engine to Obsidian so they could create *Baldur's Gate III*. Sadly, Atari never followed up on any of these proposals.

The *Temple of Elemental Evil* (aka *ToEE*) is based on the namesake classic pen-and-paper module – written back in 1985 by Gary Gygax and Frank Mentzer for the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* – now translated to the *3.5E D&D* system. Aside from that, you can say one thing about Troika: they did their darnedest to stay faithful both to the P&P module and to the tactical turn-based *D&D* system – for better and worse.

If there's one thing *ToEE* excels at, it's the combat system – they nailed it almost perfectly. You get to roll up your party, and deck them out with high-fidelity renditions of the system's basic classes – 11 in total.

Couple that with the myriad feats available to customise characters and half the fun of the game becomes concepting the members of your band of adventurers: maybe create a Druid who specialises in augmented summoning; an agile trip-focused Fighter; a near-invisible Rogue archer who scouts ahead and lands devastating sneak attacks while cloaked; or perhaps an Evocation specialist Wizard (which spell schools should I sacrifice? Decisions, decisions).



From its gridless movement to the myriad of combat manoeuvres available, *ToEE* offers plenty of tactical choices.

Once cast into the game itself, you are provided with a wide variety of tactical manoeuvres: you can play with your initiative to tailor your party's attack sequence, so you can milk that extra Attack of Opportunity. Efficiently position characters to obtain flanking bonuses (or negate the AI's). Ready an action vs. Approach as you anticipate and interrupt an oncoming attack from a particular vector (before they get to your squishy Wizard). Various levers and pulleys that help you shift focus to something at the expense of another – do I use Charge Attack to swiftly engage in melee, at the expense of an Armour Class penalty in that round? Or do I hold the line and Fight Defensively, boosting my AC at the expense of my to-hit chance?

On top of that, you have the game's vast library of spells to complement your strategies: Enlarge Person on that fighter so the chances of tripping opponents become more favourable, not to mention that increased reach which affords you those sweet extra attacks from that Cleave feat. And the havok you can wreak with those overpowered charm spells! YES!

Unfortunately, *ToEE* is also a very flawed game. For one, it was very buggy on release – it took two official patches and years' worth of fan-made patches to fix up and polish the game. The biggest disappointment, however, is in the role-playing department.

Troika had, up until that point, a reputation for brilliant RPG worlds: vast, open, fleshed out, rife with plots and subplots and well-thought-out interaction with the inhabitants, history and lore. These were the guys who brought us *Arcanum* and *Fallout*, after all!

As it turned out, *ToEE* had very little of that, and the threadbare story it did have pretty much dissolved at the mid-game stage, when you were left with not much to go on beyond "there's this Temple here, uh, kill it or something".

"When the opportunity to do *D&D 3E* came up, I sat down with my entire collection (100+) of modules and tried to decide which one I wanted to do. The module had to be one I enjoyed playing (of course), but it also had to be big enough to feel 'epic'. Many of the modules that fit the bill were Greyhawk modules, which I had grown up playing with *AD&D*."

– Tim Cain, ToEE's lead designer



The village of Hommlet is huge, and some NPCs have interesting quests and stories, but the focus of the game is the tactical combat.

To be fair, *ToEE* can be credited for being very free-form – you can ally with various factions, backstab them, or just skip them entirely. It also made a valiant effort at establishing party motivation via short introductory vignettes/alignment-based plots, and making companion NPCs have agendas of their own. It just fails at properly executing these, and this is one area that mods couldn't save.

There is one other major strength to *ToEE* that no review should leave out – it's freaking gorgeous! The 3D character models over beautiful pre-rendered 2D backgrounds approach proved itself back in 2003, and it's no wonder it has made a comeback in recent Kickstarter RPGs, such as *Pillars of Eternity*.

Despite its botched release, *ToEE* remains dear to many, having also been cited as highly influential by developers like Larian Studios. Even now, more than a decade after its release, fans continue hammering away at it, creating and polishing mods.



D&D's magic system is fully employed, with hundreds of spells and even meta-magic feats like Empower Spell.

ToEE is a game you would keep coming back to, in no small part due to the game's dedicated modders, but honestly also because there weren't many games of its kind being released for a long period of time.

Overall, it's great if you're looking for a tactical combat romp, but if you're after a fully fledged RPG experience, you may want to look elsewhere. **SA**

Mods:

Circle of Eight Mod Pack: This huge mod pack includes countless bugfixes and improvements, plus a great deal of extra optional content, including higher character levels and content. Don't play without this.

Temple Plus: This project aims to expand the game's engine, allowing for further modification and bug fixing.

Keep at the Borderlands: A total conversion mod based on another of Gary Gygax's classic *D&D* modules. It has a heavier focus on the role-playing aspect, with elaborate quests and many factions to deal with.



The Keep at the Borderlands mod adds many dialogue checks and choices to *ToEE*'s combat-heavy gameplay.

***ToEE* didn't get official modding tools, but the game's editor was accidentally released in the Polish version of the game.**

Deus Ex: Invisible War



Ion Storm, 2003
Windows and Xbox

Compared to the golden era that was the late 90s, the 2000s were somewhat deluded times, especially for CRPG fans. It was a period tainted by the "death of PCs", the closing of beloved studios and a shift towards multi-platform releases, with console-oriented design trends taking over.

While these changes are noticeable in several games, nowhere are they more notable and frustrating than in the infamous *Deus Ex: Invisible War*.

Those who wish to play *DE:IW* can edit the game files to get widescreen resolutions and higher FOV. We also recommend John P's Unified Texture mod.



Your missions are delivered directly to your screen. No matter who you side with, every faction will be constantly begging for favours.



Invisible War introduced a shared ammo system, where all guns use the same universal ammo, but in different amounts.

Set 20 years after *Deus Ex,* you play as Alex D. (who can be a man or a woman), an augmented agent who escapes his/her training facility to investigate a terrorist attack that destroyed Chicago.

Creating a sequel to one of the best games of all time would be difficult in any scenario, but Ion Storm began on the wrong foot – a multi-platform release. Simply put, the Xbox couldn't handle the large areas of the original game, so they had to scale things down.

Replacing the large, open locations with small areas interrupted by constant loading screens wasn't just disappointing – it killed exploration and made the multiple routes feel like pointless cosmetic choices. With no room for elaborate alternative paths, it boils down to "pick locked door" or "go into air vent nearby".

A lot of streamlining was done as well – items, inventory and bio-mods were drastically reduced, while the RPG-like skills were removed altogether.

Game director Harvey Smith later summed it up best by saying they tried to fix what people didn't like in *Deus Ex* and forgot to focus on what they did like. A good example is the plot. The original game was elaborate and full of twists, although very linear. *Invisible War* offers two competing factions and you can pick sides, but the plot is an uninspired mess.

Moreover, any choice the player makes is quickly forgotten in favour of "player freedom", e.g. if you betray a faction, it will send men after you. Once you dispatch them, the faction goes, "hope you learned your lesson, don't betray us anymore, please do this new quest".

Deus Ex: Invisible War is not a horrible game. There are glimpses of creativity and the core gameplay can still be fun, even in such limited scale. But it's a horrible sequel to *Deus Ex*, and became a poster child for the compromises that PC games suffered when transitioning into multi-platform releases. **FE**

Kult: Heretic Kingdoms



3D People, 2004
Windows and Mac

Kult: Heretic Kingdoms (aka *Heretic Kingdoms: The Inquisition* in the US) began with 3D People developing an isometric Action RPG. To stand out among the many "Diablo clones" of the early 2000s, they partnered with International Hobo, a game writing and design consultancy company.

This little backstory seems key to understanding why *Kult* feels like two different games inside one.

Clearly influenced by Michael Moorcock, it tells of a world where an ancient hero killed God. His blade became infused with god-like powers, and later one of his descendants used it to conquer the land, imposing a brutal theocracy. He was eventually defeated, and to stop another theocrat from rising, the sword was hidden and an Inquisition was formed, seeking to destroy all religions that might grow to oppress humanity.

You play as Alita, an apprentice to the High Inquisitor – but also a descendant of the ancient hero's bloodline. During your adventures you'll learn more about these past events, of your own order and of those seeking to resurrect God, in an morally ambiguous tale with multiple endings (based on a last-minute choice).

Kult also has great world-building, with all quests and NPCs having their own reasonable motivations. You'll hear about refugees from neighbouring countries, tribal caste systems, prostitutes fleeing slavery, etc.

What dooms *Kult* is that all this is trapped inside a very poor Action RPG. Combat is slow, tedious and extremely unbalanced (some skills are plain broken), map design is poor and monsters barely have any skills or abilities – even the bosses just run at you.

The skill system is similar to some JRPGs, where each equipment piece can teach a new skill if you use it enough. Sadly, most skills are dull passive bonuses and the few magic spells are all automatically cast, so you'll just right-click on enemies the whole game.

Kult is a game in conflict with itself – at one point you'll be playing a low budget *Diablo* clone; at another you'll be exploring a large city full of NPCs, uncovering secrets of the past and taking sides in a faction war between thieves, with barely any killing involved.

The good news is that *Kult* is short (6-8 hours), and doesn't overstay its welcome. As such, it's worth giving it a chance – you'll likely enjoy most of its good parts before tiring of the bad ones. **FE**

***Kult* got an unexpected sequel in 2014 with *Shadows: Heretic Kingdoms*, a party-based Action RPG set in the same world.**



You learn new skills from equipped gear, but they might have special requirements, such as using a fire-based weapon and no armour.



Your character can freely shift into a shadow version of the current area, meeting ghosts and battling demons for XP and skill bonus.

Sacred



Ascaron, 2004
Windows and Linux

In the early 2000s, a small German company named Ikarion was developing *Armalion,* an Action RPG based on the highly popular German tabletop RPG *The Dark Eye (Das Schwarze Auge).* The company eventually went bankrupt, but the unfinished game was bought by Ascaron, known for its soccer management series *Anstoss*. Dropping the *Dark Eye* license, Ascaron's subsidiary Studio II continued developing the game and published it in 2004 as *Sacred*.

Sacred 2 is famous for featuring the heavy metal band _Blind Guardian_. They provided the game's main theme, Sacred Worlds, and upon completing certain quests you can watch them perform it in-game.

The game is unmistakably based on *Diablo 2.* It's an isometric Action RPG with six heroes: Battle Mage, Dark Elf, Gladiator, Seraphim, Vampiress and Wood Elf (plus Daemon and Dwarf in the expansion). They learn and improve passive skills upon levelling up, but each hero's unique powers is taught and upgraded by runes. Instead of mana, these powers are all cooldown-based, and can be connected to form combos.

There's also multiplayer (though you'll need to use Hamachi now), five difficulty modes and, of course, tons of loot to collect – normal, magical, rare, uniques and item sets. This may sound like a generic *Diablo* clone, but the charm of *Sacred* lies in the details.



Some characters have very unique abilities – the Dwarf is the only one that can use guns, the Vampiress has two forms, the Daemon can fly over obstacles, and so on.

Sacred features an extensive open-world map, with most of it being freely accessible from the start. It's packed full with side-quests, towns, NPCs, caves, dungeons and secrets to uncover. To explore this vast world, you can buy horses and actually fight while riding them – they decrease your attack speed, but offer stat bonus and are great for ranged characters.

The graphics blends pre-rendered backgrounds with fully 3D characters, and, while they may look somewhat dated and pixelated up close, the 3D models have great animations and enemies all wear diverse weapons and gear, besides the usual palette-swapping.

This attention to details is constant, and the devs also included many easter eggs, references and their own sense of humour. You'll hear amusing taunts from monsters, read funny tombstones, meet developers and beta testers, drag a runaway groom back to the church, wield lightsabers and even visit a recreation of *Diablo*'s Tristram. With all that, the shortcomings of its bland story are almost forgotten. You'll find yourself excusing "just one more quest" or "just one more level-up", while addictively searching for more treasure.

Despite a rather buggy initial release, *Sacred* was a huge hit, selling over two million copies worldwide. This success rescued Ascaron's finances and funded the *Underworld* expansion, which adds two heroes and many areas, items and enemies. Eventually, the sequel arrived in *Sacred 2: Fallen Angel* (2008).

The game now uses fully 3D graphics, and while the core gameplay was carefully maintained, there are some big changes. Of *Sacred*'s classes, only the iconic Seraphim was kept – the other six classes are all new, such as the cybernetic Guardian, or the dark Inquisitor. Two campaigns are now available, Light and Shadow, which change your role in the game – either as saviour of the land or as the source of its problems.

"In retrospect, it turned out that the team that created *Sacred 1* and *Sacred 2* was some sort of 'one in a million'. It is very rare that so many different people are forming a team that's so balanced and full of positive energy. Chaotic creativity against analytical thinking, boldness of the rookies against coolness of seasoned developers, everything in this team seemed to be in equilibrium. Get a load of this: we even had artists and programmers talking to each other! Mindboggling, isn't it?"

– Franz Stradal, Sacred's project lead



Passive skills are learned and improved by levelling up, but to acquire and upgrade abilities you must find special runes.

Sacred 2 was also released for the PS3 and the Xbox 360. The gameplay became somewhat easier to fit the consoles but *Sacred 2's* real flaw is an apparent lack of flow. The world is huge, but lacks a sense of pacing and atmosphere, while the main quest doesn't convey the story very well. And, unfortunately, some bugs also found their way back into the sequel.

Still, *Sacred 2* expanded upon the previous game, with more depth to character progression, more loot, set items, mounts and multiplayer options. The improved graphics and sounds are also pleasing, though the camera can take some time getting used to. Once again Ascaron's typical humour is present, with even more easter eggs, references, silly loading messages and odd items like Jason's mask. Overall, you'll find devout fans for both *Sacred 1* and *2*.

Sadly, while *Sacred 2* sold well, Ascaron spent far too much time and money developing it. They would still release the *Ice & Blood* add-on, with two extra regions and the Dragon Mage as new character, but the company was dissolved soon after.

The *Sacred* brand was still strong, so Deep Silver bought the series' licence. Their first release was a small spin-off project called *Sacred Citadel* (2013). A side-scrolling beat 'em up, its reviews were rather mixed and the game had little to do with the *Sacred* series, being quickly forgotten after its release.

Sacred 3 arrived in 2014, but sadly it was a huge disappointment. Key features such as the vast open world, countless quests and ample loot were dropped (in fact, there's no loot!) in exchange for a multiplayer arcade-like hack-and-slash divided into linear stages. The game's dialogues are especially frustrating – a poor attempt at replicating the series' humour, they end up as a barrage of witless, sarcastic quips that are more disheartening than the game's own mediocrity. The game was widely bashed by reviewers and fans alike, bringing the *Sacred* series to its lowest point.

Regardless, the passion for the first two games remains, their light-hearted humour and open-world design still a thrill. Anyone into *Diablo* should do themselves a favour and give *Sacred 1* and *2* a try. **MHO**

***Sacred 2's* Community Patch is highly recommended, as it fixes many bugs and adds cool new items. Also consider the Free Camera mod and the *Diablo 2 Fallen mod*, which overhauls the game with *Diablo*-inspired classes and lore.**



Sacred 2 went fully 3D and added more system depth, but the game's vast world isn't as well-designed and paced.



Sacred 3 replaced the series' formula with a multiplayer arcade-like hack-and-slash and was very poorly received.

Fable



Lionhead Studios, 2004
Windows, Mac and Xbox

Fable was first released in 2004 for the Xbox. The PC port came in 2005, renamed _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 travelling across a simulated fantasy world that, while not as revolutionary as promised, is still quite reactive.



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.

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 wields XP, but you'll also gain extra points for how you act. Using magic wields 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 and 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.

"I think it's fantastic that people still remember *Fable*, and some of them are really passionate about it. For me, going back to *Fable* is a terrible experience. I look at it and at best I would call it fractured. I don't think the story is compelling enough, the game mechanics weren't tremendously fun, the pacing is totally off, the tutorials were awful. I think the combat got too 'samey' after a while. There's a whole list of problems that make me grind my teeth."

– *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.

This reactivity, while mostly illusory, can be fun. 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 colourful art style add a lot to this, giving a light-hearted tone to the game. Overall, it still looks good, and natively supports HD resolutions.

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 armour 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 apologised 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 a 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 good 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.fabletlcmod.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 colourful 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.

I have to hand it to the Russians – when they make video games it feels as if they create something they really wanted to play, rather than a soulless product designed by a marketing committee.

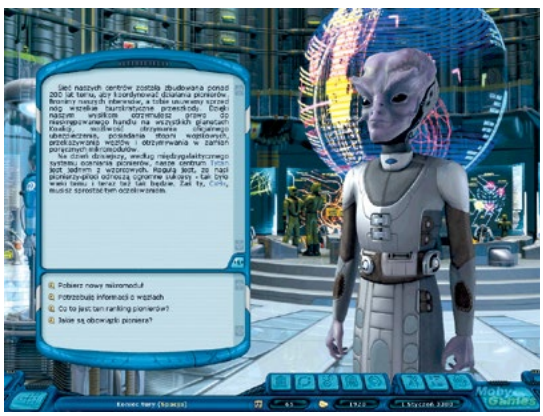
Space Rangers 2 is solid evidence of this. A space exploration RPG, it takes a kitchen sink approach, tossing in arcade space fights, resource trading managers, real-time strategy battles, a faction popularity system, Choose Your Own Adventure gamebooks and more. Game design such as this shouldn't work, as it appears to lack a tightly woven, cohesive experience. But how wrong that assumption is, and how fun is the diverse open-world experience contained here.

The game is set in a fictional universe where several alien races are fighting for their survival against the Dominators – three factions of a robotic species intent on ruling over all organic life. It's 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 has its own focus on industry and system of government.

Since the 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.

Amidst this chaos, the aliens races create a loose confederation in order to deal with both the growing presence of pirates and the invading forces of the Dominators, forming 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 Rangers. After some tutorial missions, the player is set loose into the open universe in order to do... well, whatever the player feels like doing really.

As mentioned before, *Space Rangers 2* is quite open-ended and full of diverse activities. Initially the player will want to earn funds in order to beef up his spaceship or to purchase a new and better vessel.



There are five races and five classes to play, and each combination has different ships and relationships.



There are various ships, with lots of equipment, skills, artefacts, personal traits and even trophies to pursue.

"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 customising your character's abilities to create just the character you want, it's an adventure game where you explore an immense living and 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.

To do this, the character can take missions to hunt pirates or protect convoys. Alternatively, he or she can decide to be a miner of asteroids, a trader of commodities from planet to planet, or perhaps engage in a little of that piracy action.

There are also elaborate "side-games" inside the main space game. Ground combat missions hearken back to the RTS games like *Command & Conquer*, complete with vehicular combat, tower defense and resource-gathering. And the several CYOA text-based scenarios range from stealing a spaceship to escaping from prison or simply managing a sky resort.

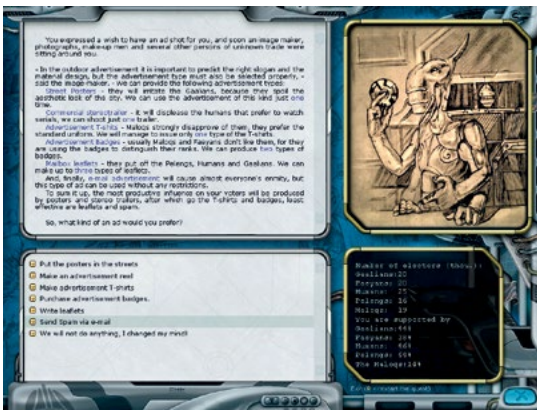
Since there are so many various factions in the game and ways to interact with them, the player will find his popularity changing through his decisions. For instance, if he saves a member of a certain faction from a pirate attack, then the aided faction will trust the player more, while pirates will see him more as a threat and may start attacking him on sight.

You truly get the feeling that the developers were themselves gamers that worked passionately to create something inspired by games that were popular when they were in school.

There is a sandbox charm to *Space Rangers 2*, as, despite the constant battles and invasions, the Dominators will never completely conquer the galaxy. Therefore, the player can take his time exploring, questing, upgrading, fighting and enriching at his own pace, enjoying this unique game, full of charm, danger and a sprinkle of zaniness. **DT**

HD Version:

In October 2013, a new version of *Space Rangers 2* was released on Steam: *Space Rangers HD: A War Apart*. It adds a lot of content, such as new text adventures, quests, equipment, planetary battles and a new sub-plot regarding a pirate threat to the galaxy.



You'll face amusing Choose Your Own Adventure mini-games, such as escaping prison or running an election.



When fighting RTS battles on planets, you can design your own custom troops and even directly control them.

Sudeki



Climax Studios, 2004
Windows and Xbox

Sudeki was first released for the Xbox in 2004, then ported to PCs in 2005.

The first time I heard about *Sudeki*, it sounded like a joke on gamer stereotypes: Microsoft wanted a big RPG for the Xbox audience, so Climax Studios made them a FPS/JRPG hybrid.

Heavily advertised as a revolutionary title, this now-forgotten game is actually a modest Action RPG starring four young characters: Tal, a reckless knight; Ailish, a princess with magical powers; Buki, a bestial huntress and Elco, a gun-wielding scientist.



The ranged characters battle in first-person, while melee ones fight in third-person. Each hero also has access to unique skills and powers.



Each level-up, you can increase one of your stats or learn a new skill. You can also add runes to your equipment, giving it new abilities.

The game's defining feature is its unusual combat. During battles you control one character at a time, but can instantly swap between them. The melee fighters play like a third-person Action RPG, timing attacks to create combos. The ranged characters, however, play like a first-person shooter, with multiple weapons that vary in damage, range and firing speed.

Outside combat, each hero also has an ability used to solve puzzles: Tal pushes crates, Ailish dispels illusions, Buki climbs certain walls and Elco has a jetpack.

Sadly, the game's world is very small and linear, with no real exploration. Areas are just long corridors filled with loot barrels and maybe one dull NPC, plus many obvious "combat arenas": you enter them, the doors close and some level-scaled enemies spawn. Kill them all and the door opens. Rinse and repeat.

It feels underwhelming; a feeling that permeates the game as a whole. *Sudeki* has a nice list of features – two combat systems, magic skills, special summons, equipment upgrades, large boss battles, secrets, etc. – but they all lack in depth and quickly grow stale.

Luckily the game doesn't overstay its welcome, lasting only about 10-12 hours. This keeps things always moving, but also accentuates how paper-thin the plot is and how one-dimensional its heroes are.

If the writing is poor, the visuals are among the best the original Xbox produced. Characters may have an uncanny "Western anime" look, but everything else has a pleasing, colourful art style. The landscapes are especially pretty, and the soundtrack does a great job at giving personality to the world. It's a shame that it's such a small and limited world.

Much like *Fable, Sudeki* comes from a time when many Xbox owners were just discovering RPGs. It's accessible, simplistic and definitely not made for CRPG veterans, yet can still offer a fun little adventure. **FE**

The Bard's Tale



inXile Entertainment, Inc., 2004
Windows, Mac, PS2, Xbox, iPad, etc

One of the big mid-2000s trends were hack-and-slash Action RPGs for consoles, such as *X-Men Legends*, *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*, *Champions of Norrath* and *Demon Stone*.

They were such a guaranteed hit that Interplay cancelled its PC-exclusive *Fallout 3* (aka *Van Buren*) to focus on *Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel* (2004), an infamously bad Action RPG for PS2 and Xbox. By this time Brian Fargo had already sold Interplay and founded his new studio, inXile Entertainment, but he also joined the trend, releasing *The Bard's Tale*.

That doesn't mean that the game is devoid of originality. While borrowing *Dark Alliance*'s engine, *The Bard's Tale* is actually a satire of fantasy RPGs. You play as the Bard, an arrogant and lazy anti-hero voiced by Cary Elwes (Westley in *The Princess Bride*), who desires nothing but "coin and cleavage".

The game has a very light RPG system, with customisable stats and unlockable talents, but no inventory – loot is automatically converted into gold, and new weapons are auto-equipped. Certain dialogues also offer the choice of being "snarky" or "nice".

The humour is hit and miss. Some jokes are funny and the songs are well-executed, but there's also many lazy puns and dated pop culture references. As much as the game enjoys making fun of fantasy clichés, your quest is as cliché as it gets. The only difference is that the Bard does it while spewing snide remarks and arguing with the narrator, voiced by Tony Jay (Judge Frollo in Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*).

Despite being an Action RPG, combat is the game's weakest feature. All you do is attack in melee, fire ranged weapons or use a magical lute to summon allies. The interface, clearly designed for consoles, is terrible on PCs, and the more you advance, the more combat there is, ruining the pacing between jokes.

In the end, *The Bard's Tale's* biggest sin is its name. By itself it is a decent light-hearted Action RPG for consoles. Not as good as *Champions of Norrath* and other popular hack-and-slash titles, but not as terrible as *Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel* either. However, as a game that carries the legacy of Brian Fargo and shares his name with the classic *Bard's Tale* series, it's underwhelming – a reminder of how disappointing the mid-2000s were for classic CRPG fans. **FE**

***The Bard's Tale* was remastered in 2017, adding higher resolutions and the original *Bard's Tale* trilogy as a bonus.**



The game's controls are simple, but were made with controllers in mind and require a lot of input on radial menus.



Being a game about a bard, many songs are incorporated into the game, such as the "Charlie Mopps" sing-along song.

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 Games.

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 on 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 expertly merge classic RPG gameplay with modern FPS visuals. You experience the game as one of seven different vampire clans, who have different powers – allowing you to play *Bloodlines* like a shooter, a stealth game, a hack-and-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.



Bloodlines is quite faithful to the tabletop version, including the obligation to respect the Masquerade.

Still, there are often multiple approaches possible in a quest depending on your character, and other characters will react accordingly to your behaviour, 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 dialogues for *Bloodlines*, especially for the mad Malkavian clan that has entirely different dialogue 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 depth 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!

"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 then 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 dialogue skills such as Intimidate and Seduction, but all dialogues 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 honour the source material. Besides the aforementioned Malkavians and their unique dialogues, there's the Nosferatu, hideous vampires that must avoid being seen at all costs and cannot communicate 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 and Patches:

Unofficial Patch: The basic patch fixes countless bugs, and the optional plus patch restores a lot of cut content, including dialogues, 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.

Bloodlines: Antitribu Mod: A large mod that adds seven new clans, new disciplines and weapons and hundreds of new characters, plus several tweaks to the combat and visuals. Highly recommended.

In 2014, a group of fans began Project Vaulderie, an attempt to port *Bloodlines* over to the Unity Engine. Sadly, the project received a Cease and Desist letter from CCP Games and had to abandon development.



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.

The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky



Nihon Falcom, 2004
Windows, PSP, PS Vita and PS3

***Trails in the Sky* was first released in Japan in 2004, as a PC exclusive. The PSP port was localised into English in 2011 by XSEED Games, and an enhanced PC version was released on Steam in 2014.**

The Legend of Heroes series began as an offshoot of the *Dragon Slayer* series by Nihon Falcom, with its first entry, *Dragon Slayer: The Legend of Heroes* being released in 1989 in Japan for the PC-8801 computer. After five more releases throughout the 90s for Japanese computers, *The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky* (also know as *First Chapter* or simply *FC*) was released in Japan in 2004.

While part of *The Legend of Heroes* series, *Trails in the Sky*'s story does not connect to previous entries, and it acts (alongside its two sequels) as a stand-alone trilogy within a larger universe of games.

Later games in the series do take place on the same continent as the *Trails* games, including the Crossbell duology (*The Legend of Heroes VII: Zero no Kiseki* and *The Legend of Heroes VII: Ao no Kiseki*) and the *Trails of Cold Steel* trilogy, but these latter two metaseries focus on different countries and characters.

Trails in the Sky takes place in the country of Liberl on the continent of Zemuria, and follows Estelle Bright and her adopted brother, Joshua, as they travel across the country training to be Bracers – members of a guild which spans the continent who help citizens in situations involving investigation and combat, without ties to any governmental body.



The game has several stats, but levelling up is automatic. Only equipment and Quartz will alter your stats.

At the same time, they are trying to find their father, a highly ranked Bracer who disappears under mysterious circumstances. The story begins at a very small scale, before expanding to a grandiose epic involving treason, shadowy organisations, and characters who are not who they claim to be. The entire trilogy benefits from a stellar localisation done by XSEED Games, which retains the epic storytelling and wry humour of the Japanese original.

Trails in the Sky presents itself from an isometric perspective where the camera can be freely rotated. The game's art style combines cute "chibi" sprites, hand-drawn 2D portraits, and 3D models for the world geography and some enemies. Character and enemy designs are reminiscent of other Nihon Falcom RPGs, with a 90s anime-esque look for the characters, combined with influences from steampunk and European medieval styling.

The gameplay is that of a traditional JRPG. The party travels from town to town, pursuing the main quest and acquiring optional side-quests. These range from monster hunts to fetch quests to longer, story-heavy sequences that feel more akin to visual novels or adventure games.

Here lies one of the series' most celebrated aspects: world-building. While RPGs like *Skyrim* populate their world with generic NPCs running on a script, *Trails in the Sky* has only handwritten characters – be it a citizen, a traveller, or a shopkeeper, they all have names, personalities and ambitions.

As your story advances, so do theirs. They'll start dating, get jobs, argue with their family, go on a journey, etc. Instead of just blurting out exposition or waiting to be helped by the protagonists, they each have their own lives – and by following them you can understand and immerse yourself in their world.

"Normally in Japanese RPGs, a lot of time and effort is spent on the main story. *Trails in the Sky* is unique in the sense that we spent as much or perhaps even more time and effort working on character conversations and additional elements. By doing so, it really makes the world come alive, and creates a setting that's both fantastical and realistic in equal parts."

– *Toshihiro Kondo, Nihon Falcom's President*



Your party can have up to four characters. The sidebar on the left side of the screen shows whose turn is next and when a buff will appear.

Combat in the *Trails in the Sky* series is turn-based, set in a tactical grid. Besides traditional JRPG commands like Attack, Item, and Run, there's also two types of special abilities: Art and Craft.

Art uses mana and closely resembles the Materia system in *Final Fantasy VII*. Each character equips gems called Quartz, which offer several stat bonuses and can unlock magic spells depending on the colour combinations currently equipped.

Craft, on the other hand, is inherent to each hero and uses Craft Points (CP), which are earned by dealing or taking damage in combat. By storing enough CP you can unleash special attacks that can be used any time – even if it's the enemy's turn.

This is important, as turn order plays a big role: special buffs are granted every few turns, healing or strengthening the active character, so it's important to manipulate the turn order to get those buffs.

FC was followed by two sequels: *Trails in the Sky SC* (*Second Chapter*) in 2006 and *Trails in the Sky: The 3rd* in 2007. *SC* takes place immediately following the events of the first game, with almost entirely identical gameplay (save for a new Chain Attack feature).

Overall, *FC* and *SC* feel like one large game broken up into two smaller chunks, and *SC* resolves around Estelle and Joshua's story.

Trails in the Sky: The 3rd follows a character introduced in *SC* named Kevin Graham, a priest for the Septian Church, and his old friend Ries Argent, as they are sent to a mysterious realm called Phantasma. There they must figure out the mysteries of this new domain and escape it, while Kevin wrestles with his literal and figurative demons.

The 3rd plays more like a hybrid of the traditional JRPG stylings of the first two games mixed with the dungeon-crawling and demonic/religious imagery of the *Persona* series. It also seeks to tie up the loose ends left behind at the end of *SC*, while setting up events for later games like the *Cold Steel* series.

What makes the *Trails* series interesting is how it feels like a classic 90s JRPG, with turn-based combat, an epic storyline, anime art style, and a memorable soundtrack (featuring influences from jazz, classical, Japanese rock and pop, and progressive rock), all while containing modern conveniences such as being able to save anywhere, visible enemies on the map and being able to run from any encounter. The excellent PC port and localisation only sweeten the deal.

In my mind, the *Trails in the Sky* games are the pinnacle of classic JRPG design, and a must-play for any fan of Nihon Falcom's other works and turn-based RPGs in general. **NB**

***Trails in the Sky* was remastered for the PS Vita in 2015, featuring voice acting and a reworked soundtrack. You can use the *Evolution OST Mod* to play the Steam version with this new soundtrack.**



Each character has an item they equip Quartz on. The many colours and combinations provide stat boosts and new spells.



Trails in the Sky has an outstanding amount of dialogue, most of it found when chatting with NPCs in town.

Star Wars:

Knights of the Old Republic II
The Sith Lords



Obsidian Entertainment, 2004
Windows, Mac, Linux and Xbox*

When Interplay closed Black Isle Studios in 2003, Feargus Urquhart teamed up with a few veteran developers to form Obsidian Entertaiment. They then used their connections with BioWare to secure rights to produce a sequel for the recently released *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. Constantly stumbling on cables which took over most of the floor and waging a treacherous battle against deadlines, Chris Avellone's team emerged victorious, giving us a true masterpiece.

The Sith Lords takes places a few years after its predecessor. The Sith had changed tactics and are now attacking from shadows, while the Republic is crumbling and the Jedi are either dead or in hiding. In this grim scenario, players assume the role of a Jedi exile, who has lost its connection to the Force.

Presenting rich personal stories and a mature narrative enchanted with some great writing and deep characters, *The Sith Lords* vastly outshines its prequel. Carefully crafted, its charismatic villains, memorable dialogues and dark setting are all accompanied by an elaborate deconstruction of the *Star Wars* universe.



The Sith Lords introduces lightsaber and Force forms, allowing you to drastically change your fighting stance to best counter a foe.

Indisputably, *KotOR2's* greatest achievement is the character of Kreia and her unique perspective on the *Star Wars* universe. A former Jedi, now acting as the protagonist's mentor, she shares very original and interesting opinions on the nature of the Force, alongside with a questionable, but well-intentioned morality.

For her, not only does the concept of "the will of the Force" negate any notion of personal choice, but "the balance of the Force" makes the everlasting Light Side versus Dark Side conflict completely meaningless and unwinnable. Even the greatest good, achieved by the greatest sacrifices will go to waste because eventually a greater evil will have to emerge so the balance may be preserved. Any goodness done would go away, but its side effects, deaths and suffering will stay, so the final score would always be negative.

Therefore, the Force influence on all living things is negative, and the "good versus evil" battle brings only destruction on an immense scale. Kreia expresses a mix of Nietzschean/Spencerian morality, has strong opinions on everything and loves manipulating people to do her bidding.

Her voice actress, Sarah Kestelman, should also be mentioned with great reverence due to her truly outstanding work, without which the character wouldn't be half as endearing. She can pull of even the subtlest hints of emotions, enchanting and expanding the meaning of every spoken line. Her majestic performance shows that voice acting can be an art, as she her work is head and shoulders above not only most – if not all – video games out there, but movie and animation voice actors as well.

Kreia, born from Chris Avellone questioning the founding concepts of *Star Wars* universe, is – simply put – one of the best video game characters of all time, and more than enough reason to play *The Sith Lords*.

***The Sith Lords* was originally released only for the Xbox and PC, but Aspyr Media developed official Mac and Linux ports in 2015, together with a patch adding Steam Workshop support.**

"A lot of it came from deep-rooted feelings and opinions about the *Star Wars* franchise, both positive and negative, and especially what it would feel like to be a Jedi or Sith in that universe. I've always had an issue with the Force because of its predestination aspects, and I wonder if any Jedi or Sith would ever want to rebel against it entirely... and if they'd be willing to give up their ties to the Force (and all that power) to do it."

– Chris Avellone, KotoR 2's lead designer



Kreia is one of the most memorable characters in gaming, and brings a unique perspective to the *Star Wars* universe.

If writing is *The Sith Lords*' highlight, combat is its weakest aspect. It hasn't changed much from its predecessor, except that the new skills are massively unbalanced – which has its good sides, as it enables players to get through encounters faster. The crafting system, on the other hand, has been greatly expanded and polished, providing many customisation options and allowing for power gaming, which manages to squeeze some additional fun from the combat.

The soundtrack is nothing short of excellent. Mark Griskey's work successfully complements the game's dark undertones and manages to convey the desired mood of every scene, all without losing that distinct feeling *Star Wars* music should have.

Sadly, due to a sudden change of heart from the publisher, Obsidian was forced to end development prematurely, releasing an unfinished and buggy game, cutting a big chunk of its content – which was later heroically restored by modders after years of work.

If you value well-crafted characters, mature plots and great writing in games, then you should definitely give *The Sith Lords* a try. Even if you favour combat-focused RPGs, the sheer strength of the aforementioned aspects should make you consider playing this gem, especially now that its technical problems have been addressed by modders. **JMR**

Mods:

The Sith Lords Restored Content Mod (TSLRCM): The team worked closely with some of Obsidian's developers to restore the game's cut content, while also fixing hundreds of bugs. A must-have.

M4-78EP: An optional part of the *TSLRCM*, it adds a new planet to the game, which was cut during development and had to be entirely recreated.

Revenge of Revan: A demo for a now abandoned fan-made expansion, it offers some great moments.



The Sith Lords' crafting system is one of the best in RPGs. It's very flexible and makes use of every skill in the game.



There are 12 companions in the game, with some of them exclusive to specific genders or alignments.



2005-2009 The era of AAA multi-platform games

The second half of the 00s saw the gaming industry almost entirely dominated by a few giant publishers like EA, Activision and Ubisoft, plus three console manufactures – Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft.

This oligopoly, coupled with the ever-high production costs, led to stagnation. To maximise profit, every third-party game had to come out on every possible platform, and avoiding risks was the rule of the day.

Successful games became "franchises", to be followed by a schedule of yearly releases. *Assassin's Creed* and *Call of Duty* are often held as icons of this, but many series vanished after several repetitive releases, such as *Guitar Hero, Rock Band*, *Tony Hawk*, *Need For Speed,* etc. A few, like *Tomb Raider* and *Mortal Kombat,* only being salvaged by recent reboots.

The arrival of the seventh console generation raised the development costs even further, and now marketing campaigns also required millions. Very few companies could keep up with such costs, and those who could began to sell their games as "AAA" – a way to set themselves apart.

To better fit this console-dominated world, many traditions from PCs had to be adopted, leading to innovations such as *Mass Effect's* (2007) dialogue wheel, *Gears of War's* (2006) slower paced cover-based shooting and the use of paid DLCs instead of packaged expansions.

However, people weren't interested only in cutting-edge games that cost millions of dollars to create. With Steam starting to sell third-party titles, GOG, Direct2Drive and Green Man Gaming being founded and Microsoft creating the Live Arcade market, it started to become possible for indies and smaller developers to reach a large audience.

But it was a slow process. Self-published games such as *Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich* (2005) suffered heavily early on, as buying non-AAA games during the mid-2000s wasn't easy – few physical stores sold them and digital distribution was still seen as confusing and unsafe.

Finally, while the financial recession of 2007-2008 didn't affect games as much as other industries, the crisis in printed journalism did. Several established gaming magazines such as *Computer Gaming World*, *PC Zone*, *Eletronic Gaming Monthly* and *Computer and Video Games* all went out of business, unable to compete with freely available websites.

It was a time centred on massive AAA titles and casual crazes like *Angry Birds* and *FarmVille,* designed to reach the largest audience possible. If you enjoyed them, you had a steady stream of popular hits. However, those interested in less popular genres and styles were left wanting, feeding off niche Eastern European titles, a few surviving mid-sized studios and rare indie titles like *Cave Story* and *Nethergate: Resurrection.*

Only at the very end of the decade, things started to change.

Trends:

Smartphones: Nokia had already shown the potential of mixing mobile phones with games when it added the famous *Snake* game to its Nokia 6110 back in 1997. The company would keep trying with the short-lived N-Gage, a mobile phone + handheld console hybrid, as well as with the expensive N95 smartphone. But it was only in 2007, with the release of Apple's iPhone, that smartphones would take over the world, quickly followed by Google's Android OS and a frenzy of mobile games – such as the iconic *Angry Birds* (2009).



Apple's 2007 iPhone and HTC's 2008 G1 Mobile – the first mobile phone to run Android OS.

Indie Games: While development costs for AAA games were as high as ever, new tools allowed for daring independent developers to make smaller games on their own, and the new digital distribution channels such as Steam and Xbox Live Arcade gave gamers easy access to these titles. This allowed the rise of games such as *Braid*, *Castle Crashers, Spelunky* and *World of Goo* – all released in 2008 – which proved there was a demand for fresh, smaller titles and paved the way for a now-booming indie scene.



Castle Crashers was released in 2008 and sold over 2.6 million copies on Xbox Live.

Facebook Games: In 2007, Facebook began to allow other companies to develop apps for its social network. What started with a very simple games soon led to a boon of social network games, such as Zynga's *Mafia Wars* and *FarmVille*. Like many browser games before them, they were free-to-play but designed around addictive micro-transactions systems – the "freemium" model. They conquered millions of players, with Zynga peaking at 265 million monthly active users spread across all its games in early 2013.



For two whole years, *FarmVille* was the most popular game on Facebook.



Guitar Hero sparks a trend of music rhythm games, with over 30 similar games being released in just a few years, then quickly dying out.



The Xbox 360 is released, with an improved (but chargeable) Xbox Live service. Despite initial technical issues, it sold over 85 million units.



Playstation 3 is released, offering Blu-ray playback, a complex multi-core processor and a free online service. It sold over 80 million units.



Blu-ray Disc wins the war against the HD-DVD and becomes the standard for the movie industry and, later, for 8th-gen consoles.



Minecraft's alpha version is released. It would become the quintessential indie game, insanely popular and selling over 100 million copies.

2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009



YouTube is launched, allowing anyone to easily publish and watch videos. A perfect fit for games, it became a new form of media and lead to extremely popular gaming channels.



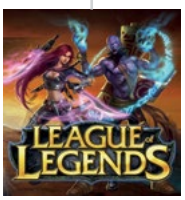
Steam, first released in 2003 as an update tool for Valve's games, begins to sell third-party titles. It would grow into the world's largest online game retailer, with over 125 million active users.



The Wii is released, introducing motion controls and targeting a broader audience outside core gamers. The most popular console of the seventh-generation, it sold over 100 million units.



Android OS is released, created by Google based on Linux. First used on smart-phones, it later jumped to tablets and consoles, such as the Nvidia Shield handheld and the crowd-funded Ouya.



League of Legends is released. Inspired by the *Warcraft III* mod *DOTA*, this free-to-play title became the world's most played game, with over 100 million players each month.

Super Columbine Massacre RPG!



Danny Ledonne, 2005
Windows

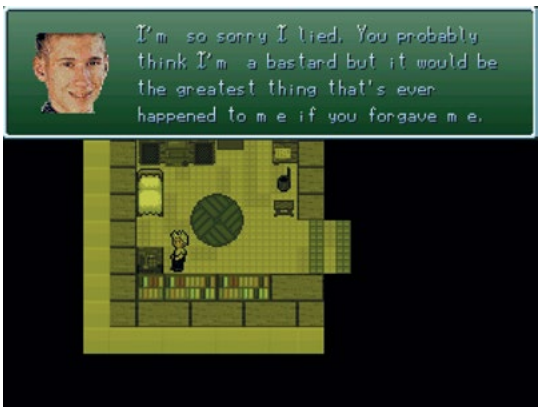
The game was released for free, together with a forum dedicated to debating the Columbine shootings.

On April 20, 1999, senior students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High School and began a school shooting, killing 12 students and one teacher, plus wounding 21 other victims. The two killers then committed suicide.

The United States was shocked by this tragedy, and the aftermath was a frantic search for reasons – and/or someone to blame –, be it guns, depression, bullying, Goth culture, Marylin Manson or violent video games – both boys were avid *Doom* players.

So, it's easy to imagine the public outrage when independent film-maker Danny Ledonne anonymously released *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, a free game where you play as Eric and Dylan.

First released on April 20, 2005, sixth years after the shootings, the game initially flew under the radar. However, about a year later it was reported on by gaming websites like Gamasutra, and soon the mainstream press was all over it, and the game eventually reached over 700,000 downloads. Danny Ledonne's identity as the game's author was then leaked, and so he decided to come out and stand up for his creation.



Flashback scenes provide background to the boys' lives, experiences and frustrations. Each flashback of suffering relived raises their level as killers.

An amateur game created on *RPG Maker 2003*, *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* blends 16-bit era sprites with digitalized photos of the tragedy, in a disturbing fusion of fiction and reality. The game begins with Eric and Dylan preparing themselves, sneaking into school to plant bombs and then executing the shooting, killing dozens of victims in JRPG-like battles. Said battles are almost entirely one-sided, with the victims mostly just cowering in fear, while you select a gun or bomb to kill them.

While a brutal game, violence in *SCMRPG!* is presented in a pointless, juvenile way, with lines like "Dylan dodges *Matrix* style" and other silly boasts. After the boys' suicide, there's a dream-like section where they go to Hell and fight hordes of *Doom* monsters, padded out to such length that even the bloodthirsty players will tire and question its purpose.

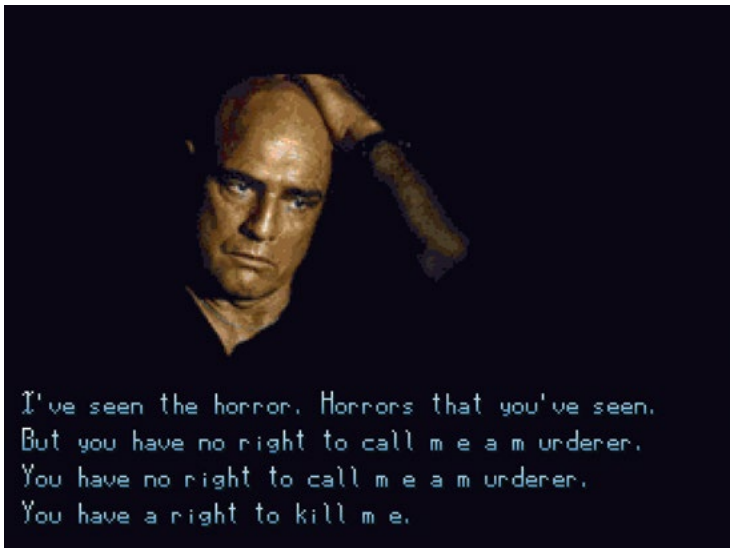
As you explore the school, you'll relieve the events of that tragic day, as well as trigger flashbacks of the frustration, anxiety and bullying that the two boys lived. There's a surprising and well-researched depth here, with the game taking a documentary-like approach and showing real facts of their lives, like how Eric was prescribed drugs for his social anxiety and those prevented him from joining the Marines, or how he ran into a school "rival" before starting the shootings, forgave him and told him to go home.

All these details provide a unique perspective into the tragedy. *SCMRPG!* was often criticised for trivialising the shootings, but in fact it humanises it. It places players in the shoes of the boys and offers a glimpse of why did they did it – and then lists them among the tragic losses that day, not as monsters.

Not everyone agrees, of course, with activists like Jack Thompson saying the game blatantly promotes similar actions, training new killers.

"Beyond the simple platitudes and panaceas of gun control, media ratings/censorship, bully prevention programmes, and parental supervision remains a glaring possibility: that the society we have created is deeply moribund. This game asks more of its audience than rudimentary button-pushing and map navigation; it implores introspection."

– *Danny Ledonne, SCMRPG!'s creator*



There are multiple references to movies, books, music and games that were part of Eric and Dylan's world, like *Apocalypse Now*, *Doom*, Marilyn Manson and even Nietzsche.

Things got worse when in 2006 another school shooting happened, this time in Montreal, Canada. Ledonne's game was brought once more into the media's spotlight, as it was revealed that the killer was a fan of violent games, namely *Postal 2*, *Manhunt*, *Max Payne* and *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*.

A year later, *SCMRPG!* was chosen as a finalist for the Slamdance Guerrilla Gamemaker Competition. But, in a sudden twist, it was pulled from the contest on alleged "moral obligations". In protest, a group of other competitors – including the developers of *Braid*, *flOw* and *Castle Crashers* – wrote an open letter to the Slamdance organisers, arguing that the decision was "[...] hurting the legitimacy of games as a form of expression, exploration, and experience".*

Outraged by the removal of the game, the jury of the Slamdance Film Festival decided to award the game a Special Jury Prize, this time as a documentary. Once again, the Slamdance organisers vetoed the award.

In the end, more than half of the finalists ended up removing their games from the contest in protest, and Slamdance never hosted a video game festival since. Danny Ledonne further explored these events with a 2008 documentary titled *Playing Columbine*, focused on the controversy surrounding *SCMRPG!* and the perception of games as children's toys.

When covering the festival incident in 2007, New York Times reporter Heather Chaplin elegantly wrote "Video Game Tests the Limits. The Limits Win". In hindsight, that was only momentarily true.

Super Columbine Massacre RPG! may have lost the Slamdance award, but it sparked a global debate about the role and value of video games as media that is still going on today, and inspired other developers to use games to explore serious real-world issues. *SCMRPG!* did break the limits on what games can talk about, and in doing so became one of the most important video games ever made. **FE**

***You can read the open letter from the indie developers to the Slamdance contest here.**

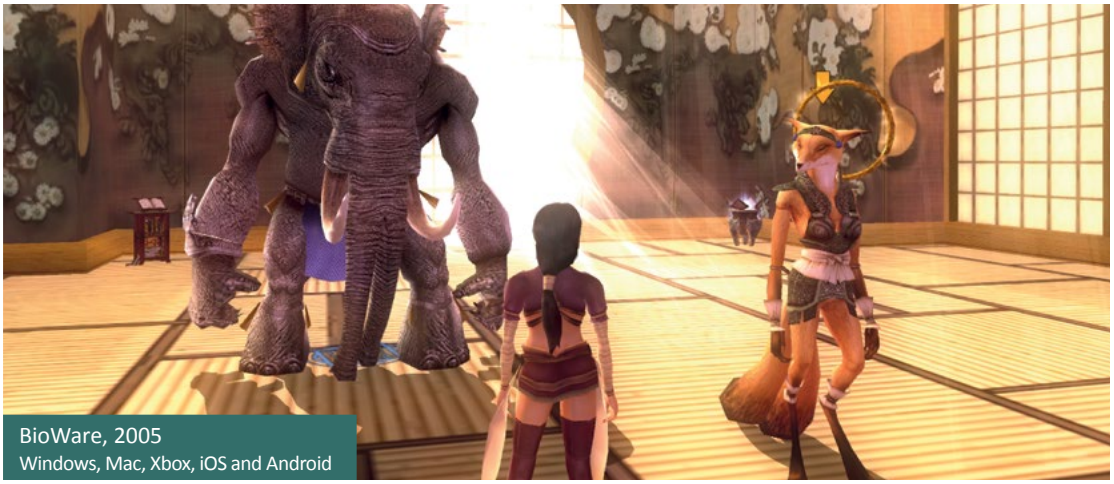


The massacre victims are dehumanised through Eric and Dylan's eyes, seen as nameless stereotypes and cliques.



The game ends with various people speaking about the tragedy, each with a different, external target to blame.

Jade Empire



BioWare, 2005
Windows, Mac, Xbox, iOS and Android

***Jade Empire* was first released for the Xbox in 2005. The Windows port came in 2007, called *Special Edition* and adding extra features. In 2016, BioWare also ported the game to mobile platforms.**

There's a popular saying about good art being about constraints, not about freedom. *Jade Empire* sees BioWare freed from the constraints of the *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset and setting, as well as from the looming presence of the *Star Wars* canon. The studio had total creative freedom for the first time since *Shattered Steel*, back in 1996.

The result? A mix of wonderful creative invention and dreadful literary excess.

The most striking aspect on display is the game's "wuxia" setting. BioWare's Far Eastern fantasy world is ripe with lore and lush with colour. It's a land of travelling merchants, of martial artists looking to hone their craft, where elements and spirits exert palpable influence in the world. But in mixing and matching from the rich source material, BioWare didn't add enough of its own. The world is a pastiche of influences from Chinese cinema and literature. It is an unusual, underused setting, but it never feels original.

Meanwhile, too many characters are far too eager to dump lore on you for the sake of doing so. *Jade Empire*'s world is likely to bore you into not caring about it before you're done with the first village.



The character system is very simplistic: there are three stats, upgrades to each fighting style, a morality bar and gems that you equip in your magical amulet.

If the world-building is tepid, the narrative is anything but. What starts as a familiar "Chosen One" quest leads to one of the best plot twists in gaming. Good twists are the ones where you have the clues to figure them out laid before you, but they surprise you anyway. Twists like this are rare and hard to pull off in games. *Jade Empire* manages it, in what is one of BioWare's finest storytelling moments to date. That it shines despite the filler dialogue and weak voice acting speaks to its strength.

Companion characters, the bread-and-butter of BioWare's modern output, are hit-and-miss. Most talk too much while having very little to say – even the romances feel like a bit of an afterthought. The ones that stand out do so thanks to their quirky personalities. In fact, *Jade Empire* is at its best when it tries to be funny and tongue-in-cheek. But more than any other BioWare RPG, this story is all about you.

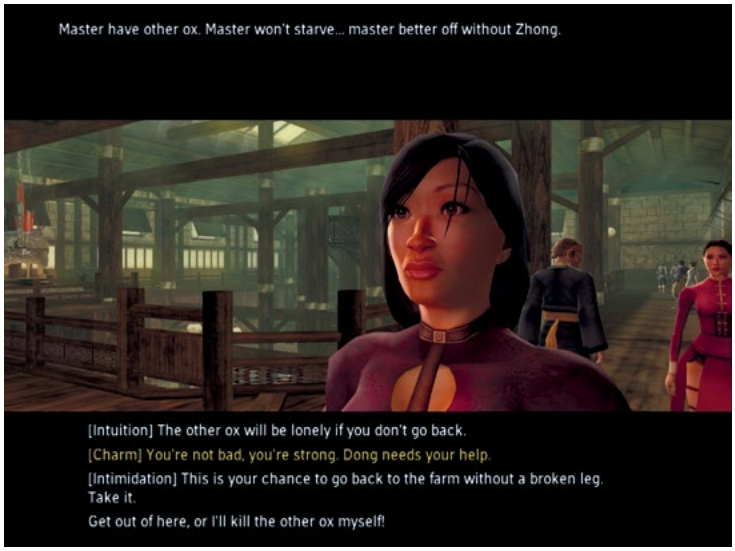
Combat-wise, *Jade Empire* sees the company abandoning its usual real-time-with-pause combat for a full action-based system. This feels more natural on a console and would serve as a stepping stone to *Mass Effect*, but the transition wasn't smooth.

When combat starts, the camera zooms out and locks on an enemy. Then, it's a matter of dodging, strafing, blocking and attacking at the right time – alternating quick, power and area attacks to create combos – often against several opponents. Still, your biggest foe will likely be the game's poor camera.

During your journey you'll learn over 30 fighting styles. Some vary in speed and strength; others inflict status afflictions. A few focus on weapons and elemental magic, and there are even styles that transform you into a giant Toad Demon or a Jade Golem. You can equip up to four at one and switch between them during combat – even midway through combos.

"One of the things that the designers were looking forward to the most was not having the restrictions of a licence. A licence is really beneficial when it comes to structure and the framework of a game, and you can take a lot from research. *Star Wars* was a great example of that – we were really able to reinterpret it all. However, just to be able to do anything you want, and know that you're not contravening the rules or someone else's idea of how it should all go, is cool."

– *Diarmid Clarke, Jade Empire's project director*



Jade Empire offers three different dialogue skills, each tied to one of its stats. The way you solve quests also affect your alignment.

Knowing when to use each style makes up the bulk of the combat. The way you finish your combo will determine the kind of energy your defeated foe leaves behind. It can either be Health, Mana or Focus.

The first is self-explanatory; healing and magic attacks consume the second, while Focus fuels weapon fighting styles and your character's time-slowing, *Matrix*-inspired ability. This Focus ability is one of the most useful, as the floaty controls and sub-par camera make fights against several opponents a harsh affair.

Character customisation is minimal. You start with a choice of seven pre-made warriors to pick from, and can alter their stats and initial combat styles.

Jade Empire only has three stats, each tied to your resource pools. They also double as skill checks during conversations. Loot and equipment management are also heavily streamlined – all you'll find are gems that the main character can affix to their pendant, usually offering simple stat boosts. That's it.

As for exploration, *Jade Empire* is a linear game, with very little to find off the beaten path. Some of the main quests offer several, often diverging paths toward a resolution. The way you choose, in turn, will influence other characters and push you towards the Path of the Open Palm or the Path of the Closed Fist – two martial arts philosophies that aim high, but lack nuance and play out as "good and evil" alignments.

Despite the weak mechanics, the need for an extra dialogue passes, and a lore-dump approach to world-building, *Jade Empire* still retains some charm. Not only is it a chance to adventure in an underused setting, but the art style hold up well, with each area showcasing that Far Eastern mystique. And the central narrative is still BioWare at its finest.

However, the many flaws that players stomached years ago are became harder to forgive today. While the rest of BioWare's catalogue has aged somewhat gracefully, *Jade Empire* has not. **LM**

Those seeking to expand *Jade Empire* can try the *Jade Empire in Style mod*, which adds several new combat styles and rebalances existing ones.



Only one companion will follow you at a time. You can order he/she to fight or to act as support during combat.



When travelling across the world by plane, you'll have the option to play a simple shoot 'em up mini-game.

Fate



WildTangent, 2005
Windows and Mac

Fate had humble beginnings, born an accessible yet deep *Diablo* clone developed in a mere five months. The game was quite successful, leading to four stand-alone versions: the original 2005 game; *Fate: Undiscovered Realms* in 2008; *Fate: The Traitor Soul* in *2009* and *Fate: The Cursed King* in 2011. Each release adds new content and features, but the game itself is basically the same: a *Diablo*-like dungeon crawler with one town and an endless dungeon under it.

You can find a handy archive of *Fate*'s mods and tools, plus guides on how to set them up at www.surdin.net/archive



Fate was designed as a casual-friendly mix of *Diablo* and roguelikes, with an art style that tries to be cute without being childish.



Each new version keeps the core gameplay but adds content and features, such as more pets, new player races and recruitable NPCs.

Each game offers a wide variety of monsters, random dungeons and an endless diversity of suffix/prefix-constructed loot. In each dungeon, you'll need to finish one random main quest to win (usually killing a boss at a deep level), and in the process you'll complete many randomly generated side-quests.

Where differs *Fate* from the most *Diablo* clones is the ability to adventure infinitely: there's no level-up limit and dungeons are endless: you can descend lower and lower, gaining more and more powerful loot and fulfilling new random quests. After finishing the main quest you can retire your hero, creating an "inheritance" to be given to his descendant in the next game.

The character system is quite straightforward, with several stats and skills that can be upgraded at level-up. The different races (added in *Traitor Soul*) differ only in initial parameters and appearance. What really determines your hero is your equipment and spells, so you can tune your playstyle freely.

Other features include a gambler, an equipment enchanter and a pet – initially a cat or dog, but you can transform it into much more powerful monsters by feeding it fish. Ah, yes, fishing! You can fish for progressively more powerful fishes and items.

If all this feels familiar, it's because *Fate*'s creator, Travis Baldree, later also worked on *Torchlight* (2009), taking most of *Fate's* features with him.

Another shared trait is the extensive modding, with fans adding a lot of content, gameplay tweaks, changing monster density, camera controls, etc.

Unfortunately, *Fate* has one big issue: it's not pretty. Graphics are quite simple, muddy and have barely been improved in the subsequent versions. Yet, while *Torchlight* might be more polished, the infinite randomness of *Fate* is worth trying for those who can overlook graphics in favour of addictive gameplay. **SS**

Titan Quest



Iron Lore Entertainment, 2006
Windows

Mythological RPGs are surprisingly rare, but *Titan Quest* does its best to make up for it. As a Greek hero trying to find the source of a monster infestation, you'll travel across Greece, Egypt, the Silk Road and China, then climb Olympus, descend into Hades and cross the Bifrost into Valhalla. No one can say this is "just another *Diablo* clone".

Alongside the mythological setting, *Titan Quest's* defining feature is its character system. Instead of classes, the game has eight masteries (ten with the two expansions), each with its own skill tree. The trick is that each character can learn up to two masteries. So you can pick the Earth mastery, which specialises in AoE spells, and play a pure caster; combine it with the Defense mastery to increase survivability; or with the Storm mastery for more single-target spells; and so on.

It's a fascinating and deep system that allows for 55 different mastery combinations, plus the variations from your choices inside each individual skill tree!

While this sounds amazing, *Titan Quest* fails to fully take advantage of it. Combat is far too easy and items don't offer much more than simple stat bonuses, making all that character-building feel underused. Moreover, this is not a game that's fun to replay.

Unlike other *Diablo*-like games, the world of *TQ* isn't random – enemies and areas are always the same. This enables visually stunning landmarks like Athens, the Great Wall of China or the Pyramid of Giza, but most of your time will be spend on generic plains and mountains, killing the same foes over and over again.

This is made worse by the game's difficulty system, where you must complete it twice to unlock the highest difficulty setting (which has additional bosses and items) – something that can take up to 40 hours per character! This made sense in *Diablo II*, but *Titan Quest's* world simply doesn't have the same quality and variety.

Iron Lore closed down after releasing the *Immortal Throne* expansion in 2007, but THQ Nordic remastered the game in 2016, then released the *Ragnarök* expansion in 2017. These add even more length to a game that's already overly long, making them rather niche in appeal.

Instead, those looking for a fresh take on *Titan Quest*'s mastery system might enjoy *Grim Dawn* (2016), a great Action RPG by original *TQ* developers, which employs the same engine and many similar features. **FE**

Titan Quest has great support for modding, leading to popular mods such as _Diablo 2 Lilith_, which adds _Diablo II_'s classes and a new world, and Soulvizier, which expands the game with new classes, monsters and items.

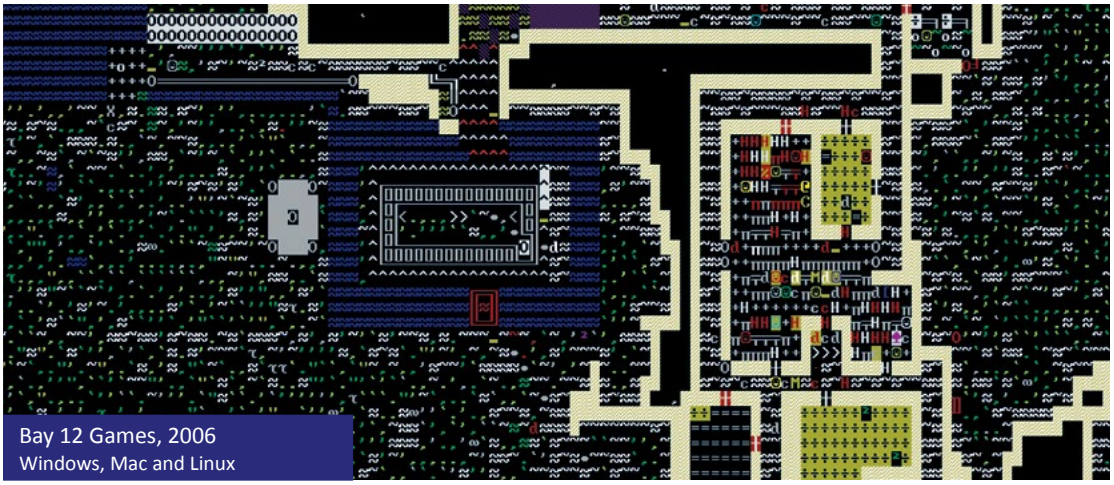


Titan Quest has an amazing art style and makes great use of iconic landmarks. Sadly, most of your time is spent on generic areas that drag for too long.



You can spend points learning and improving skills, or use them to level up the mastery itself, earning stat boosts and unlocking more powerful skills.

Dwarf Fortress



Bay 12 Games, 2006
Windows, Mac and Linux

***Dwarf Fortress'* full official name is *Slaves to Armok: God of Blood - Chapter II: Dwarf Fortress*. The game is a "sequel" to *Slaves to Armok: God of Blood*, a crude 3D roguelike Tarn Adams created in the early 2000s.**

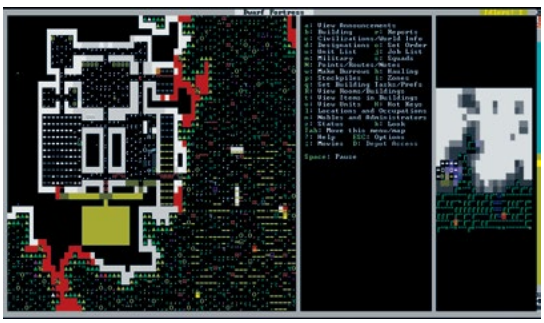
In your typical Tolkien-esque fantasy world, plenty of favour is given to the elves, the halflings, even the humans. But *Dwarf Fortress* is a game that will make you fall in love with the dwarves.

The game is freeware, developed almost entirely by Tarn Adams, with help from his brother Zach. The first alpha build released in 2006, and, after ten years in development, it still isn't exactly "finished". But while some games usually suffer for such a long development time, *Dwarf Fortress* has only become a greater, more complete experience over time.

There are two play modes to the game, and they function very differently. The first is Fortress Mode, which plays much like a real-time strategy game or a management/sim game, where the player has the run of an entire fortress full of dwarves, giving them instructions of what to build and how to survive.

The other mode is Adventure Mode, in which the player controls a single character (not necessarily a dwarf) and freely travels through an open world, taking quests, slaying monsters and collecting items, much like a traditional roguelike.

What really sets *Dwarf Fortress* apart is the staggering depth and complexity of its systems – it may be the most mechanically complex game ever.



In Fortress Mode you assign tasks such as "dig this wall", and the dwarves tasked with the appropriate professions perform them.

Take world generation for example. The first thing a player must do upon starting the game is have a random world generated. This world is formed with surprising realism. Mountain ranges form in realistic lines, rivers will flow across the land, carving out fertile valleys, and rain shadows will form deserts on the far sides of mountain ranges.

Then an extensive history for this world will be generated, with civilisations rising and falling, titans raiding towns, wars being waged, heroes appearing, etc. This will all be reflected in the factions that visit your fortress, and in the areas your hero can explore.

Physics also play a prominent role in the game's functionality. In a seemingly simple action, such as a dwarf swinging a hammer at a goblin, so many factors come into play. The game will consider the force of the dwarf's swing, the quality and material of the dwarf's hammer (a silver one would be heavier than a copper one, and therefore more effective), the thickness and quality of any armour the goblin may be wearing (which is also dependent on the specific body part struck), how many layers of armour and clothing there may be, the thickness of the goblin's skin, muscles, and bones, and more.

Through all of this, the game subverts typical damage-tracking in the form of hit points, and instead uses a broader, somewhat more vague system in which body parts may be bruised, cut, broken, mangled to various degrees, or lopped off entirely. On top of all that, the game also considers any cut arteries, severed nerves and even the character's personality.

Discussing all the game's mechanics requires an entire book (and indeed there are books and even theses on them), but, thanks to the interplay between these systems, one of the biggest draws to *Dwarf Fortress* is that it's a great storytelling game.

"We have story analysis stuff we do to plan the game where we write a short story, just some typical fantasy story, and be like, 'What makes this story interesting? Where are the inflection points that really turn it into a narrative that pops out of it?' We want that to happen when people are playing the game. We want them to have something they can hold onto and then tell their friends [...]"

– *Tarn "Toady" Adams, Dwarf Fortress' creator*



Adventure Mode stands out from other roguelikes due to its simulationist approach. Combat, NPC dialogue and even enemy behaviour all feel dynamic and unique.

This isn't to say that the game has a well-written narrative, or really much of a written narrative at all. Rather, every person who plays *Dwarf Fortress* comes out of the experience with their own unique story. You may dig too deep, find an ancient beast, kill it, or see your fortress infected by a disease spread by the beast's blood. Or perhaps play as a bold, brash Elven hero that loses a leg in battle but still roams the land, wielding a sword in one hand, a crutch in the other.

The game is also notorious for its graphics and control scheme, which many new players find all but impenetrable. By default, the game uses an ASCII tileset, representing every creature and object in the game as a unicode character, but the game is easily moddable to use graphical tilesets.

The controls, particularly in Fortress Mode, seem unintuitive at first, but this is due to the game relying largely on hotkeys which are normally reserved for more advanced players in a typical strategy game.

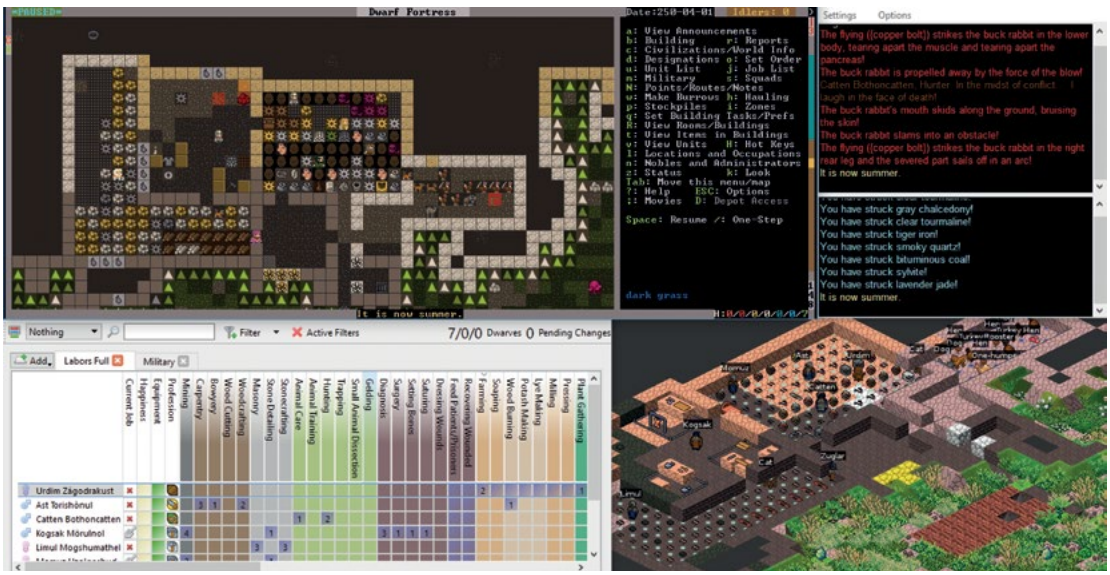
Dwarf Fortress' astonishing depth comes from over a decade of tireless development. The first release didn't even allow for multiple Z-levels; the whole game was limited to a two-dimensional plane.

In 2011, Tarn Adams stated that the game could very well be in development for another 20 years and still not reach version 1.0. And even then, he would probably keep updating it, in his pursuit of simulating the "narratively interesting parts of existence".

He receives enough money in fan donations that he is able to live comfortably, and he has stated that he intends to always keep those humble roots, never signing with any publisher or development company, funding the game solely through donations.

Although it may never be entirely finished, the importance of *Dwarf Fortress* is undeniable. It stands as a one-of-a-kind game that achieved a rare, perfect balance between procedurally generated elements and the importance of player input. **TT**

There are several mods, hacks, utilities and graphical tilesets made for *Dwarf Fortress*. Beginners may wish to start with the *Lazy Newb Pack*, which includes the most popular tiles, utilities and customisation options.



Modders have created a wealth of tilesets and utilities, such Dwarf Therapist, an app for managing the dwarves' jobs; and Stonesense, which renders the isometric graphics of your fortress.

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion



Bethesda Game Studios, 2006
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

***Oblivion* was among the first games to use the Xbox 360's marketplace to sell DLCs. It was harshly criticised for charging $2.50 dollars for a set of cosmetic horse armour, which became a term associated with overpriced DLCs in games.**

Oblivion represents a fundamental change in core audience for the venerable *The Elder Scrolls* franchise. While this was a franchise born on the PC platform, *Morrowind* was a trailblazer that opened up the console audience to a new type of RPG. Instead of the generally linear and narrative-driven Japanese RPGs that defined this type of game on consoles, *The Elder Scrolls* were games about an open world which involved crafting your own character and story.

To this end, *Oblivion* placed pumping up production value as its first and foremost priority. The game had a cutting-edge physics system where objects could be moved around and thrown, very high 3D graphical fidelity, full voice acting, a realistic action combat system and many other features.

While none of the production value here was a peak industry-wise, the fact that they managed so high a quality across a game of such size was nothing short of remarkable from a development perspective.

But this was also the time of soaring development costs. Such investment enforces commercialism from the top down without skipping a beat.



An oblivion gate, which leads to one of the hellish Daedric planes. While interesting at first, these dungeons quickly grow repetitive.

Gone is the unique oriental influence of *Morrowind* that saw it being populated with alien mushroom landscapes and complex political intrigue. Instead we are back in the safe embrace of token Tolkien European fantasy, complete with wolves, goblins and evil demons to slay. If only this was the only misstep.

Voice acting meant that the text was pruned extensively, much of it being to the point and related to whatever current quest the player is on. The days of stopping a passer-by to talk about the local news, geography of the land and political upheaval are gone. And though Patrick Steward was advertised as providing the voice of the Emperor, this proved to be a marketing ruse since he dies in the tutorial and the rest of the game has a small cast which leads to uncanny valley moments where people are having conversations while having the same voice.

This stripping away of complexities applies to the world and story as well: hellish portals appear across the land due to the Emperor and his entire magical bloodline being assassinated. But said land is mostly unaffected by this event. The side-content focuses on mundane dangers like bandits or other unrelated world threats. It's downright bizarre to hear the population express just minor concern over what is supposed to be the end of the world according to religious canon.

For all the those faults though, it must be said that the quest design significantly improved; in fact, it's one of the areas where the title excels. While lacking the context of *Morrowind*'s quests, which were more about the setting and political intrigue, *Oblivion* provides excellent opportunities for adventures, such as exorcising a haunted manor bought cheap or travelling through someone's mind to wake them up. The Dark Brotherhood assassination quests in particular are some of the best in the series.



A radical departure from *Morrowind's* customisable UI, *Oblivion's* interface is list-based and designed for consoles.



Oblivion added two mini-games: a reflex-based one for lock-picking and a crude logic puzzle for speechcraft.



Many of the old-school RPG elements were streamlined, but others were kept intact, resulting in an uneven game.



The *Shivering Isles* expansion moves away from generic European fantasy, sending you into a plane of madness.

Gameplay-wise, *Oblivion* uses an action combat system with realistic hit detection, a clear departure from the statistical combat hidden by faux animations from the previous games. While this leads to better game feeling in all areas, it plays the same way from start to finish. No longer are there enemies that drain stats which require special medicine to reverse, nor the annoyingly charming Cliff Racers of *Morrowind* that would swoop down on the player. Outside of vampires that can turn invisible, *Oblivion*'s combat is all about smacking enemies and seeing their life bar go down.

Admittedly, the trap design of dungeons does try to shore up fights by adding environmental factors, and turning them against enemies is rewarding but it is not enough to redeem the rest of the experience.

Every issue mentioned here gets amplified by the invasive level-scaling system, which not only spawns creatures appropriate to your current progress – e.g. replacing a pack of wolves with a group of minotaurs – but also levels up them up to match you, making every encounter, again, fall into a rigid sameness quickly.

The game also sold itself on its Radiant AI, which supposedly gave dynamic schedules to NPCs. However, given the small population and the obvious moments when they stop to execute their script, it mostly resulted in generating the uncanny valley effect yet again.

Oblivion is and shall remain a controversial title. The wonderment of console players first exposed to a massive living world proves the game worthy of praise. But just as genuine was the bitterness of CRPG fans that hold *Oblivion* (along with *Fallout 3*) as the seminal example of the trend to mutilate CRPG design into palatable slop for the console mass market. **LL**

Mods:

Unofficial Oblivion Patch: fixes thousands of bugs.

DarNified UI: Offers an interface more suited for PCs.

Oscuro's Oblivion Overhaul: A large mod that adds monsters, items, quests and removes level-scaling.

Nehrim: At Fate's Edge: A brilliant total overhaul mod that often surpasses the original game.

***Oblivion* received two expansions: *Knights of the Nine* asks you to collect a set of relics to fight the Sorcerer-King, while the critically acclaimed *Shivering Isles* sends players to the plane of madness.**

Dungeon Crawl: Stone Soup



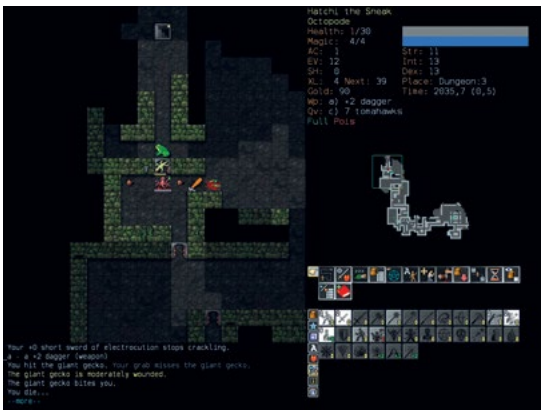
Robert Alan Koeneke, 2006*
Windows, Linux and OS X

***The original *Crawl* was released in 1995, but the *Stone Soup* development branch began only in 2006.**

A huge part part of the roguelike's appeal is its mystery: random generation means that no two games will be the same and makes memorisation 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 (levelling up, collecting items) and the knowledge of different strategies for dealing with the inevitable appearance of something he/she 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.



How many games allow you to play as a stealthy octopus assassin? Far from a mere gimmick, each of the many exotic races offers a unique playstyle.

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 so far as to remove the ability to sell items in shops. In addition to trying to make the 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: it's inspired by *NetHack*'s persistent levels with special rooms, multiple dungeon branches, focus on preparation rather than levelling up, etc. However, it also 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 armour but get additional lives after levelling 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.

"My favourite gameplay mechanic is roguelike permadeath: 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 different benefits while at the same time requiring a specific code of conduct – those range from simple, like Elyvilon wanting you to destroy weapons and avoid 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 an 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. It was first released in 1997, then constantly updated until 2003.

The "stone soup" version was supposed to be a temporary fork when the development team went on a hiatus, but after some time it was clear that the project was abandoned and *DCSS* became the official version.

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 flavour 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 favour of Nemelex Xobeh, the Trickster God. A terrible punishment for this betrayal awaits us.

Gothic 3



Piranha Bytes, 2006
Windows

***Gothic 3*'s release was plagued by game-breaking bugs, which led to bad reviews and a "Disappointment of the Year" award. The Community Patch fixed most issues and is now officially endorsed by the game's publisher.**

Gothic 3 might be one of the most ambitious games ever attempted, trying to rival *The Elder Scrolls* for size but with the specific depth that Piranha Bytes showcased in their much-lauded *Gothic* series. But greatness is not made by ambition alone sadly, and saying this game is a gem in the rough would be an understatement.

Following on *Gothic 2*'s ending, the nameless protagonist now reaches the mainland, where the Kingdom of Myrtana is under Orc subjugation. While Orcs in the previous games were just savages, the mainland conquerors are less Tolkien and more Klingon. They have an orderly warrior culture based on strength, but also a meritocracy with a strong sense of justice. This change was necessary to push the player towards possibly thinking of the Orcs in a positive light, maybe even allying with them, as *Gothic 3* features one of the most interesting reputation systems ever attempted.

The Orcs and the human rebels (as well as other factions) have their own rating for the hero and raising it will grant access to new quests, gear and areas. Moreso, each town has its own individual rating, and when it is high enough the hero is allowed to see the town's leader. From there he can decide to overthrow the current establishment or crush the dissidents.



Gothic 3's combat is fundamentally flawed, as you can stun-lock almost any enemy simply by attacking first.

This system isn't limited just to the Orcs and human rebels in the temperate kingdom of Myrtana. *Gothic 3*'s world is huge, spanning three regions and over a dozen towns, with a similar faction choice to be made regarding the Hashishin and Nomads who live in the southern desert land of Varant. Unfortunately, the northern arctic region of Nordmar only has quests that allow siding with the local Barbarians against the Orcs, as such, the whole area just feels unfinished.

Sadly, that feeling pervades the entire game. While the idea of growing your reputation in each given city is amazing, in practice it's less so, since it mostly boils down to performing fetch quests. Some of these are well-contextualised, like playing spy for the Orcish mercenaries, but for the most part they are menial jobs like getting meat or killing wolves for each town and village – an exercise in pure tedium.

To top this off is the fact that there isn't much interconnectivity between factions. You can complete quests in all towns and need only decide which side to take during the endgame, which makes it shallow and much less replayable than previous *Gothic*s, where they forced you into a faction from the start. This is further reinforced by the fact that if more than a few towns are freed or rebellions crushed then the defeated factions will attack you on sight, something which isn't explained to the player in any way.

But even with all that there's a sense of wonder to be derived from actually impacting the world by deciding who will rule each town. The game doesn't hold your hand and allows you to go anywhere, do anything and kill anyone from the start. And while the story is almost non-existent for most of the game, there are three possible endings based on the faction you end up supporting, plus slides showing the fate of key characters. Yet, *Gothic 3* could have been so much more.

"What happens with the narrative when a major character dies? How can we tell a story without a reliable narrator? In this point we didn't meet our own expectations. The story is great but it slumbers beneath the surface and cannot really take off, because there is no mouthpiece to tell it."

– *Kai Rosenkranz, Gothic 3's developer and composer*



Some areas like this desert stronghold can only be entered after you gained enough reputation with their faction. Or killed the guards.

The other aspects of this game don't have such extenuating circumstances. Gone is the rewarding exploration with hand-placed items, replaced by progressive randomised loot where the contents of chests you find are decided by the number of chests previously opened. This results in situations where the player manages to brave caves filled with monsters only to be rewarded with junk, while finding the better items in chests on the side of the road.

Combat is a shadow of its former self: melee is decided by who manages to strike first due to stun-locking – a far cry from the previous *Gothic*s where timing was essential. There's also a new, completely unnecessary endurance bar that quickly drains as soon as combat starts and makes no sense in a game with lengthy town battles. Archery, on the other hand, is improved due to adding manual aiming and physics, which made it feel much more satisfying.

Magic is relatively the same, but the progression structure was changed for the worse. You don't start as a mundane character that has to prove himself if he wants to become a mage – now you can focus on magic from the beginning. Some of the higher level spells are quite spectacular, like changing night into day, but only the player has access to them since all other mages are limited to basic offensive spells.

Engine-wise, *Gothic 3* looks quite good for its time, and the lack of any loading screen in such a huge open world is an impressive feat. That said, there are plenty of visual quirks that require some tweaking – the draw distance especially, since it's pitifully small. The game is also too colourful and bright for the grim atmosphere it wants to portray, something that its predecessors did quite well.

It should be noted that *Gothic 3* was bug-ridden on launch and only after extensive patching by the community was it truly finished. More than that, the fans added an optional alternative AI and system balancing to the game, but all it does, ultimately, is smooth a broken experience. While the community's bug fixes are absolutely essential, breezing through the game on Easy as a mage with the alternative changes disabled is probably the most enjoyable way to see what this game does well.

In its own twisted way, *Gothic 3* is an endearing game, thanks to its scope and ambition in creating a living, breathing world – which was beyond the time and budget Piranha Bytes had available. Even so, there are a couple of unique elements here, and with the proper patches it is a worthwhile experience. Not necessarily one that needs to be finished, but one that can offer some worthwhile moments. **LL**

In 2008 JoWooD Entertainment published *Gothic 3: Forsaken Gods*, a stand-alone expansion developed by Trine Games. Sadly, it's little more than a quick cash-in, replicating *Gothic 3*'s faults without any of its redeeming qualities.



Gothic 3 offers an excellent map that tracks the locations you've discovered, their quests and your reputation.

Mods:

Community Patch: Absolutely essential, it eliminates hundreds of game-breaking bugs. It also offers optional alternative balancing/AI, which makes the game harder and more complex – thought arguably not better.

Questpaket: Adds a lot of new content to the game, especially new quests. Has fan-made German voice acting but a rather poor English translation.

Content Mod: Expands upon the Questpaket, adding even more quests, items, equipment and new textures.

Neverwinter Nights 2



Obsidian Entertainment, 2006
Windows and Mac

NWN 2 uses an updated version of _NWN_'s Aurora engine, called Electron. Obsidian moved it from OpenGL to DirectX, planning for an Xbox 360 release. However, due to lack of funds the port was never made.

Obsidian's second game, once again a sequel to a BioWare title, *Neverwinter Nights 2* is set in the *Forgotten Realms,* based on a modified *Dungeons & Dragons 3.5* ruleset. The game features a long single-player campaign, an elaborate toolset for making custom content, as well as a multiplayer that allow players to create persistent role-playing servers, or just play through the game with a friend or two.

The most impressive feature of *NWN2* is the character system, sporting a very generous amount of classes, races and build options, including the option to pick multiple classes as your character improves. Few games can compare when it comes to the sheer variety of options for creating and developing your character. You could be a gnomish cleric/rogue who specialises in assassination, or perhaps a half-angel warlock mowing down enemies with dark magic and a fire-enchanted scythe.

Equally impressive is that the game features several template builds for each class, providing ample guidance on what to pick for players who, like myself, have little prior familiarity with the *D&D* ruleset. It is everything a power gamer could hope for, while still being entirely accessible for the newcomer.

The only real flaw of the character system is a slight lack of documentation, making external aids like wikis a requirement for an in-depth planning and understanding of your options, although this will only bother those who really like the gritty details.

Sadly, combat does not live up to the promises of the character system, featuring a messy real-time-with-pause system and a clunky camera that makes it hard to tell what is going on, further obscured by fancy spell effects that block your view.

And cast spells you will, because there's no limit to resting, and therefore no limit to spell-casting and health restoration. Combat is further hampered by a generally poor AI and, in the campaign, a lack of good encounter design, making tactics mostly unnecessary. Overall, most battles will amount to little more than watching combat rounds roll on while you wait for the enemy health bars to deplete.

Outside of combat, *NWN2* also features various skill checks, both in-dialogue and while exploring, and a crafting system, which works but isn't exciting. The enjoyment from these activities depends a lot on the writing and dungeon design, which most of the time works well enough, a few boring areas excepted.



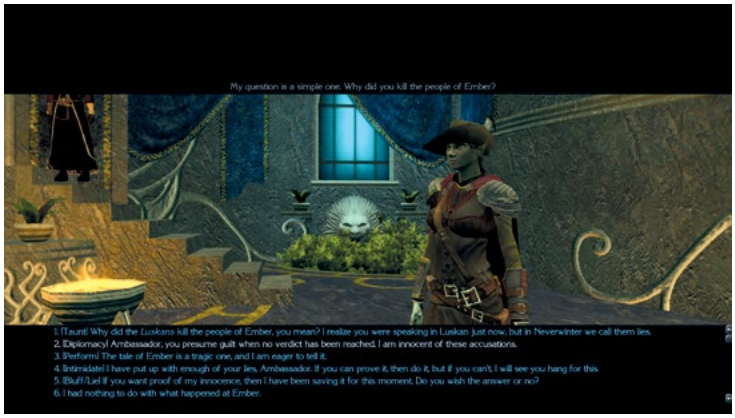
*C*haracter creation fully employs *D&D 3.5*, with dozens of races, sub-races, classes and prestige classes to choose.



Eventually you'll get to manage a stronghold, rebuilding its walls, training guards and making various decisions.

"The biggest problems during development were an unrealistic scope and a lack of focus on quality/fun from the beginning. It's arguable that the former resulted in the latter. With *D&D* games, it's easy to become consumed by the idea of adding every feat, class, and race you can find in various books."

– *Josh Sawyer, NWN 2's lead designer*



NWN2 makes great use of skill checks, especially during some of its dialogs, where it presents multiple approaches with varying results.

NWN2's campaign is split into three acts: the first featuring low-level adventuring on the road to and inside the city of Neverwinter, the second revolving around an excellent trial, and the third around gathering allies to stop the big bad.

The campaign as a whole is not bad or particularly good, but the pacing of the first act is horrendous, involving seemingly endless traipses to dungeons to unlock plot gates. The trial in the second act is a great example of how to do dialogue as a boss battle, only slightly undercut by the fact that your failure means nothing. The third act gives the player a stronghold to manage, providing a much-needed breath of fresh air, even if the decisions are mostly without consequence.

During the campaign, you are joined by four-at-a-time of 12 total companions (mostly at your choice, sometimes imposed), one of every base class except the Barbarian. This makes all PC classes relevant, but the writing is spread a bit thin, and most of the characters are stereotypes of their class. They will sometimes interject during quests, allowing you to gain or lose loyalty with them, which has consequences later in the campaign when that loyalty is tested.

Overall, *NWN2* is a very strong foundation for a good CRPG, but the content is lacking, something which was addressed in the expansions.



NWN2 features three different camera and control modes, from third-person to top-down, but they all work poorly.

The first one, *Mask of the Betrayer*, featured a new campaign with vastly improved writing, while the second expansion, *Storm of Zehir*, introduced one with much stronger gameplay. *NWN2* also received an official third-party adventure pack made by Ossian Studios called *Mysteries of Westgate*, featuring a small city with less but more significant combat.

With all this considered, *Neverwinter Night 2* is more successful as a foundation for a great RPG than it is one itself, but it is still worth checking out, if only for mods or as an appetizer for the expansions. **JA**

Mods:

NWN2's toolset is very powerful, but lost NWN1's accessibility. Still, fans created some fantastic content:

Tony_K's Companion and Monster AI Mod: Improves the game's AI, making it smarter and adding many quality-of-life features and improvements.

Kaedrin's PrC Pack: Adds many new races, classes and prestige classes, plus new spells and cleric domains.

Baldur's Gate Reloaded: A complete remake of the first *Baldur's Gate,* updated to fit the *D&D 3.5* ruleset.

Wulverheim: A huge, open-world sandbox campaign, heavily inspired by *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion.*

Pool of Radiance Remastered: An award-winning remake of classic CRPG *Pool of Radiance*.

The Maimed God's Saga: A brilliant module where you play a cleric of Tyr sent on a quest that will test his faith. Has great writing and a heavy role-playing focus.

Conan Chronicles: A multi-chapter campaign based on various short stories from Conan the Barbarian.

Planescape - The Shaper of Dreams: An epic saga of a woman trying save her husband from the Abyss.

Dark Waters: A three-part pirate campaign that pushes the limits of the engine, adding new gameplay modes such as naval battles and card collecting.

***NWN2* offered persistent multiplayer servers through Gamespy, but the service closed in 2012. You can still play through community-hosted servers, listed at www.nwnlist.com**

There are some valuable resources for *NWN2* players, such as the NWN2 wiki, which offers extensive documentation on the game's mechanics, and the online Character Builder, available at www.nwn2db.com

Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales



Akella, 2006
Windows

By editing the game's .ini files you can unlock higher resolutions. In *Age of Pirates 2: City of Abandoned Ships* you can also unlock 15 new starting characters.

The *Age of Pirates/Sea Dogs* series is what happens when Russians play a lot of *Sid Meier's Pirates* and decide that they can do it better. By Crom, they almost did.

The series began with *Sea Dogs* (aka *Corsairs*) in 2000. Bethesda then signed to publish a sequel, but renamed it to *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) to take advantage of Disney's popular movie series. In 2006, Akella released *Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales*, changing the series' name due to copyright issues.

Afterwards, other developers began to make sequels. *Age of Pirates 2: City of Abandoned Ships* (2007) was a huge leap forward, adding three playable characters, better combat and a deeper stat system for you to further customise your characters. Years later came *Sea Dogs: To Each His Own* (2012), a professionally made mod released as a stand-alone game, it improved the graphics and added a more involved story.

Each new game improved the engine and some of the systems, building upon the assets of the previous one, so the series' core gameplay remained constant: open-world sailing, fencing and swashbuckling.



Towns offer taverns to hire crew and hear rumours, multiple shops and NPCs that can provide you with quests. Or they can be captured and pillaged.

You usually start the game choosing a character (some games only have one, others have multiple), a starting class (which defines your stats and initial gear) and a nation (England, France, Spain or Holland). You'll then have to complete a starting tutorial, which ranges from short and skippable in some games to somewhat longer story-based intros in others. After that, you set sail – the entire Caribbean now open to you.

You can sail in third- or first-person view, travel the world-map in a overhead travel mode and explore towns, forts and jungles on foot, talking to NPCs for quests and rumours. You'll trade, fight and generally blunder your way across the Caribbean and, if you wander enough, run into special quests that can reward you with considerable wealth and rare ships.

Your character's skills improve the more you use them, and you can buy perks that add key benefits to your playstyle. You can also hire ship officers and fighters to cover whatever skill deficiencies you have.

Fighting on land or while boarding involves two key parameters: health and stamina. You die when you run out of health, and you can't swat even a fly without stamina. You and your opponents play by the same rules, and while one-on-one combat is easy, getting swarmed in a group can be anything from challenging to tedious, depending on how well-stocked you are with potions. You also have the emergency option of firing a pistol, which, while handy in a pinch, takes long enough to reload that swordplay remains the chief means of fighting.

The first games have a button-mashing combat, but the swordplay was upgraded after *Caribbean Tales*, offering six moves: a light swing, a lunge, a heavy overhand blow, a counter attack, a parry and a huge swing that cuts at everyone in front of you. You can also block attacks, and sidestep or dodge backwards.



You have to carefully manage your crew, morale and cargo, as they will affect your efficiency while sailing and fighting.



Sea battles require you to pay close attention to the wind and your cannon's range, maneuvering carefully.



Age of Pirates 2 added the PIRATES stats system, which was heavily inspired by *Fallout*'s SPECIAL system.



Long travels are done in a overhead world map. You'll have to keep an eye on food, morale and other ships.

A nice abstraction when boarding a crew that heavily outnumbers you: instead of facing vast numbers beyond the engine's capacity, you instead face very tough opponents who are several levels ahead of you. A nice touch, if a bit perplexing to new players.

Sea combat is an entirely different beast. It might seem slow and ponderous (hint: the + button speeds up the game) but is far more character-skill dependent than fencing. You get regular cannonballs for all-round damage, grapeshots for greater hull damage, chain-shot for sail damage and explosives for setting ships on fire. All of them have their uses, no matter your style of ship fighting. You can also command a fleet of ships into battle, so you won't always face utterly terrible odds.

Due warning, this series is as Russian as they get. Outdated graphics, indifferent writing, no hand-holding, an emphasis on certain aspects of "realism", extremely obscure mechanics and quests that run the gamut from simple "FEDEX quests" to utterly crazy gigs that are the equivalent of looking for an ink-drop in the entire goddamn Caribbean waters.

It's all very daunting to newcomers. Even if you spend hundreds of hours playing, you'll probably still need a walkthrough to complete some of the more unique quests, especially the endgame ones.

On the other hand, they offer an amazingly open experience, similar to *Mount & Blade* (2008), and you can definitely see your character progress from landlubber to sea dog, master fencer, etc. There's a lot of RPG here, from choosing your character's initial build, to working for different factions, to getting a sustainable economy going. Forget wooing the governor's daughter like in *Sid Meier's Pirates*. Here you can BE the governor. But you gotta take over the colony first. Good luck.

Since the games are all very similar, it's hard to point out which is the best one. Furthermore, every entry in the series has one or two big exclusive mods, so the community is quite fractured. Good starting points are *Sea Dogs: To Each His Own* (the latest entry, has a good story and better graphics) and *Pirates of the Caribbean* with the *New Horizons* mod (huge amount of content and options for free play). Just pick one and set sail into a life of adventures. **ER**

Dark Messiah: Might and Magic



Arkane Studios, 2006
Windows and Xbox 360*

When the 3DO Company went bankrupt in 2003, Ubisoft bought the *Might and Magic* licence and did a complete reboot. Their first new game, *Heroes of Might and Magic V,* presented a new world called Ashan and followed the story of a group of knights fending off a demon invasion and uncovering the Prophecy of the Demon Messiah, who would one day unleash chaos upon the world.

Twenty Ashan and three Earth years later, the "kicking simulator" formally known as *Dark Messiah: Might and Magic* details the adventures of Sareth, a warrior sent to retrieve an artefact known as the Skull of Shadows. He is aided by Xana, a spirit confined inside his soul right in the game's beginning cutscene.

While the story boasts four endings (really the permutations of two major choices), it's fairly simple and linear. You can almost guess the plot points by the first hour of the game, after the introduction of all the roles. It's quite cheesy and probably intended not to be taken seriously, seeing that all characters can be easily read and predicted – especially Xana's voice steering you towards conflict. Regardless, considering the franchise's large storyline background and its context, *Dark Messiah*'s storyline is actually quite important to the new *Might and Magic* universe.



You'll be joined by the young mage, Leanna, and by Xana, a spirit that provides advice and snarky comments.

The game blends this convoluted setting with what's possibly the best first-person melee combat in gaming. It starts slowly, with a tutorial level that dissects some of the arguably composite mechanics of the game. But within minutes of the first chapter you're thrown right into action – and will understand that combat here is not a matter of mashing buttons.

Dark Messiah's combat is fast, deadly and offers a solid array of options to inflict damage and defend yourself, whilst demanding a careful approach to enemies. You can equip swords, daggers and staffs, attacking with stabs, slashes and lunges, depending on your movement – these can be enhanced by holding down the mouse button, unleashing a power attack. Shields will block attacks easily but can be destroyed, while parring is risky but allows for counter-strikes.

Thanks to the solid physics engine, you can also employ the environment to your advantage – setting objects on fire, triggering traps and destroying pillars placed next to patrolling guards. Another option is kicking enemies into spikes or over cliffs, a tactic so powerful on release it could be used to "cheese" the entire game and became the source of many jokes.

Being a game focused on action, *Dark Messiah*'s RPG elements are simplified. Instead of gaining XP and levelling up by killing, you're given skill points for each objective met, of which there are plenty per chapter. There are three main skills trees to pursue – Combat, Magic and Miscellaneous. Even though they are small, it's wise not to spread your points too thin.

Combat skills allow you to deal more damage, disarm enemies and aim better with the bow, while Miscellaneous skills include passive bonus and a few Thief skills, such as lock-picking and backstabbing. The stealth system isn't always useful, but it's quite robust, based on light and sound like the *Thief* games.

***Dark Messiah* was ported to the Xbox 360 in 2008, under the title *Dark Messiah: Might and Magic - Elements*, with extra levels and new multiplayer modes to enjoy.**

"I clearly remember when we discovered how creating an icy surface made the orcs slip on it. I think it was when we realised that we were right in trying to create a simulated world where everything was possible. This was really fun."

– *Raphael Colantonio, Dark Messiah's creative director*



The UI is simple and elegant, with a quick bar, a small slot-based inventory and three talent trees you can spend skill points on.

The Magic skill tree features standard fare such as fireballs and healing magic, but also spells to freeze the ground, see in the dark, plus an amusing telekinesis power that works just like *Half-Life 2*'s Gravity Gun.

While you'll grow quite powerful during your journey, equipment change will be sparse. Still, with each new sword, dagger, staff, bow or armour you'll get visibly stronger, and some weapons have special abilities that manage to make them fairly memorable.

Dark Messiah employs a 2006 version of Valve's *Source* engine, complemented by Havok's powerful physics engine. The developers managed to deliver an outstanding presentation of medieval architecture, with massive gates, churches, temples in ruins, Orc constructions, a complete boat and much more. It's not without its flaws, though: walking and jumping on narrow edges has to be executed with extreme caution, light sources in some places may deter your field of view and the chase in the third chapter can be annoying with its twists and turns and rope climbing. It also tends to crash sometimes, so save often.

While levels can be impressive, they are all too linear – so much so, Arkane didn't even bother to include a map system. But there are plenty of the secret item caches to find, which depending on your familiarity with the game may decide if you live or die.

Multiplayer, although nearly dead at the time of the writing, still can be enjoyed if you find some friends and an available server. Game modes include the classic "capture the flag" and "crusade", where the teams try to take control of the whole map and can level up like in the single-player mode. The maps are visually stunning and well-designed, with open arenas for inexorable bloodshed and nooks and crannies for sneaking around and setting up traps and ambushes.

Arkane's concern for details is substantial even on their least known game: there's a forge that you can use to make your own sword; a bow that allows you to shoot ropes and climb them; mage apprentices that tremble in fear once they see you; and a rewarding "adrenaline boost" that activates after a certain number of killings, allowing you to mangle enemies with a single strike or beefed-up spell. A work of passion, these details add a lot to the fun factor, even if they are not very important or innovative.

Unfortunately, none of this was enough to make this underrated game stand out among the other big releases of 2006. Nonetheless, *Dark Messiah* should be tried by anyone with at least a mild interest in first-person RPGs – or that wants to experience the best kicking physics of all time. There has not yet been a foot stronger than Sareth's. **GZ**

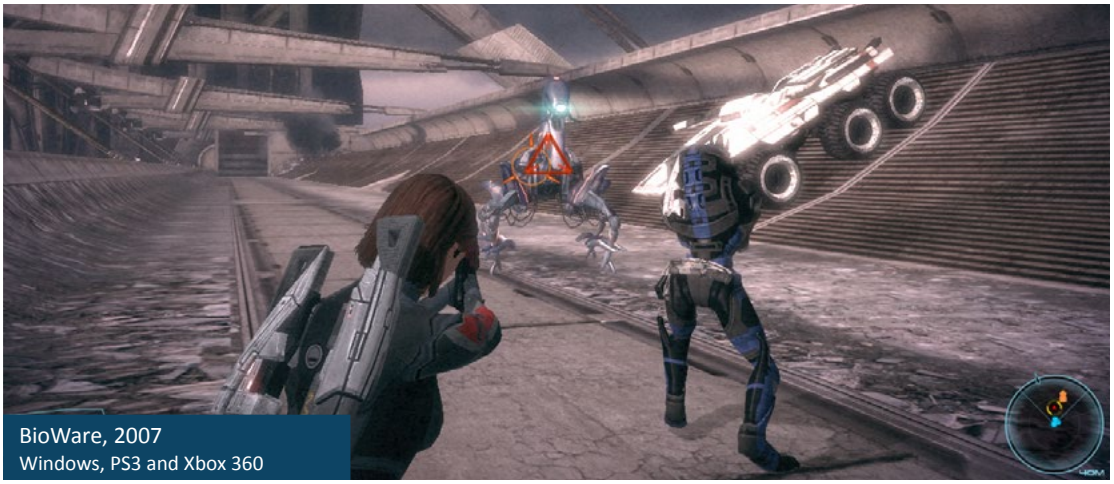


The game is focused on melee combat, but you'll also have access to 12 spells, from fireballs to telekinesis.



The multiplayer mode offers five classes with unique skills and huge arenas for battle.

Mass Effect



BioWare, 2007
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

Mass Effect became a cross-media hit, with seven novels, ten comic series, board games, action figures, a theme park ride and even a movie in the works.

During the past 10 years, we had many popular RPGs that conquered millions of fans and left a mark on the entire industry. However, few will dispute that *Mass Effect* was the most influential of all. An epic trilogy that spanned six years – from 2007 to 2012 –, yet was still contained in a single console generation, using the same engine. Hard to say if we'll ever see an ambitious project like this succeed again.

Mass Effect feels like the end goal of what began back in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* – the scope, narrative and choices of a computer RPG, but in an accessible form, easy to be played on controllers. BioWare had tried using a real-time martial arts combat in *Jade Empire*, but titles like *Resident Evil 4* (2005) and *Gears of War* (2006) proved that third-person shooters were a perfect match for consoles.

Yet *Mass Effect* is not just "*KotOR* with guns"; it draws heavily from *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5,* as well as classic space RPGs like *StarFlight* and *Star Control.*

You're not a young farmer in search of adventure, nor a lone mercenary who's getting into trouble – you're Commander Shepard, soldier of the Human Alliance. You have missions, commanding officers, a ship, and must answer to the Citadel Council, a committee of advanced alien races who rule the civilised galaxy.



The character system in *ME1* is the most complex of the series, allowing great customisation of playstyle.

You start by defining who Commander Shepard is, choosing gender, background and one of six classes. These range from the Soldier, a gun combat specialist, to the Engineer, who focuses on tech (shields, hacking), to the Adept, who uses powerful biotic abilities (like telekinesis), with the three remaining classes being hybrids of these archetypes.

Once you're done, the game truly begins, and you'll immediately notice how BioWare did everything to make the game as "cinematic" as possible, from the camera angles during conversations to the film grain filter the game uses. Another new feature is the Dialogue Wheel. Developers always struggled to display the long dialogue lines of PC RPGs on a TV screen: the solution used here is to only display short paraphrases of the dialogue lines, so the player quickly reads and chooses, then sees his/her choice spoken verbatim by Shepard.

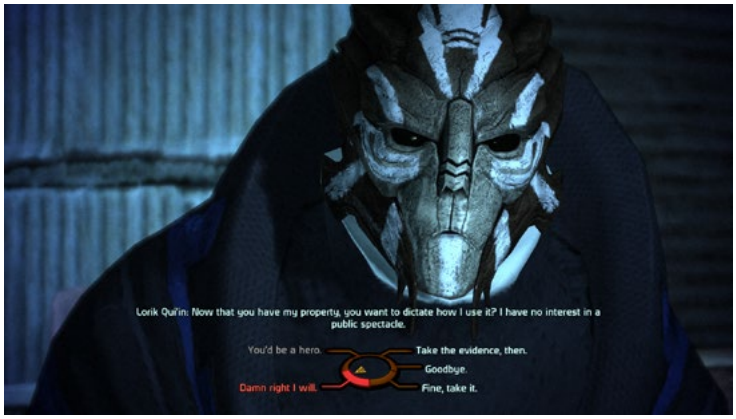
The game follows BioWare's traditional formula, starting with an intro mission then opening into four locations the player must visit in any order to reach the ending. The difference is that when the game opens you also gain control of your very own spaceship and can fly to various planets and systems to engage in side-quests, which fits perfectly with the game's concept.

As you travel to various planets, you'll eventually meet and recruit companions. *Mass Effect 1* has six of them, and they're easily the best BioWare made since *Baldur's Gate II*. While they wouldn't be fully developed until *ME2*, the cast is charismatic and memorable.

As the game advances, you'll get the chance to make several choices, which often will award Paragon or Renegade points, a simple morality system inherited from *KotOR*. Most of them are rather superficial, only changing your mission reward or some extra dialogue line, but they create a decent illusion, thanks to some actually meaningful choices woven in between.

"I can say that the reason *ME1* was so immersive is that we had the luxury of spending almost a year thinking up and fleshing out the universe (planets, technology, aliens, political and historical details) before we had to actually start writing the game. It let us really create something with a lot of depth."

– Drew Karpyshyn, *Mass Effect's lead writer*



Unique Paragon and Renegade dialogue choices can appear on the Dialogue Wheel depending on your character's morality and dialogue skills.

All this builds up to *Mass Effect*'s enticing call to adventure – you choose a new destination on the star map, travel there with your ship and go out exploring with two squad mates, meeting new aliens, locations and mysteries, all while making choices that define your story and bring you closer to your final goal.

It's here that the spirit of games like *StarFlight* and *Star Control* are felt in force. You can survey planets and asteroids for valuable minerals and relics, as well as land on a few of them with the Mako, an all-terrain vehicle, for side-quests that range from killing pirates, bandits and aliens to trying to negotiate with rebels or just hunting more relics and minerals.

Sadly, you cannot move freely in space – only jump from planet to planet – and there's no space combat. Most of these side-quests are also very formulaic, being set in similar locations and usually just boiling down to brief combat encounters. But there's a nice effort to give them weight, as you learn about them by overhearing conversations and news broadcasts, hacking terminals or when fleet admirals directly contact you.

In fact, this is where *Mass Effect 1* stands out from the rest of the trilogy: the sense of scope. Shepard is not the "Space Jesus" she/he would later become, but rather the leader of a group of misfits working from inside the system to solve a threat that the system can't handle.

While *ME2* and *ME3* would greatly improve the gameplay, adding a more engaging combat, enhanced graphics and a much more polished overall experience, the series also lost something important in the process. It narrowed the setting, made everything revolve around Shepard, Reapers and Cerberus. And only that. So much so that *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) had to do a "soft reboot", travelling to a whole new galaxy.

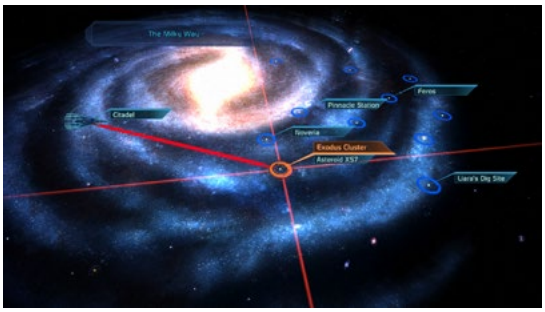
Mass Effect 1 still indulges in player-pandering and some power fantasy clichés from time to time – especially during its overly dramatic ending – but most of the time it succeeds at painting an overwhelmingly large universe. One where humanity is just a young, second-class race who recently unlocked space travel.

Setting-wise, *Mass Effect 1* is the series is at its best. It presents a galaxy filled with possibilities, interesting creatures and mysteries, all waiting to be uncovered by those brave enough to reach to the stars. **FE**

Mods:

MEUITM: The *Mass Effect Updated/Improved Textures Mod* greatly improves the game's visuals, adding high-res textures and new shaders.

A Lot of Textures (ALOT): A complementary texture pack for MEUITM. Also available for *ME2* and *ME3*.



You get your own spaceship and can freely explore the galaxy, doing side-quests or searching for rare resources.



The Mako is an all-terrain vehicle you'll get to drive when landing on uncharted planets and hostile environments.

Puzzle Quest:

Challenge of the Warlords



Infinite Interactive, 2007
Windows, Mac, iOS, PS2, PS3, NDS, etc

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 Fawkner 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 coloured 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.



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.

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 levelling 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 rumours. 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**

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 for 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 fewer customers. There are also special events, such as days when certain types of items are in high demand.

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 five 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 latter 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, light-hearted and a nice change of pace from other RPGs. **FE**



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 prioritise your profit?

***Recettear* was first released at the 73rd Comiket in 2007, and then localised into English by Carpe Fulgur in 2010. It's often credited as one of the pioneers in bringing Japanese games to Steam.**

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl



GSC Game World, 2007
Windows

STALKER is loosely based on the Soviet sci-fi novel _Roadside Picnic_ (1972), by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. The same novel also inspired the 1979 film _Stalker_, by Andrei Tarkovsky.

Before *Far Cry 2* and *DayZ* challenged players with their unrelenting ecosystems, Ukrainian studio GSC Game World created *STALKER*, an FPS/RPG hybrid set in an alternate reality version of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.

Struck by a second disaster, the Zone is now home to mutants and anomalies that defy the laws of physics – as well as valuable radioactive artefacts hunted by "stalkers". As the amnesiac Marked One, players will be advancing through the Zone's large open world in their quest to hunt down a figure called Strelok. Each of the Zone's regions comes with unique obstacles and points of interests, offering plenty of opportunity to interact with NPCs, trade items or scavenge loot in warehouses and underground labs.

STALKER blends several styles of gameplay, such as FPS, RPG, survival horror and sandbox. During combat it distinguishes itself with tactical elements like stances, stealth and leaning, and by applying realistic physics to every shot. Lifelike hit damage and wide open spaces mean that the intense gunfights can end as soon as they start, reinforcing the sense of fragility. Players must leverage their resources and play carefully if they are to emerge relatively unscathed in the already hellish game world.



The Zone is filled with anomalies, such as unstable gravitational fields and clusters of high temperatures. To help navigate around them, you can throw metal bolts as you walk.

While there's no RPG-style XP/level-up system, equipment and inventory management are vital. There are several types of weapon, ammo and armour available, but their weight and durability must be carefully considered. Players also have to deal with hunger, bleeding, radiation and other types of hazards. The artefacts scattered across the Zone can be used to boost resistances, though usually with a drawback (e.g. reducing radiation but increasing bleeding).

Sadly, interaction with NPCs is usually limited to just accepting quests, trading or asking about rumours. However, *STALKER* does offer several different endings based on the player's reputation with the Zone's factions and NPCs, as well as how they chose to act in certain important story quests.

From bandits and mutants to pockets of radiation and anomalies, the Zone offers many dangers, the biggest of them being its systemic nature. *STALKER*'s A-Life engine gives every NPC in the game a dynamic routine set by personal goals. Whether it's bandits fighting lone stalkers or rabid dogs charging into settlements, events can be spontaneously triggered even when the player's not around, giving the Zone a sense of place and generating new quests.

In spite of its oppressiveness, the Zone plays host to an eerie sense of wonder and beauty. From guitars being played near campfires to the day-and-night cycle that showcases striking lighting effects, *STALKER*'s world acts as a picturesque allegory to Mother Nature reclaiming her property. Soviet-era ruins stand out from the fauna and flora, evoking a feeling of lost history titles such as *Metro 2033*. Because *STALKER* rewards constant exploration, the player gradually becomes acquainted with their environment, allowing them to take in the scenery and contemplate the Zone's threatening and alluring nature.

"...[the player] is not limited by shooter-standard corridor limits; he can act at his will and see how the outer world reacts to his doings. We are very glad we managed to implement the unusual mix of FPS and RPG, integrating the elements of stealth and, horror, so as to provide a unique playthrough to each of the players."

– *Anton Bolshakov, STALKER: SoC's project lead*



The moody lighting effects and grim soundscape lend uncanny beauty to the vast Zone.

STALKER isn't without its fair share of faults. Combat can abruptly shift from challenging to punishing with the slightest tactical misstep, especially against humans whose resilience can prove unfairly advantageous even when using the same gear as the player. Backtracking can become a chore when carrying too much loot, and technical oddities can lead to broken quests and wonky AI. A fitting metaphor to the Zone's unpredictability, one might say, but these issues can be easily eliminated with the game's numerous fan-made mods and patches.

Shadow of Chernobyl would go on to spawn two additional games, *Clear Sky* and *Call of Pripyat*. *Clear Sky* (2008) is a prequel that introduces gear customisation and a faction system, allowing players to take sides in a war and help capture strategic points or remain neutral. *Call of Pripyat* (2009) is the most polished entry, with improved AI, UI, quests and stealth gameplay, but also the most streamlined.

As engaging as these games are, their atmospheres fail to replicate the harsh oppressiveness of *Shadow of Chernobyl*. Still, the *STALKER* series is known for its extensive library of mods, and while the original game remains the best "vanilla experience", excellent mods like *Misery* and *Call of Chernobyl* recently turned *Call of Pripyat* into a must-own for fans.

The greatest achievement of *STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl* is its peerless transplantation of survival horror to an open world. Like the Zone itself, the game is foreboding and relentless, but beneath its intimidating facade lies a captivating sandbox that invites players to explore its nooks and crannies, presenting an opportunity to bolster their gear and unravel the mystery behind one of the eeriest locales in both gaming and human history. **MIS**

STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl Mods:

Zone Reclamation Project: A large bug fix pack with no further changes. Recommended for a first playthrough.

Autumn Aurora 2: Greatly improves the graphics, tweaks gameplay and UI and includes the *Zone Reclamation* mod. A good all-in-one pack if you want better visuals.

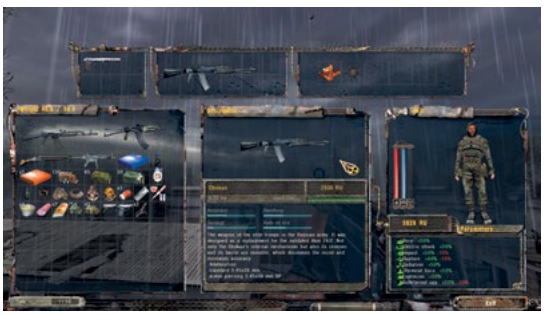
Lost Alpha: A free, fan-made stand-alone game based on concepts *STALKER* had early in its development.

STALKER: Call of Pripyat Mods:

Misery: The most popular of all *STALKER* mods, it turns *Call of Pripyat* into a hardcore survival game.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Chernobyl: Combines the maps of all three games into one massive sandbox game using *Call of Pripyat's* engine. Also has many of its own mods.

Originally announced in 2001, *STALKER* suffered many revisions before being released. Some features, such as a faction wars system, were cut from the final build and later reintroduced in the sequels.



Artefacts can give several types of bonus, like increased burn resistance, but they usually come with a drawback.



Your PDA tracks quests and can also display information about hidden caches learned by looting enemies' PDAs.

Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer



Obsidian Entertainment, 2007
Windows

Mask of the Betrayer is the story-focused expansion to *NWN2*. That's not to imply that it's a graphic novel, but rather that the changes introduced are all in service of the story.

It included extra content such as classes and races that can naturally be used in modules and such, but at its core it is a single-player product. While the original campaign was about a group of adventurers saving the world, *MotB* is about you escaping a curse that threatens to devour your soul with the help of people similarly driven by personal goals.

The expansion's story is mostly unrelated to the original's, and while you will miss a reference or two there is absolutely no requirement that you play *NWN2* beforehand – unless you want a tutorial, as *MotB* begins at Level 20 and goes all the way to 30. This can overwhelm those new to *D&D* rules, but also provides a much wider variety of crazy character builds, including new epic feats and spells.

Much like the original campaign, this one is split into three acts. The first and last are fairly short, consisting only of the introduction and ending, whereas Act 2 is fairly large and open-ended, with plenty of optional content. Unfortunately, thanks to the inherent power of the "epic levels" (above Level 20), you'll likely be fairly overpowered after Act 1.



Many powerful spirits inhabit the Rashamen lands. Diplomacy is often possible, but you'll also need to feed to stay alive.

While the challenge suffers after Act 1, it's also when *MotB* begins to truly shine, for it is here that the Spirit Meter manifests. Put simply, it's a measure of how much spirit energy your character has – energy that's constantly being drained by a curse. As it drains you'll receive various stat penalties and eventually die.

To counteract this, you must suppress the hunger with your will, or by consuming spirits. Spirits are thankfully plentiful in the Rashamen lands where a lot of the campaign takes place, but its inhabitants do not take kindly to you eating their spirit friends.

Around the time of *MotB*'s release, the Spirit Meter was the subject of much scorn from both press and players. The chief complaint was that managing the meter was very hard. This perceived difficulty is blown out of proportion however. If you treat your curse without due consideration, you will die or be forced to sacrifice parts of your soul (XP) to survive. But, treat it with the respect that the game's setting, lore and characters say you should, and you will survive, even if you do not thrive.

The Spirit Meter is reason enough for *MotB* to be remembered and studied (aside from its excellent writing). With it, Obsidian succeeded at something few game developers attempt: entwining the game's narrative and mechanics in a compelling way. In both the story and the gameplay you are under constant threat of succumbing to the curse, giving you ample reason to push forward. This lends meaning to the events of the game, as you feel yourself struggling with the same problems that your character deals with.

The constant drain also limits the player's resting, preventing the constant replenishing of hit points, spells and abilities – an issue that often plagues *D&D* games. Unfortunately, the epic levels allow for characters so powerful that resting rarely matters.

"On *Mask,* my goal was to make the companions feel unusual and different, partly to reinforce the player's impression of being a stranger in a strange land. Okku was mostly inspired by the giant animal gods in *Princess Mononoke*. When I first saw that movie in the early 2000s, I wanted to *be* one of those guys in a game... or failing that, I wanted to travel with one."

– George Ziets,
Mask of the Betrayer's creative lead



You'll journey across the planes to exotic places such as the Wall of the Faithless, where those without a god are sent to suffer after death.

Thankfully, Obsidian delivered a great narrative alongside its Spirit Meter. While *NWN2*'s campaign was a poorly paced save-the-world plot, *MotB* borrows heavily from *Planescape: Torment*, presenting a short and personal story of searching for answers to your curse. The game graciously takes advantage of often overlooked aspects of *D&D*'s settings, such as the nature of the gods and the extra-dimensional planes. This provides many interesting vistas and dungeons to explore, from temperate forests to death vaults, from shadow planes to the inside of dreams.

The characters that join you are also unique and generally very well-written. You may travel with three of five companions (two of them mutually exclusive): a half-celestial cleric, a Red Wizard of Thay, a dream-walker shaman, an undead abomination made of convicted souls and, last but not least, a Bear God, king of animal spirits.

The companions will react to your actions and choices – please them and they will impart various boons, antagonise them and they might leave. They very rarely ask you to pick sides amongst themselves, but each has a personal goal which drives them. These come with a suitably big influence swing, but may be a suboptimal action for you. Just be mindful that they may even attack you if you cross them.



You're free to explore the world in search of clues, but must pay attention to your Spirit Meter during travels.

Besides companion interactions and a healthy amount of choices regarding quest resolution, a large part of role-playing in *MotB* revolves around how you choose to view the curse. It's slowly sucking your life, but it also bestows you the power to devour spirits (and other abilities players might uncover by learning to control the curse).

Sadly, the simplistic nature of *D&D*'s alignment system largely removes around the moral depth this choice could have had. Still, *MotB* has the most satisfying evil path of any game I've played, and there are multiple endings (and ending slides) to fit your choices.

Simply put, *Mask of the Betrayer* is brilliant. The writing is of high quality and refreshingly original. The way the gameplay and story is tied together by the Spirit Meter is excellent, and I hope it is remembered in the future. Building and planning your character is as fun as ever. And even more nice things are hidden in the details: a stellar bit of voice acting here, a cool role-playing choice there, a powerful unique item hiding behind that.

The combat may be too easy and the gameplay mostly mediocre but, with so much other good stuff in the game, does it even matter? **JA**

TIP: use cheats or mods to get all companions into your party at the same time. Combat is easy regardless, and there's no point missing out on their excellent dialogue.

Mods:

MotB Makeover SoZ Edition: A complex mod that adds features introduced in *NWN2: Storm of Zehir,* such as full party creation (up to eight characters), companion multi-classing and an expanded crafting system. Save for a replay, as it changes the game a lot.

Rooster Cheat: Removes the party limit, allowing you to travel with four companions. A mod for those who value story and role-playing over combat.

Romance Pack: Allows you to romance some of your companions, and adds extra scenes tying up possible romances from *NWN2*'s original campaign.

Agarest: Generations of War



Idea Factory & Compile Heart, 2007
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3

Agarest was first released in 2007 in Japan for the PS3. It was localised into English for consoles in 2009, and then ported to PCs in 2013.

A very divisive title, *Agarest*'s main feature can be either its main draw or an irredeemable flaw: can you endure a journey that spans multiple generations of heroes and over a hundred hours?

The game is a tactical JRPG where you control a party of up to six characters, fighting in extremely challenging turn-based battles. The game was clearly made for hardcore players, so expect tons of stats and equipment, an elaborate skill system, combo attacks, crafting, enchanting, monster capturing, formations, multiple routes, fan-service and a lot of grinding.

Along the way you'll meet a colourful cast of characters – including three romanceable heroines – and make a few decisions which affect your alignment, the battles you'll face and which girl likes you more.



Choices you make during the game will affect battles you face, your alignment and relationship with the three heroines of each generation.



The orange dots on the world map are mandatory "filler" battles, which are far too frequent and will test your patience.

After a few dozen hours, you reach the climax, battle evil, marry your girl of choice and have a baby.

However, instead of ending there, the game flash-forward until your son is all grown up and you take control of him, ready to meet new companions, romance new girls and make a new stand against evil.

Agarest lasts for five generations, all working towards a final goal. Items, spells and some companions carry on, and the stats, weapons and looks of each generation's hero are determined by his parents', leading to some interesting long-term planning.

Inexplicably, despite being "five-games-in-one", the developers decided to pad *Agarest*'s length. Thus, while the events and story battles are interesting, you'll waste an ungodly amount of time in pointless filler fights. Moreover, the game is repetitive and really starts to drag after the 3rd generation. I honestly can't imagine the patience required to replay it multiple times to see all the routes and the secret "true ending".

In 2009, a prequel, *Agarest Zero*, was released. It follows the same basic formula but reduces the filler combat and only has two generations. It also added character creation for the first hero and a lot of great post-game content – including an abridged version of the first game that removed all filler and choices.

Agarest 2 arrived in 2010 with better graphics, three generations of heroes and a new, more complex (but confusing) combat system based around combos.

It's hard to pick the best game – the first has the best characters; *Zero* polishes the gameplay and reduces padding while *Agarest 2's* fast-paced number-crunching combat might interest more some players.

Regardless, here's some advice: *Agarest*'s DLCs are pay-to-win, so disable all of them except for dungeons and extra costumes. Otherwise, you'll start the game extremely overpowered, ruining all the fun. **FE**

Elona



Noa, 2007
Windows

Elona, short for "Eternal League of Nefia", is a free Japanese roguelike with rather unconventional design choices – such as its open-world nature and the fact that death is not permanent.

Most typical roguelikes are about exploring a single self-contained randomly generated dungeon, restarting from the beginning if you die. *Elona*, on the other hand, counts on the player holding on to one save file for dozens, or even hundreds of hours.

At first sight, *Elona* may look derivative. Many mechanics were borrowed from *ADOM* and it uses art assets taken directly from *RPG Maker* and *Stone Soup*. It also has a less serious tone, with chest-busters from *Aliens*, Big Daddies from *BioShock* and even Pokéball-like items you can use to capture monsters. But there's an undeniable complexity underneath it.

While the game is pretty sparse when it comes to dialogue choices, its role-playing options go far beyond the typical "melee, ranged or magic" tropes seen in nearly every modern fantasy RPG.

For example, it's perfectly viable to play focusing on Charisma. Such characters may roam from town to town performing as a musician and earning money that way. They don't even necessarily have to do battle – it's often possible to run away, but high Charisma also means a greater capacity to employ hired mercenaries. Not interested in the life of a travelling musician? Charisma also makes it easier to get paid as a travelling merchant, or even a prostitute.

The game provides so many varied mechanics, random dungeons and side-quests that it's very easy to get distracted from the main quest and pursue other interests. A player might run a farm, build a shop or even set up a museum. Investments can be made, but bills need to be paid every month. There are also allies and monsters you can recruit – or marry – or breed!

Moreover, sudden events like being affected by a dangerous mutagenic wind or having a town infested by aliens can completely alter your game, enforcing urgent objectives or unpredictable new powers.

This sandbox approach, the lack of permadeath, its 16-bit JRPG-like graphics and controller support all give *Elona* a very different appeal from other roguelikes, but there's more than enough freedom, depth and challenge here to please most RPG fans. **TM**

Noa moved on to work on a new game but made *Elona's* source code available, leading to new versions. The most popular is *Elona+*, which is Japanese-only but has an English derivation called *Elona Custom*.



Its Japanese origins are felt: early on you can get a cat, dog, bear or little girl as a "pet". In *Elona+/Custom* you can even evolve the girl.



Elona offers ten classes and 11 races, as well as several traits and feats, allowing for characters that can range from a Lich Warmage to a Fairy Pianist.

The Witcher



CD Projekt RED, 2007
Windows and Mac

In 2008, an Enhanced Edition of *The Witcher* 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, a ruined fortress serving as a 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 the 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 a 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 carries a silver and a steel sword, plus many potions, oils and bombs he can employ against certain enemies. You must study to know when to use which.

Sound design is very good, and, while the bleak music may not be very appealing to listen to outside the game (unless you are trying to fuel your of depression), it complements the game's setting perfectly.

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 humour and cynical attitude, only emphasised 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 – even if CD Projekt failed to avoid the trap of "mature equals sex, violence and profanity".

This is a world where 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 guerrillas (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 select 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.

"We didn't want the vision of the game to be in any way distorted or dampened. An odd example of that occurred during a conversation with a publisher who said that, on account of their market research, players overall want their protagonist to be an Elvish woman and that if we had changed *The Witcher* accordingly they would have considered negotiating a contract."

– Michał Kiciński, CD Projekt's co-founder

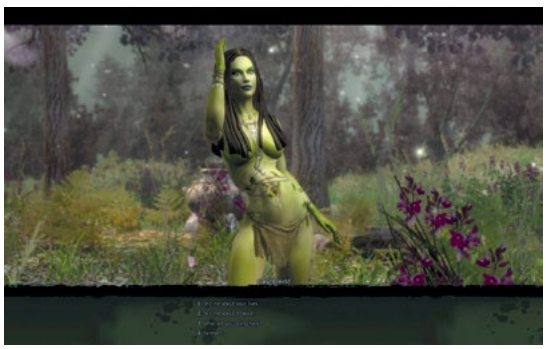


In combat you must pick one of three combat styles best suited to your enemies and then carefully time your clicks to chain attacks.

When levelling up, Geralt earns skill points of three types: bronze, silver and gold. These can be spent to improve his abilities, with higher levels requiring the rarer 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 works well against agile, armoured and numerous opponents, respectively). Using other melee weapons is possible – but suboptimal, as Geralt's kill only works 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 be upgraded by spending skill points. The toughest fights, however, require thorough preparation – learning about your target via books and NPCs, then using alchemy to brew potions that will temporarily boost Geralt's abilities and exploit the monster's weakness.

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 all sorts of characters, and it's by interacting with them that players will get immersed into this rich world – solving many problems and pondering over morally grey issues – but also hearing gossip, fist fighting in taverns, playing dice and occasionally getting drunk in the company of good friends.

Because ultimately, this is what *The Witcher* is all about – becoming Geralt of Rivia and living his life for a little while. And it does it very well. **WM**

Mods:

CD Projekt released a toolset with the game, leading to some interesting fan-made adventures and mods:

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* mods, you must cleanse a mine and solve a lover's curse. About 12 hours long.

Full Combat Rebalance Mod: Completely revamps the combat, aiming to make it closer to the books. It was developed by Andrzej "Flash" Kwiatkowski, who also did *Flash's Witcher Mod*, which adds higher difficulty settings to the game, bug fixes and other features. He was later hired by CD Projekt Red.

***The Witcher* book series' popularity in Poland is incomparable to any other fantasy franchise. One week after the game's long-awaited release it was out of stock everywhere. One of *The Witcher* short-stories collections, *The Last Wish*, remains the only Polish fantasy book adapted into a film (and a TV series).**

7.62 High Calibre



Apeiron, 2007
Windows

In 2008 Aperion released *7.62: Reloaded*, a stand-alone expansion to *High Calibre*. Unfortunately, it's only available in Russia, but some of its content was included in the *Hard Life* mod.

Although it was released back in 1999, *Jagged Alliance 2* still reigns alone – a highly complex and detailed tactical game that to this day is 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 a 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, customisable 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 of 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 customisable skills.



It's vital to carefully maintain your guns, consider your loadout and optimise 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 to the combat. Interruptions in turn-based systems 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, underbarrel grenade launchers, laser sights and multiple types of scope. 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 it 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 a lone mercenary, hired to find a Russian businessman that is currently hiding in the North African 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-intensity 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 downloaded on 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, stat balancing and many essential bug fixes. Highly recommended even for first-time players.

Mercapocalypse: A merge of two popular mods, adds new mercenaries and over 350 new weapons. It also rebalances weapon stats and adds more diversity to enemy weapon usage. Requires the Blue Sun Mod.

Hard Life: A Russian mod designed for *7.62* veterans, it radically changes the game and adds lots of content. Was recently translated into English and released on Steam as an free enhanced edition for *7.62* owners.



There are various locations to travel to, and you can buy a vehicle to go faster and store items in the boot.



Inside cities you can take quests, hire mercenaries, buy weapons and even conquer or defend the whole city.

Eschalon: Book 1



Basilisk Games, 2007
Windows, Linux and Mac

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.

Eschalon: Book I became entirely free in 2017, in celebration of its 10th anniversary. You can download it here.

"Old-school" describes the game 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 game mechanics follow clear and simple formulas and are easy to grasp, with special mention of to how they seem to cater to thief-like characters, which is uncommon in RPGs. Locks sport various designs and levels of quality, but in many cases they can also just be smashed open with brute force.

The setting feels unimpressive and clichéd at first, staring with the tired trope of an amnesiac protagonist that wakes up in a ruined house.



Light is very important in *Eschalon*, and its pitch-black nights and dark dungeons make torches essential equipment.

A cryptic chain of letters guides him onto the main quest which involves four powerful gemstones, and soon enough he's travelling across the lands, invading goblin strongholds and dwarven fortresses in order to prevent a cataclysm from taking place.

Probably the greatest feature of *Eschalon* is the freedom of exploration, there are very few artificial barriers in place to force a player along a pre-determined path. Instead the game opts for the more organic approach of giving 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.

To help with the exploring, *Eschalon* sports a detailed automapping system, but asks that skill points be invested in the Cartography skill to use it. Sadly, there are no recruitable characters to help the player, and while character dialogues aren't badly written I still couldn't shake the feeling that NPCs were little more than quest dispensers or shopkeepers. At least some quests allow for multiple solutions.

But the bread and butter of the game is the combat. The turn-based system allows for a tactical approach, with the environment playing a vital role. Gates can be slammed down on monsters' heads and traps can be laid down in tight passages. Light, sound and line of sight also play a role, and, while other games make darkness your enemy, here it can be made an ally. With little effort, any character can become a proverbial ninja, striking unseen.

But, unfortunately, *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.

"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. [...]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.

Skills also suffer from severe balance issues, as some of them are only used in a handful of situations, or maybe even on just a single map.

As can be expected, the game improves with the sequels: *Eschalon: Book 2* was released in 2010 and strikes a good balance between having more of the same and adding new things, like overhauling the UI (so now it looks like a 1993 game) and adding in-game weather. The neatest addition is the customisable difficulty level; this includes options such as weapons wearing down with use, and hunger and thirst meters.

In contrast, *Eschalon: Book 3* (2014) feels like it was rushed out the door. Sporting only minor improvements to the game mechanics, the game is clearly only half-finished as the ending comes abruptly and the writing takes a nosedive in quality, to the point of making the whole story anticlimactic and disappointing.

The game's ending goes so far as to make the other two games in the series feel irrelevant, which frankly is unforgivable. Combine that with overall poor graphical support (none of the games support widescreen resolutions) and it becomes clear that the third game was neglected by the developers.

Sadly the poor performance of the third game has all but killed further support and goodwill for the *Eschalon* trilogy, leaving it hanging by a thread when it needed a lifeline. **ÁV**

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*.



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 customisation, item wear and a better UI.

Hellgate: London



Flagship Studios, 2007
Windows

I clearly remember myself watching the fantastic trailer for *Hellgate: London*, awestruck by the promise of a *Diablo*/FPS hybrid where high-tech holy warriors fought hordes of demons in the ruins of a post-apocalyptic London. I would shoot flying demons with holy rifles, unleash spells from balconies of gothic buildings and they would fall one by one, spewing out incredible amounts of loot!

At a quick glance the promises were delivered. *Hellgate*'s action is fast-paced, there are interesting weapons with unusual mechanics, plus cool monsters and bosses. The art direction is tight and consistent, darkness is used cleverly in some areas, buildings have several stories for you to traverse, and loot pours out of monsters like there's no tomorrow.

Those willing to give the original *Hellgate: London* a try should use the *Revival Mod* for better game balance and more content. And keep an eye out for the upcoming *London 2038* mod.



Hellgate uses London's metro stations as hubs between random dungeons, but they only offer goofy NPCs and dull fetch quests.



Weapons follow the classic *Diablo coloured* loot system and can be upgraded, but guns don't require bullets nor reloading.

The game presents three archetypes to choose from, each divided into two sub-classes. Blademasters and Guardians are melee warriors; Summoners and Evokers are spellcasters; Marksmen and Engineers are ranged attackers. Depending on your weapons, you can switch between a first- or third-person camera.

With these features, former Blizzard developers at the helm and a fine marketing campaign, *Hellgate* was highly hyped and sold nearly one million copies.

Then came the fall. It quickly became evident to players that content was lacking – they were just walking in the same corridors and fighting the same monsters. The only thing that changed was their HP and damage, plus a few poorly balanced skills.

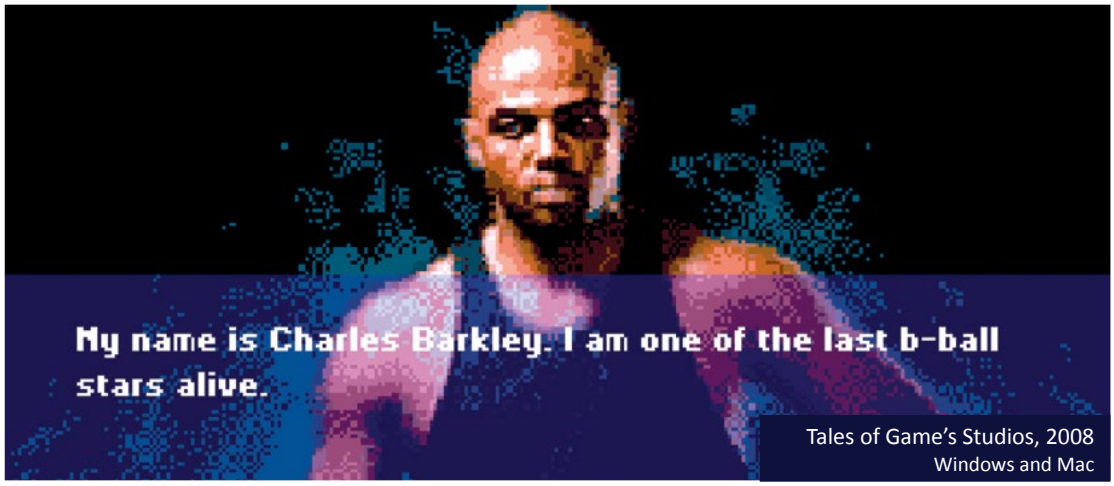
Valuing quantity over quality, designers over-relied on MMO-type fetch quests – everything was based on "collect this artefact", "kill this monster", "collect X body parts from X type of monster".

Like *Diablo II*, the game could be played either online or offline, but only those paying a monthly "Elite" subscription of $10 (or a lifetime fee of $149) would get content updates, such as new dungeons and items. Regardless, all players had to deal with server issues, character resets, crashes and bugs.

And so, a year after *Hellgate*'s release, Flagship went bankrupt, closing the game servers soon after. A Korean company then bought the game and re-launched it in 2011 as *Hellgate Global* – this time free-to-play and with new Tokyo areas. Criticised for its "pay-to-win" progression, it lasted until January 2016 – with a Chinese company then buying the rights and re-releasing it in China as *Hellgate: Reborn*.

Few games get this amount of hype and chances, but, while *Hellgate: London* had a brilliant concept, it failed to deliver. *Borderlands* (2009) would soon prove just how well "*Diablo* with guns" could work. **BA**

Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden



Tales of Game's Studios, 2008
Windows and Mac

B-Ball. B-Ball never changes. The year is 2053. Basketball is dead. Ravaged by the power of the Chaos Dunk, the lives of countless innocents were inadvertently taken by Charles Barkley.

Basketball became forbidden, putting the sport into disarray. In the same year, the storm of dunking came again – a mysterious player reduced Manhattan to cinders. 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 by *Chrono Trigger* and *Earthbound*, the game presents a bizarre trip around Neo New York and its surrounding areas, with quests and characters that can go in outlandish directions.

You'll write poetry, uncover the long-forgotten history of b-balls and realise the full potential of the Chicken Dew. If a talking fuel pump lectures you on the sublime nature of *Chrono Cross*, things have clearly taken a turn for the strange. The writing is a strange amalgamation of basketball references, allusions to JRPGs, and just about everything else in between.

The combat is the traditional turn-based JRPG fare, with up to four party members and several special attacks. The combat also embraces the absurdity of the setting. Clashing against Basketball spiders, Zombie Referees, and Robotic Killer Gatorades is a slice of what the developers came up with.

The special moves of your characters require special input that varies 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 comical design of the characters, enemies and locales are a treat. And the music delivers a serious Cyberpocalyptic atmosphere, only occasionally heading into silly territory.

Any gamer with a sense of humour 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 – just like this game. **GT**

A sequel to *Barkley* was funded by a Kickstarter campaign in December 2012, raising over 120,000 dollars and currently scheduled for 2018.



You'll come across all sorts of characters, from your old friend Michael Jordan to a cyberdwarf.



Mix and match your abilities with the varied combat system. Slam them from downtown, or have yourself some chicken fry – the choice is yours.

The Last Remnant



Square Enix, 2008
Windows and Xbox 360

The Last Remnant was released for Xbox 360 in 2008, then received an enhanced PC port in 2009, adding a New Game+ mode, a Hard Mode and extra content. A PS3 version was advertised, but sadly later cancelled.

The Last Remnant was a first for Square Enix, in many ways. It was their first game using the Unreal Engine 3, director Hiroshi Takai's first time at the helm, and their first big RPG designed from the ground up to appeal to Western audiences (which didn't work, as reception in the West was lukewarm). The result is a highly unusual JRPG with some key flaws that prevent it from reaching greatness.

The game is set in a fantasy world divided into city-states, all of which were built around Remnants, mysterious ancient artefacts that hold great power. Remnants have different shapes and sizes, going from small hand weapons to colossal towers, monsters and weapons. They can only be bound to one person at a time, usually the ruler of each city.



Some battle commands are only available in certain contexts, while others depend on hidden stats.



The character system is very different, as you can't directly control the class, skills or equipment of units. The focus are the formations.

The story begins with Rush Sykes, the son of two Remnant scholars, having his sister kidnapped. In his quest to rescue her, Rush finds himself in the middle of political struggles, uncovering several mysteries and makings allies in the process. It's as bad as the typical JRPG story, but with a slightly better supporting cast.

But make no mistake – battles are the focus here. *The Last Remnant*'s combat system is the game's high point – as well as its most divisive aspect. Instead of individual characters, the player controls "unions". Each union can have up to five units, and the number of unions and units grows as the story progresses, up to five unions and 18 units per battle.

The HP, stats and skills of each union depend on its formation and the units comprising it. Instead of directly choosing attacks, you give general orders like "Use magic!", "Heal yourself!" or "Charge!" to each union, and its units then decide how to act.

There are many nuances like Battle Rank, morale, engagement and hidden stats, all of which are poorly explained. This makes combat artificially complicated at first, but it becomes rewarding once you mastered it, especially the large-scale battles near the end.

The game has many sub-quests, crafting, mining, random unique monsters, challenging optional battles, and sudden difficulty spikes which may lead players to grind, but you're actually punished for it. Enemies scale up after you pass a certain threshold and some can grow so powerful as to become near impossible.

As such, *The Last Remnant* has a sweet spot – you should do all the side-quests and pursue its excellent optional battles, but grinding or min-maxing too much can spoil the fun. JRPG fans with the patience to learn its mechanics will have a good 60-100 hour experience with the game's unique combat system, great soundtrack and beautiful art. **FAX**

Valkyria Chronicles



SEGA, 2008
Windows, PS3 and PS4

Set in a fictional version of Europe during a World War I-like conflict, *Valkyria Chronicles* saw the veteran Sega team behind the *Sakura Wars* series deliver a breath of fresh air into tactical games.

The game's outstanding feature is its blend of tactical turn-based RPG with third-person combat. When a mission starts you're sent into a tactical map and asked to dispatch up to ten units. Each turn you're given a set number of Command Points, and by spending one you get to control a unit in third-person mode, walking around for a set amount and performing one attack. You may use a unit repeatedly, but once your points are over, the turn ends.

The game offers five classes – Scouts, Engineers, Shocktroopers, Lancers and Snipers – plus two types of tank. Knowing where and when to use them is key: a Lancer can destroy a tank with one well-aimed shot at its engine, but it's useless against regular troops.

Each character also has its own personality traits: a "Loner" character, for example, gets a bonus when far from the rest of the squad. After each battle you'll earn money and XP based on your performance, which can be used to upgrade weapons, armour and tanks, as well as level up each of the classes.

The main campaign offers 18 battles with a wide range of goals – you'll pursue an armoured car across narrow streets, avoid enemy search parties in a forest at night, defeat a massive tank, blow up a bridge, etc. Some missions can take over an hour to complete and allow many strategies, though the game pushes you to complete them as fast as possible to earn an S rank.

You'll eventually unlock extra side-missions, such as repeatable skirmishes (where you can train), special missions based around individual characters and the DLC missions, which are included in the PC port and allow you to play as other squads.

Between each mission you're treated to story cutscenes, which are surprisingly good. Characters are quirky but down-to-earth, and the story is simple but focuses heavily on racism and the horrors of war, going as far as to include a concentration camp.

The fantastic art style helps to set the bleak yet hopeful tone of the game, mixing expressive cell-shaded models with a charming watercolour style.

Sadly, the sequels *Valkyria Chronicles II* (2010) and *III* (2011) remain PSP exclusives, while *Valkyria Revolution* (2017) changed the series' combat into a disappointing fantasy Action RPG of sorts.

Still, *Valkyria Chronicles* remains one of the best tactical RPGs of the 2000s, with a fresh take on the genre, an involving story and gorgeous visuals. **FE**

***Valkyria Chronicles* was first released for the PS3 in 2008, then ported to PCs in 2014. It also got a remaster for the PS4 in 2016.**



The game is turn-based, but you control your units in third-person mode, manually positioning them and aiming shots.



Battlefields offer several obstacles and opportunities, such as high grass troops can hide in, minefields, sniper towers, elevators, barricades, etc.

Fallout 3



Bethesda Softworks, 2008
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

Bethesda hired various Hollywood actors for the game, with Liam Neeson voicing your father, Malcolm McDowell voicing Enclave's president and Ron Perlman reprising his role as narrator.

Upon the announcement of *Fallout 3*, someone new to the genre would be forgiven for thinking that Bethesda's previous RPGs, the *Elder Scrolls* series, were some of the worst ever made. I have rarely witnessed the sort of disappointment and vitriol that long-standing *Fallout* fans displayed.

Their worry was that *Fallout*, known for its branching paths, rich writing and complex character development, would be turned into a vapid, first-person, post-apocalyptic reskinning of *Oblivion*.

Bethesda did indeed scrap the famous Interplay-developed "Van Buren" *Fallout 3* prototype and decided to play to their strengths, with an enormous open world and a first-person, single-character perspective. *Fallout 3* turned out to be more than "*Oblivion* with guns", with an identity and atmosphere of its own – even if lacking the wit and dark sense of humour that characterised its predecessors.

From your introduction to the *Fallout* mythos via short slices of the character's life as a child living in a Vault, to dealing with the various factions and survivors that populate the DC wasteland, the player is immersed in a huge world, littered by odd groups trying to rediscover and reclaim their place in it.

Each merchant caravan, each little settlement, each small hut in the middle of nowhere or hidden, highly secured Vault has its own story, its micro-narrative, either obvious or hidden, that helps the player assemble a larger picture of this post-apocalyptic world. It doesn't stand up to scrutiny, especially when compared to the previous games – things like food availability or the timeline don't make much sense when you think about it, so enjoying it does require a healthy dose of suspension of disbelief.

The combat feels like an odd mixture of genres, not quite skill-based first-person shooting and yet far from stats-based RPG territory. Crucial to making this approach work is the VATS system, which allows the player to pause time and target opponents' specific body parts, spending Action Points that vary depending on target, range and weapon.

This allows the player to fall into a pleasant rhythm of alternating between VATS tactical shooting and finding cover or doing real-time shooting while waiting for AP to recharge. Character development, however, is a curt affair. At each level-up, you can assign skill points that marginally increase your efficiency at a variety of tasks.



You begin the game living with your father in Vault 101, from birth to the day he leaves the vault – and you follow.



Fallout 3's character screen, quest log and inventory are all presented in your wrist-mounted Pip-Boy 3000.

"I think a lot of people assume that we're doing things to meet some sort of demographic; they're like, 'Oh, why is it first-person?' I love first-person. [...] When you step out of the vault, in first-person, and see the [HDR light effect on your] eyes come in... Dude, that is a real moment."

– *Todd Howard, Fallout 3's director and executive producer*



The writing is one of *Fallout 3*'s weakest points, presenting few meaningful dialogue choices, dull companions and failing to capture the dark humour of the originals.

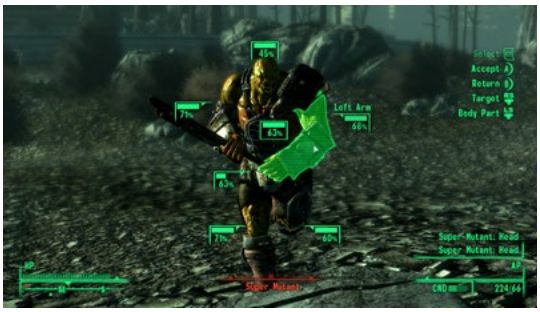
These range from hacking and lock-picking mini-games to better handling of each specific class of weapon. Each level-up, you can also choose a perk that, in most cases, ultimately boils down to making you hit others harder, or being harder to kill.

Meanwhile, exploring the game's vast world is hit-and-miss. Long treks into the unknown can sometimes uncover interesting side-quests, cool micro-narratives or even the treasured, permanent stat-increasing "bobblehead" collectible figures, but more often that not reveal just one more derelict office building, a victim of copy/paste area design.

And while you can participate in acts that range from blowing up an entire town to sharing water with a dying man, choices ultimately matter little besides nudging your karma meter one way or another. They are accounted for, but don't impact you.

Luckily, the game came with powerful modding tools, allowing the community to improve on most of these negatives through many different mods, the most comprehensive of which is "*Fallout 3 Wanderer's Edition*" mod, an overhaul of nearly every mechanic. To many, this is the "right" way to play the game.

Still, *Fallout 3* is an interesting journey, with fun set pieces leading up to a truly epic final showdown – which, once again, doesn't stand up to scrutiny.



VATS allows you to pause and spend Action Points to fire aimed shots, which are then shown in slow motion.

But storytelling was never a landmark of any Bethesda game, and *Fallout 3* is no exception. Instead, it grips you with its vast open world, as you cruise the wasteland listening to vintage records on the radio, wondering what lies just beyond the next hill.

The first few hours remain the most engaging, where, fresh to this new world, players must scramble to find resources amidst the ruins, always fearing the raiders or bandits that lurk around every corner.

After release, *Fallout 3* got five DLCs, which sent the player away to different regions, but most were limited in scope. The two standouts, however, were *Point Lookout,* a tour through an exceptionally atmospheric bayou region, and *Broken Steel,* an additional chapter to the main storyline that enabled the player to continue playing past the game's ending.

"War, war never changes" is the game's opening line. But *Fallout*, on the other hand, changed a lot. And while it introduced a whole new generation of fans to the series, it also left many of the old fans out in the cold wasteland. **LM**

Mods:

Unofficial Fallout 3 Patch: Fixes hundreds of bugs.

Fallout 3 Wanderer's Edition: A huge overhaul mod that improves the game in every way, making combat better, the RPG elements more relevant and adding new weapons, items and features. A must-have!

Fellout: Overhauls the game's weather and lighting, replacing the green tint for a more natural look.

Fallout Overhaul Kit (FOOK): A big mod pack that adds hundreds of weapons, armour and new textures, together with some gameplay balance changes.

Flora Overhaul: Replaces the game's environment.

Alton, IL: A fan-made expansion, adds an entirely new area and a long and elaborate quest to the game.

Drakensang: The Dark Eye



Radon Labs, 2008
Windows

Drakensang adapts *The Dark Eye,* the popular German pen-and-paper RPG, to a computer RPG for the first time since *Realms of Arkania: Shadows over Rivia*, way back in 1996.

A lot changed since then. *Drakensang* uses the updated 4th edition rules and, instead of a blobber with turn-based combat like *RoA*, plays as what its developers described as "*Baldur's Gate* in 3D" – an epic real-time-with-pause RPG where you create a character and gather companions to save the world.

This instantly brings *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) to mind, but *Drakensang* actually predates it. It also goes for a very different tone, with a colourful, slightly cartoony art style and a whimsical world, populated by burlesque characters. It feels as a game born out of a fun pen-and-paper RPG session between friends.

Its main feature, *The Dark Eye* ruleset, is both a blessing and a curse. It's a complex, classless system, that offers a lot of freedom in character building. Experience points are used to directly upgrade your characters – improving attributes, spells and talents, or being spent on trainers to learn new ones.

A series of online Choose Your Own Adventure games based on *The Dark Eye* were released alongside *Drakensang*. You can play them at www.tde-games.com



You can start by choosing from 20 archetypes, such as Human Battlemage and Dwarf Prospector, or toggle the "Expert Mode" and customise your character using *The Dark Eye* ruleset.

Such degree of freedom demands understanding to be fully enjoyed. The developers added tooltips and a nice manual, but it's a system much more complicated than *Dungeons & Dragons*. Some nuances, such as how parry works, can be hard for newcomers to grasp.

A bigger frustration comes from how poorly the game employs all these talents and nuances, e.g. there are five Social talents, such as Fast Talk and Seduce, but you'll have very few chances to use them. The majority of dialogues won't even provide a single role-playing option – you'll just click on the only available option and continue reading. Or just skip, since NPCs have unique looks but dull, poorly translated lines.

In fact, *Drakensang* as a whole suffers from a poor overall quality of content. Everything is linear and railroaded – once you explore an area and finish the main quest there, you're sent to the next area, unable to ever return to the previous one. Some quests have creative premises, but too often they force you to walk back and forth over large area, usually fighting the same respawning enemies over and over.

The combat is also a mixed bag. It has great animations and flows well, but lacks depth. During most of the game, characters will only have one or two combat skills, limiting your options. Worse, there's no collision detection – enemies can walk right through your heroes, making positioning useless.

This is tolerable during most fights, but hurts during the challenging boss battles – especially when they overwhelm you with large numbers of enemies, exposing the lack of tactical options available.

Overall, *Drakensang* has all the building blocks required for a great RPG, but the content lacks in quality and fails to take advantage of its strengths. Playing it leaves you disappointed. It looks great and has a rich system, it should be fun! But it isn't.

"What's really important to us is creating a huge pool of clothing, weapons and armour for the player to choose from, so we have something which I jokingly call '*Barbie* dolls for men', an opportunity for adults to play dress-up, so to say. The variety of items, a flexible equipment system and upgrading your character are a lot of fun and very important elements in *Drakensang*."

– Bernd Beyreuther, *Drakensang's project director*



Combat is real-time-with-pause, with up to four party members. It's very similar to many BioWare titles, but issues such as limited abilities and a wonky movement system stop it from being great.

Luckily, Radon Labs later released *Drakensang: The River of Time* (2010), a prequel which took player's feedback to heart and improved upon every aspect of the game. Exploration became non-linear, talents more useful, fast-travel points were added, the filler battles were replaced by engaging set pieces, etc. It's the same system, but with much better content.

Still, the most interesting change is the scope, as *The River of Time* goes for a shorter and more intimate story. Instead of being The Chosen One, here you join a trio of charismatic adventurers – Ardo, the Warrior; Cano, the Thief; and Forgrimm, the Dwarf – and play as a their partner in a smaller, 30-hour adventure.

You'll still be able to control them most of the time, but in some moments they'll act by themselves. For example, when trying to invade a fortress, Cano will try sneaking while Forgrimm will brute-force his way in. You'll decide who to help – playing either a stealth section or a combat gauntlet.

The game delivers these moments in a well-paced and humorous tone that fits perfectly with the colourful art style. In a sense, *The River of Time* is perhaps the closest we ever got to a *The Princess Bride* CRPG.

Sadly, Radon Labs had several issues publishing the game outside Germany. Its English version arrived almost a year later, as a $20 budget title that had no marketing or press coverage. Radon Labs still put out the *Phileasson's Secret* expansion, but then went bankrupt.

The company was acquired by Bigpoint Games, a German publisher specialising in browser games. In 2011, they released *Drakensang Online* – a free-to-play *Diablo*-like browser MMORPG, no longer connected to previous games or *The Dark Eye* ruleset.

Drakensang: The Dark Eye might have been underwhelming, but *The River of Time* remains a great RPG. Few people got the chance to play it, but if you're reading this and enjoy games like *Dragon Age*, be sure to embark on this joyful, full-hearted adventure. **FE**

We suggest using *Ergo's Fixpack* when playing *Drakensang*, and *Ergo's AddonPack* when playing *River of Time*. Both mods feature several bug fixes, balance improvements and other useful tweaks, such as faster movement.



The Dark Eye ruleset gives players a lot of options, but they can be hard to understand and are often underused.



The River of Time features more choices that affect dialogue and gameplay, such as helping Forgrimm or Cano.

Fortune Summoners: Secret of the Elemental Stone



Lizsoft, 2008
Windows

Fortune Summoners is a hardcore side-scroller 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 is controlled in the manner similar to fighting games, while her friends are magic-users – Sana's water magic is slow but diverse, while Stella is an aggressive fire spellcaster, capable of freely moving around.

_FS_ had a Deluxe version released in 2009 in Japan, with additional content and voice acting. But only the original version was localised into English by Carpe Fulgur in 2012.



You can switch control between the three main characters on the fly, as well as customise their behaviour when being controlled by the AI.



Characters have four base attributes, and also learn many spells and abilities. 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, stun-lock 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 themselves worse at controlling the girls (in particular Arche) than the AI, but also highly customisable.

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. 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 favourite. **CB**

Seventh Sense



Project Aon, 2008
Windows, Mac and Linux

In July of 1984 the first instalment of the *Lone Wolf* gamebook series, *Flight from the Dark*, was published, spawning a franchise that would sell over ten million copies to date.

The setup is classic: you are Lone Wolf, the only surviving Kai Lord – an order of holy warriors blessed with psychic and physical powers that opposes the Darklords. It's a simple tale of good guys versus bad guys, but the implementation is masterful.

Created by young musician Joe Dever together with his artist friend, Gary Chalk, the series would stamp upon young minds a narrative, a look and an identity that would shape their idea of fantasy for years to come. Sadly, by the late 90s the gamebook market withered, prematurely ending the series.

In recent years however there has been renewed interest in the series thanks to Project Aon, a fan-created site that re-released the books in HTML, with permission from Joe Dever, who approved the free dissemination of his work online as a gift to the fans.

Seventh Sense is a free, fan-made playing aid for the Project Aon versions of the *Lone Wolf* gamebooks. It automates and aids the playthrough, tracking all stats, rolls, skills, items and page-jumping, while also allowing players to greatly customise the book's rules, art style and even seek special challenges.

The books are intended to be played in order, as one huge adventure. In the first one you create your character, rolling stats, choosing skills (Camouflage, Hunting, Weaponskill, Healing, Mind Blast, etc.) and your initial equipment. These choices will all greatly impact the options available during your quest.

Each subsequent book allows you to keep your current equipment and choose one extra skill, taking Lone Wolf all the way from an apprentice to a Grand Master with mythical weapons and powerful spells.

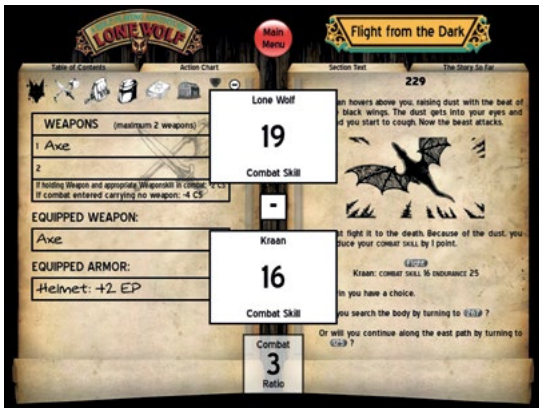
The series has 29 books, and at the time of writing *Seventh Sense* supports up to book 17, *The Deathlords of Ixia*, and it's regularly updated with more content.

To return to *Lone Wolf* after a few decades away is a pleasurable experience. The adventures of the last of the Kai Lords are short, sharp shocks: full of daring escapes, sudden deaths, exotic locales, crazy plots and fantastical elements that enchant young minds and cloud old ones with a perfect miasma of nostalgia. **NT**

In 1998, Joe Dever published the 28th *Lone Wolf* book. After an 18-year hiatus, he returned in 2016 with a self-published 29th book.



Seventh Sense calculates and tracks all your rolls, skills, items and choices. This is especially useful as you carry your hero from one book to another.



Combat is solved by taking your Combat Skill, subtracting the enemy's Combat Skill and rolling a dice. A chart then indicates the battle's result.

Mount & Blade



TaleWorlds Entertainment, 2008
Windows

TaleWorlds is an indie games studio based in Turkey. In 2005 they were founded and released an alpha of *Mount & Blade*. From that alpha they gathered a fan base, funding for the full game and a publishing deal with Paradox.

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 à la *Medieval: Total War,* and wrap it all in the trappings of a medieval sandbox world with RPG elements, your end result is the multifaceted and engaging game named *Mount & Blade*.

Your start by creating your character, answering questions about his/her background and ambitions, which will affect your stats, items and social standing. Then the game begins, and you're in Calradia, a large medieval world, free to do whatever you wish – hunt bandits, recruit villagers for your army, fight nobles in tournaments, offer your services for a king, etc.

But truly, the soul of *Mount & Blade* is its battles. Whether you are a general charging the enemy's army from a snow-covered hill or just a soldier taking part in a castle siege, the game just comes to life: the landscapes, character, weapon and armour models, sound of hooves, clash of blades and cries of battle all work together to immerse you in that moment.

Combat is deceptively simple: by pressing the left button and moving your mouse you attack from left, right, overhead or thrust. Doing the same with the other button leads to a block, but there are parries, shields, weapon types, momentum and other nuances.



While travelling in the world map, you'll often come across nobles, villagers, caravans, bandits and armies, each with their own objectives and behaviours.

You may also issue instructions for your army – if you manage to keep a sharp mind as battle erupts around you. Clashing with targets of opportunity and making snap decisions as the unpredictableness of battle unfolds to achieve victory is deeply satisfying.

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 multiple 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 ever-shifting, and the armies are 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 Caraldia are alive with more than just the faction forces: army deserters, 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 always 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.

Mods for Mount & Blade

Battle Size Changer: Allows you to increase the maximum number of soldiers in battle at once, from the default 100 to a max of 1,000.

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 huge mod set in the *Star Wars* universe that allows you to explore, battle heroes and conquer the galaxy.

Sword of Damocles Adds a complex kingdom management system, over 100+ troop types and much more.

Mods for Mount & Blade: Warband

Floris Mod Pack: A compilation of great mods created by the fans. Highly recommended.

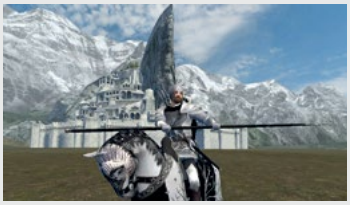
Anno Domini 1257: Set during the Crusades and Mongol Invasions.

Brytenwalda: A complex mod set in Britain after the fall of Rome.

Prophesy of Pendor: A popular but challenging mod, with tough enemies and deadly combat.

A Clash of Kings: Set in the world of G.R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*.

Warsword Conquest: An amazing mod based on *Warhammer Fantasy*.



The Last Days of the Third Age mod allows you to defend Minas Tirith.



Conquer the galaxy as a Sith lord in 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.

Perhaps you wish to aid a pretender to wrest the throne from her rival and in turn be granted a lordship. 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.

If combat is your main goal, the XP gained from kills and completing missions increases your stats, which in turn opens the door for higher skill levels. Skills are all passive, and range from dealing more damage with certain weapons to riding better horses, tracking other groups, capturing prisoners, persuading nobles and better training of troops.

Yes, your troops will also level up, following one of several upgrade trees. Those Swadian farmers you recruited might become powerful knights, while the Khergit recruits can become agile horse archers.

The effort 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 hew wood or stone, 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.

In 2010, a stand-alone expansion called *Mount & Blade: Warband* was released, adding a new faction, the ability to form your kingdom and multiplayer. Then came historical packs: *With Fire & Sword* (2011), *Napoleonic Wars* (2012) and *Viking Conquest* (2014), adding guns, cannons, ambushes and much more. Still, *Warband* remains the most popular version, thanks to its amazing variety of excellent mods.

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**

The *With Fire & Sword* expansion is set in 1600s Poland and it's based on a famous novel of the same name, written by Nobel-winning author Henryk Sienkiewicz.



Characters don't have much of a personality, but dialogues offer many options, from serving kings to marrying nobles.



You can buy weapons, armour, horses, food for the troops or even live as a trader, making profit on trade goods.

Neverwinter Nights 2: Storm of Zehir



Obsidian Entertainment, 2008
Windows

Where *NWN 2's* first expansion, *Mask of the Betrayer*, wriggled free of the main campaign's tiresome Sword Coast heroics to deliver a charmingly dark and offbeat fairy-tale narrative, Obsidian Entertainment's second add-on offered the chance for its designers to get genuinely creative with the series' gameplay.

Storm of Zehir wouldn't have the budget of either of its predecessors, or the development time, or the manpower. What it did have was an impressive collection of art assets (including almost 120 unique creatures), 24 sub-races, 15 base classes, 24 prestige classes and 1,859 feats – plus a dozen-odd background traits for anyone who wasn't satisfied with those character-building possibilities.

The tight budget on *Storm of Zehir* led to some of the VA work being carried out in-house, with the developers themselves voicing some of the characters.



Zehir allows the entire party to engage in conversations, with characters' skills, races, classes and alignments allowing for distinct replies.



On the world map, characters pass skill checks to run faster through rough terrain, spot various hidden locations and avoid being ambushed by wandering foes.

With this hoard of role-playing resources in hand, lead designer Tony Evans and his team decided that *Zehir* would be a throwback CRPG; a story-light adventure with full party creation, a variety of monsters, and heavy emphasis on skill checks. It would take the player through the mysterious jungles of Chult, founding a trade empire while attempting to thwart a Yuan-Ti conspiracy.

It was a fantastic idea – and, in its efforts to re-establish the delights of unfashionably outdated RPG tropes, highly prescient. Sadly, the project's ambitions come up short against a pretty unassailable obstacle – the game itself. Simply put, *NWN2* is the wrong vehicle for this kind of RPG. Its long loading times and module-based gameplay become truly agonising when applied to a constant series of random encounters and tiny settlements, while the infamously bad AI continues to wreck all hope of creating legitimately tactical combat.

Other ideas simply feel half-baked; the merchant empire-building amounts to little more than trotting across the map collecting invisible lumber and dropping it off at various towns. The main plot itself is so lightly handled as to barely register.

There are genuine consolations, however. The game's dungeons, while often frustratingly small, make full and inventive use of its bestiary. The jungles of Chult (and their dinosaurs!) are a fresh and welcome locale. And the grandest innovations – the party-based conversation system and the world map – deserve to have real influence on RPG design long after memories of this expansion have faded.

Zehir, in short, is a real curiosity – albeit one more likely to appeal to modders, designers and Obsidian completionists than anyone looking for a solid, entertaining dungeon-crawling good time. **GT**

Divinity II: Ego Draconis



Larian Studios, 2009
Windows and Xbox 360

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 spell-casting, 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 multiplayer 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.

Starting as an apprentice Dragon Slayer, you are sent on your first hunting expedition. Soon the tables turn as you suddenly find yourself bound to a dragon, able to shape-shift 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 dialogues 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 customise 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 the flying fortress, when the real treat lies in its dialogues and quests. The combat isn't bad per se, featuring a nice range of spells and abilities, but it's poorly balanced. Worst, it's often clear that you're fighting enemies just to artificially 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 design documents, concept art, a fascinating documentary about the development of the game and the various obstacles they faced, plus an optional "cheat mode".

Read that as a developer's confession that the game works better as a crazy, light-hearted experience, enjoying quests and skipping combat. *Divinity II* could have been much more, but its humour and clever writing still guarantee a good time. **FE**

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.



Combat is simple and cooldown-based, but gets the job done. The real problem is that there's just too much of it.



While impressive, transforming into a dragon can get tiresome, as you're mostly limited to repetitive battles against a flying fortress.

Dragon Age: Origins



BioWare, 2009
Windows, Mac, PS3 and Xbox 360

To help promote *Dragon Age*, EA hired Blur Studio to create an elaborate 4-minute CGI trailer, titled *Sacred Ashes*.

It is difficult to accurately portray what *Dragon Age* represented at the time. While still independent, BioWare had given us some of the most memorable entries in the RPG genre. However, their recent dabbling in Eastern martial arts with *Jade Empire* and pulp science-fiction shooter-RPGs with *Mass Effect,* had baffled as many fans as it had pleased others.

Dragon Age, then, when first revealed in 2004, was seen as a return to form. A return to tactical battles, to a high-fantasy setting, to game mechanics uncompromised by console ports. While in line with the company's desire to create their own original IP, it was a spiritual successor to the *Baldur's Gate* series.

Rechristened *Dragon Age: Origins*, it held its ambitions up proudly, with an intro chapter that varied wildly depending on the race, class and social standing of your created character. The game thus sidestepped the usual memory loss trope beautifully, giving you plentiful background into your character's life and possible motivations – before tying it in smartly with an epic first chapter that demonstrated both the scope of the threat facing the world of Thedas, as well as the rich background of cultural and political intrigue that tugged at its periphery.

Dragon Age stands to this day as a masterclass in introducing players to a game, world and characters, and sadly, few games have attempted beginnings in such a scope. *Origins*, indeed.

Then came the combat that makes up much of the game. An active, party-based battle system where the player controls up to four characters in real-time-with-pause combat. The game seamlessly went into this mode from Exploration mode whenever required, offering in both modes a good degree of camera control. The PC version also included a third, tactical bird's-eye view with mouse-driven controls – a clear nod to the Infinity Engine games.

The complaint, for many, was that, in deviating from the rich *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset, Bioware had not created an equally compelling alternative of their own, and the oversimplification of the system – fewer classes, fewer abilities, simplified skill trees, and even fewer party members – made for less compelling encounters and less of a tactical challenge.

While there were highlights – one of the first fights against a towering, ogre-like enemy, for instance, or the dragon encounters – many of the battles felt cookie-cutter and by-the-numbers.



Character creation is limited to three classes and three races, but you can unlock 18 specialisations as you play.



Combat offers both a third-person camera and a tactical top-down camera, similar to the *Baldur's Gate* series.

"The problem with the 'moral meter' is that even though we're offering you choices, it forces you to choose one or the other, and then you're on a fixed path [...] So, in *Dragon Age*, we don't have a good and evil meter, all the decisions in the game have solutions that are logical, where we thought, 'let's provide the player with solid reasons for doing these things', which allows us to have a lot of room for greyness in morality."

– David Gaider, *Dragon Age: Origins'* lead writer



Spell-casting uses a mix of mana and cooldowns. Some spells can be sustained, while others can be combined into powerful magic combos.

Loot was similarly simplified. While equipping a new piece of gear for your characters did have pleasant visual impact, it was relatively rare to find items that had a cool story behind them or a tangible mechanical benefit. And the lack of variety often made players wear the same armour set for dozens of hours.

The world, too, was missing the huge amount of secrets and places to explore for exploration's sake that had left their mark on previous games. Some areas – like Ferelden's capital, Denerim – have their share of nooks and crannies, but most other areas feel a bit flat.

It was the writing, then, that saved *Dragon Age: Origins*. To this day it stands as some of BioWare's finest. The world was written with a scope and depth that paints a much broader picture than the relatively small setting of Ferelden where the plot develops. Yet even this small corner of the world is rife with political plots and cultural/racial tensions. Be it the plight of the elves or the ostracisation of magic-users, your character is given much to think about.

And think about it you should, because the available dialogue options are much more nuanced than those of modern BioWare games. Gone is the duality that forced you to pick between demon and saint in *KotOR*, or between good samaritan and hard-assed rebel in *Mass Effect*.

Here you can, as an example, really feel sorry for the way mages are treated, because you know a few and they seem actually quite decent people. But, on the other hand, some of these decent people seem to be involved in blood rituals and the summoning of demons, endangering common folk and themselves.

The lack of a moral compass that defines your character is replaced by relationships with your party members – some of the most beautifully written and complex party members in BioWare's history. Depending on how they view your actions and words, they may either open up to you or even directly oppose or betray you – a fascinating loyalty system that can sadly be mostly cheated on via gift-giving, but remains as one of the finest integrations between writing, player choice and mechanics.

The game was further complemented by a huge amount of DLC, most of which is story-driven and of very high quality; a modding toolset that gave us some great fan-made content; and a remarkably tight – if somewhat brief – expansion in *Awakening*.

A mystery when first announced, *Dragon Age: Origins* is today seen by many (myself included) as BioWare's last great RPG, before they turned completely to a (still quite enjoyable) more mainstream kind of game. **LM**

***Dragon Age* had over 35 DLCs, ranging from stand-alone campaigns to extra party members, holiday gifts, pre-order bonuses and merchandise tie-ins. It was highly criticised for featuring an NPC that would advertise and sell DLCs in-game.**



Armour offers set bonuses and weapons can be upgraded with runes, but both are very limited and feel uninspired.

Mods:

Extended Community Canon Project: A series of interconnected mods and campaigns that expand upon the game's world and lore.

Dragon Age Redesigned: Adds many subtle changes, improving the visuals, environments and events.

JX - Dragon Age Extended: A big mod pack that adds new classes, specialisations, bug fixes and tweaks.

Baldur's Gate II Redux: Module 1: Allows you to play through Irenicus' iconic dungeon from *BG2*.

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II



Relic Entertainment, 2009
Windows Linux and Mac

DoW2's co-op and multiplayer mode were originally tied to Windows Live, but were moved to Relic's own servers in late 2014. To this day they remain quite popular.

The original *Dawn of War*, released in 2004, was a very popular RTS based on the famous *Warhammer 40k* license. Its sequel, however, dramatically changed the gameplay into what can be described as a unique real-time tactical RPG.

Gone are RTS elements such as base-building or resource-collecting – you now control a squad of four units, each with their own personality and skills.



You control your squad in real time, using tactics, cover, skills and items to best survive the game's overwhelming odds.



From dozen of weapons and accessories to jetpacks, relics, Terminator armour and even giving into Chaos, there are a lot of customisation options.

The campaign casts you as Blood Angels trying to stop a Tyranid invasion. There are many stories and optional missions, all presented by great voice acting. *Dawn of War II* can also be very hard – it has only one save slot and failing a mission might lock you from retrying it or give time for the invasion to advance.

Your units all gain experience as they battle, allowing you to customise their skills and equip them with the *Diablo*-like loot you find. This aspect of *DoW2* is extremely satisfying – there's a lot of freedom in how to build your squad so their abilities complement each other, and finding items such as Terminator armour and Power Swords will have any *40k* fan grinning.

The first expansion, *Chaos Rising*, improves upon everything, especially the rather repetitive missions. Besides items and enemies, it adds a corruption system – optional objectives are presented and failing them or choosing the easy path will taint you with Chaos.

Those seeking to remain pure not only need to carefully approach each mission, but also refrain from using tainted equipment – which is far more powerful. Your corruption level also affects the game's ending.

The other expansion, *Retribution,* is a mixed bag. It features six factions: Space Marine, Eldar, Chaos, Imperial Guard, Ork and Tyranid. Unfortunately, they all must play the exact same dull missions and the RPG elements have been heavily cut. These campaigns now use the same system as the game's multiplayer matches, with resource-gathering and unit-building similar to a "lite" version of Relic's own *Company of Heroes*.

Retribution's big addition is the Last Stand mode, where three players pick a unit each and combine to fight waves of enemies, earning XP and loot as they play.

With *Dawn of War III* returning to its RTS roots, *DoW2* remains a one-of-a-kind title, recommended for *40k* fans and those seeking a quick-paced challenge. **FE**

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 himself – 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 did a great job, filling the city with stunning sights and a few hidden side-paths, while using a colourful 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 a 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 nearly at the end of 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 uses those in interesting ways.



Combat is simple and exploitable, but the game doesn't overstay its welcome or tire players with endless filler fights.

Torchlight



Runic Games, 2009
Windows, Mac, Linux and Xbox 360

Mythos, the game the team at Flagship first began working on, was acquired by Korean company HanbitSoft, who continued development and released it in 2011. They have since closed its servers.

During the development of *Hellgate: London*, a team at Flagship Studios began working on *Mythos*, a simple online *"Diablo clone"*, to serve as a network technology test for *Hellgate*. The project was led by Travis Baldree, creator of *FATE*, and several former Blizzard North employees, who all grew quite fond of it. However, financial issues at Flagship led to the team being dismissed.

To stay together, the team formed Runic Games, aiming to create a "spiritual successor" to *Mythos*. Before tackling a full-scale MMORPG, they decided to first test their concepts and polish their tools with a smaller, simpler and more inviting game. Eleven months later, *Torchlight* was released.

Despite the short development time, the team's experience in the genre shines through. *Torchlight* is a charming and polished game that faithfully follows *Diablo*'s core design, while adding several proven concepts and improvements from similar games, plus some fun new ideas of their own.

Torchlight is set in a steampunk world, where a small mining town found trouble while excavating magical ores. Like in the original *Diablo*, your task here is to descend the vast dungeon next to town, reach its lowest level and defeat the ancient evil within.



Torchlight reintroduces iconic features from *FATE*, such as Fishing and a Pet that hauls your loot back to town to sell it.

Spanning 35 randomly generated floors, this deep dungeon contains several themed layouts that change every few floors, such as mines, ruins, caves, crypts, prisons. But these environments are far from claustrophobic – they present a sense of scale and verticality that's rare in the genre, with large open areas and distant levels visible as you explore.

Torchlight offers three heroes – the Destroyer, focused on melee combat; the Vanquisher, a range-oriented rogue; and the Alchemist, specialised in magic and summoning. Each has three unique skill trees, with distinct specialisations.

There's a great degree of flexibility here – skills are diverse, heroes can wield (or dual wield) all weapon types, and there are spells found while exploring that can be learned regardless of class or stats. So you can easily play as a melee Alchemist with two axes, or as a gun-wielding Destroyer focused on spells. The trade-off is that some skills feel rather generic.

Feature-wise, *Torchlight* is like a collection of some of the best ideas in the genre, presented in a coherent and accessible package. The pets from *FATE* return, fighting alongside you and hauling extra loot back to town; the UI is efficient and friendly; you can enchant items, transmute them, socket gems and collect sets; there are side-quests and bounty hunts, boss battles every few floors; a "retirement" feature for those wanting to switch heroes; and even an endless dungeon available once you beat the game.

The art style is another of *Torchlight's* highlights. It's whimsical, with cartoony characters and painterly, faux-waterbrush environments. Some of the enemies are borderline cute, adding to the casual-friendly tone of the game. However, the short development time does rear its head here, for the lack of enemy variety is quite noticeable after a few hours playing.

"We felt like *Torchlight*'s price point was a magic price point for that kind of game and we sold more than we anticipated. So there's a market for a $20 AAA game. Our idea was: let's just make games that feel like an AAA game and play like an AAA game, but strip away all the extraneous stuff and the expensive marketing campaigns and all that."

– Max Schaefer, Torchlight's designer



Most class skills in *Torchlight* aren't very impressive nor unique, but the more generic character system does allow for more flexible playstyles.

A smart move from the developers was to release *TorchED*, the editor for *Torchlight*. Highly moddable, the game was flooded by mods – from small tweaks to new features, classes and extensive overhauls.

Sadly, *Torchlight*'s biggest weakness could not be easily fixed: it lacks multiplayer, for many players, a must-have in games of this genre.

Despite limitations like this and a shorter overall length, Runic's decision to support mods and sell the game at a $20 dollar price point made it a success.

With *Torchlight* selling over one million copies, Runic decided to work on a sequel, expanding the game and adding the much-desired multiplayer.

Torchlight II (2012) is pretty much that – a larger and better game, with new classes, pets, enemies and items; a longer single-player campaign that spawns four acts all across the world, huge outdoor areas full of events, mini-dungeons and side-quests, a new game editor (GUTS) with Steam Workshop support, cleaner UI and – finally – multiplayer co-op.

The game now contains four classes: Engineer, Outlander, Berserker and Embermage – each with its own Charge Bar, a unique resource that builds up during combat to fuel their powers. And more replayability features were added, such as New Game+ and Mapworks, a random map generator.

It's quite telling that, although *Torchlight II* was released just a few months after *Diablo III*, many found themselves preferring the "clone" to Blizzard's new entry in their genre-defining series. *Torchlight I* and *II* are both great games, highly polished, creative and inviting. Their lower price and the extensive mod library only add to their appeal. **FE**

Torchlight 1 Mods:

Wulf's Beginner's Mod Pack: Several mods to expand the game without changing its core experience.

Emberfiend: Adds crafting, recruitable companions, new quests, items and locations. Great for a replay.

Jarcho's Class Compilation: Offers over 20 new classes, such as Demonologist, Airbender and Ice Queen.

Torchlight 2 Mods:

Haknslash Essentials: A massive collection of mods, it adds dozens of new classes, pets, items, enemies and quests, plus a few small fixes and tweaks to the game.

SynergiesMOD: A total overhaul mod, it offers new towns, rebalances most of the game, adds new classes, enemies, items, maps and features like Respec potions.

Far East Pack I and II: Part of a now-abandoned fan-made expansion, adds seven new classes and lots of great content.

After the release of *Torchlight II*, the Runic team stated that they would not be creating a *Torchlight* MMO anymore, due to burnout and deep changes in the MMORPG landscape.



Each class has three skill trees they can level up, but there are also spells that every character can use, regardless of class.



Torchlight II features four all-new classes, each with its own specific Charge Bar, making them feel more unique.

Yumina the Ethereal



Eternal, 2009
Windows

Yumina was localised into English by JAST USA in 2013. An expansion and a sequel have since been released in Japan.

Yumina the Ethereal is a perfect example of modern PC-exclusive JRPGs. Very different from popular console titles like *Final Fantasy,* these are focused on a niche market, usually mixing Visual Novel storytelling with challenging battles and complex mechanics – plus erotic scenes.

But leave prejudice aside – *Yumina* is above all a great, polished RPG, with clever mechanics and artful use of 3D backgrounds with 2D sprites.



Yumina packs several unique mechanics, stats, equipment, skills and systems. It's intimidating at first, but very logical and robust once mastered.



As the game progresses, its gameplay expands, adding daily schedules, affinities and even first-person dungeons full of monsters.

The plot starts (but doesn't stay) simple: to avoid failing in school, Yumina needs to become the next Student Council President, so that she can change the school rules. For this, she must win the Election War. It's all told through a typical Visual Novel style, with humorous but long, overwritten dialogues. Thankfully they can be skipped if you only care for the battles.

Indeed, the Election War is quite literal. You'll have to win "debates" that are in fact turn-based battles, with rivals shouting arguments – such as "Standardised testing is pointless!" – 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 friends and foes. It's locked at 100, but divided into four colours. Using red abilities, for example, reduces the percentage of red mana in the pool and increases other colours. Managing mana through 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 game has various routes, leading to vastly different endings and final battles. Each time you finish the game, you're offered the chance 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".

Yumina is not for everyone. Few will stand the anime-style art, insane plot, complex systems and the presence of awkward hentai scenes. But those who try it (there's a demo) will discover a challenging game, packed with content and unlike any other RPG. **FE**

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 of 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 antihero, 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 neighbours 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 armoury 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 lock-picking. 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 dialogues are all in Russian, with poorly translated English subtitles.

Rough, challenging and intense, *Marauder* is a unique low-budget tactical RPG. Its bleak story, harsh setting, high difficulty and complex combat are a sure treat for 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.

Risen



Piranha Bytes, 2009
Windows and Xbox 360

Due to a deal with publisher JoWood, Piranha Bytes lost the rights to the *Gothic* license after *Gothic 3*. This led to the *Risen* series, but the contract expired in 2011 and the licence has since returned to them.

Gothic 1 and 2 established an open-world Action RPG standard that, from certain perspectives, still hasn't been surpassed. They inspired a devout fanbase, which was less than pleased with how *Gothic 3* turned out. While the game tried many new things and had some merits, they got overshadowed by the numerous faults – some due to design, others due to publisher interference.

The fallout from the third instalment resulted in the developers, Piranha Bytes, parting ways with their long-time publisher JoWood and starting a new franchise – *Risen*. But *Risen* is a *Gothic* game in all but name; even the setting's backstory is essentially a follow-up to one of the endings of *Gothic 3*.

Set on a remote island occupied by three factions, packing a challenging melee combat and the typical blue-collar German writing, *Risen* made *Gothic* fans feel right at home. Rewarding exploration and the iconic trainer system were strongly present alongside, sadly, some old flaws such as overly tedious dungeon areas. While the world may not be as coherent and atmospheric as *Gothic 1 and 2*, *Risen*'s improved graphics and friendly interface make it a good entry point for Piranha Bytes games.

Overall, fans were pleased. But the mainstream audience had lukewarm feelings towards it, especially on consoles. *Risen 2: Dark Waters* (2011) was a clear attempt to rectify that, embracing a whole slew of modern design trends for streamlining purposes.

Combat was heavily simplified, devolving into mindlessly whacking at enemies. Guns were added, but given their simplicity and lacklustre animations, their only merit is speeding up fighting considerably. Ditto for adding companions. This is relevant because, for some reason, the developers decided to bloat the enemies' health to about double what it should be, making battles a long exercise in tedium. Given that melee fighting was one of the highlights of previous games, it was disappointing how *Risen 2* had fallen.

The skill system also got changed into a bizarrely overcomplicated mess: you gain glory (EXP) to spend on statistics that derived into sub-statistics and then you go to trainers to unlock special abilities. Why?

In the previous games the player simply gained Learning Points when levelling up, which were then spent with trainers by paying gold. The fact that this system was overcomplicated for no reason shows the designers were aimless in their creative process.



Harbour Town is one of the three hubs in *Risen*. Its NPCs feel alive, and most of its quests have multiple solutions.



Risen's character system is almost a straight copy of *Gothic,* as you use gold and level-up points to pay for trainers.

"If you ask three people what a *Gothic* game consists of, you'll get five answers. That makes it very difficult to realise what players expect from a new *Gothic*."

– *Björn Pankratz, Gothic and Risen series' designer*



In *Risen* you use runes to freely cast damage spells, but all the other spells require scrolls that you must find or scribe yourself, making them a valuable resource.

Several other issues also plagued *Risen 2* – the seamless world was replaced by small islands that aren't interesting to explore (some are just corridors), the factions were reduced, the quests are mostly linear and fetch-based, DLCs, fast travel and QTEs were added and the game's UI was redesigned for consoles. If not a bad game, it was mediocre and forgettable.

The game's only real highlight was its aggressively advertised pirate theme. But, in the end, it was more of a façade. You can't freely sail your ship; merely use it for fast travel; and the plot is about defeating a godlike being with the use of magical artefacts. Beyond some flavourful fetch quests, the game really isn't all that pirate-oriented – or, at least, it's more Johnny Depp than Errol Flynn in terms of atmosphere.

Risen 2's adoption of modern gaming trends renounced all the things that fans appreciated about the *Gothic* series. Still, it did sell over a million units. It's hard to say if this was due the pirate theme or the marketing, but probably a combination of both.

Risen 3: Titan Lords (2014) was Piranha Bytes' attempt to pander to everyone – which resulted in nobody being pleased. On one hand it sold itself as "Piranha Bytes going back to its roots", on the other it added a mini-map with quest-compass, a binary morality system and even a "detective vision".

Combat was slightly better – no longer so rigid and with a bit of flow reminiscent of the older games. But, given the excessive reliance on rolling and on charged blows, it looked ridiculously floaty. The game also returned to having three factions, each leading to different flavours of the Warrior/Mage/Rogue paths.

However, trying to be everything for everyone, *Risen 3*'s world is a mishmash of pirate and medieval influences from all other *Gothic* and *Risen* games, which resulted in a frankly schizophrenic tone and writing truly hitting rock bottom. It feels like a parody, especially since the protagonist sounds like Clint Eastwood doing an impression of Clint Eastwood.

Risen 3 may be marginally better mechanically than *Risen 2*, but its lack of coherence and obviously pandering design makes it far less redeemable.

Piranha Bytes first tried going back; then they tried changing; and then they tried compromising. All attempts at catching a flame that's ever-fading in the collective conscious of the gaming crowd. The *Gothic* experience can't simply be recreated for a modern audience – it needs to be reintroduced. Games like *Dark Souls* and *XCOM* show us that hard-but-fair is something that can flourish even today. Hopefully Pyranha Bytes can achieve this seemingly Sisyphean task of getting back to their old glory. **LL**

There aren't any big mods for the Risen series, but both *Risen 1* and *Risen 2* have unofficial patches to fix some minor bugs. You can also tweak their .ini files for improved shadows and draw distance.



Risen 2's UI was redesigned for consoles. And while the character system expanded, most additions are pointless.



Risen 3 tried to please *Gothic* fans while adding anything that was popular – from kill-cams to a busty side-kick.

Knights of the Chalice



Heroic Fantasy Games, 2009
Windows

Knights of the Chalice uses the Open Game Licence, a public permission that allows anyone to freely create games based on _Dungeons & Dragons 3.5_ or _5th Edition_.

To this day, the debate still rages over which game can rightfully be called "the ultimate *Dungeons & Dragons 3.5* game experience". While sectarians wage this endless war, the critical thinker will know that the answer depends entirely on which a part of *3.5* you use to judge each game.

Looking for the most expansive implementation of the character system? Then surely no competitors can hold a candle to the amount of options in 2006's *Neverwinter Nights 2*. Are you instead looking for strictly correct rules and combat implementation? Then 2003's *Temple of Elemental Evil* is the game for you. If story and role-playing opportunities are what you crave, *Mask of the Betrayer* is rivalled only by true classics like *Planescape: Torment*.

If, however, what you want is a consuming dungeon-crawling experience that harkens back to the Gold Box days, then no games can challenge 2009's masterfully crafted *Knights of the Chalice*. Perhaps the most criminally overlooked RPG of its era, it is no overstatement to call it one of the defining *D&D 3.5* video games.



You begin the game by rolling a party of four characters using *D&D 3.5* rules, here limited to three classes and three races.

Knights of the Chalice is a turn-based, tactical combat simulator developed single-handedly by Pierre Begue. It is a vast game with tons of dungeons to explore and foes to battle. The game was developed using the Open Game Licence – the "freeware" version of *D&D 3.5* – and stays relatively true to the core rules. While you'll only find a small selection of races and classes, casters have a veritable library of spells at their disposal, while fighters can grapple, bull-rush and choose from a wide selection of feats.

In the story department, *KotC* offers only the most basic of explanations for your adventuring endeavours. The game's art assets are simplistic but incredibly endearing. The flat, top-down perspective was the most immediate turn-off for players when the game was released and remains so to this day, but do not let such details deter you. Within 30 minutes you'll be completely used to the camera, which will perfectly do its job in the fighting to come.

KotC is a dungeon crawler above all else, and as such presents your party of four with a run-of-the-mill adventuring quest, which soon turns into a sprawling epic throughout the land. As you fight Orcs, giants and dragons in increasingly exotic locations, encounters remain handcrafted and take advantage of the strengths of the systems on display here. More often than not, the game forces you to shake up previously solidified tactics to overcome new obstacles.

Combat is fought on tile-based terrain, which will soon imbue you with the sensation of moving miniatures during a pen-and-paper session. Mages must be positioned correctly for Cone of Cold spells, clerics must use their Righteous Might with care so as not to block themselves from proper positioning when they turn Large, and fighters must hurry to grapple the enemy mage before he summons a deadly demon.

"If I was the dungeon master on a tabletop game and you, as a player, wanted to reduce the price of a flaming sword by 20%, I would not roll a D20 to see if you succeeded; I would ask you to demonstrate your own bargaining skill in talking. [...] That's why I don't like the 'talking' skills very much; they are a replacement for the player's own intellect."

– *Pierre Begue*, *Knights of the Chalice's creator*



Knights of the Chalice's crude graphics are secondary next to the quality and complexity of its combat system.

Throughout your tour of *KotC*'s world, you'll be greeted with ingenious design decisions that make the adventure flow. Like how you can revitalise your party completely by resting, but must do so at limited campfires that put pressure on your resource management. Or how the game presents you with fights that are sometimes too difficult for your current level, but hides useful resources like Arrows of Slaying nearby. Or how you can compensate for the restricted resting by crafting wands of healing or fireball scrolls.

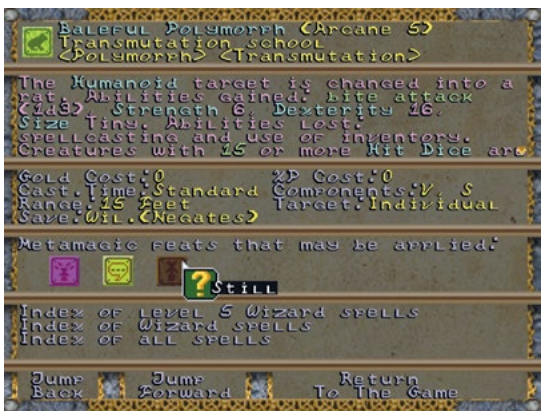
The crafting system is also the game's one, true weakness, however. You can craft every single piece of equipment your characters need, as long as you can pay. This, in turn, means that the loot you gather throughout your quest is only useful insofar as it can be sold for gold, allowing you to craft something better. Considering the game's dungeon-crawling nature, being rewarded with new, wondrous items now and again could have been one of the game's main draws.

The game is also balanced around a party of two fighters, a mage, and a cleric, and so taking along more casters will make the mid- and endgame easier.

In an effort that dwarfs almost every other game, *KotC* is perhaps the most well-documented CRPG in existence. Thanks to a hyperlink-based based tool that describes every aspect of the rule system, any clarification you might need is just a click away. As such, not only does *KotC* have one of the most complex rule systems of modern RPGs, but also one of the most transparent. It stands as a testament to the importance of good documentation and brings into question why even AAA RPGs are often incomprehensible and vague in this regard.

Knights of the Chalice is as classic an RPG as they come. Its complexity and depth will appeal to veterans of the genre, while its slick design and wealth of documentation makes it easy to dive into for newcomers looking for a tactical challenge. **CG**

***Knights of the Chalice 2* is currently under development. It's an ambitious project, set in a new world and featuring many new races, classes and spells, as well as a module editor tool.**



If you're ever in doubt about a stat, feat or spell effect, just click on it and you'll get a detailed rule explanation.



The game is heavily focused on combat, but you'll also come across a few puzzles and talkative creatures.



2010-2014
The freedom to play (and create) any game

After years in the hands of a few giant publishers, the new decade brought in a widespread democratisation of the gaming industry.

Digital distribution bloomed, with Steam dominating the market. With its Greenlight system introduced in 2012, it became possible for any developer to (try to) get their game on the platform. Introduced in 2013, the Early Access service also allowed developers to sell still-unfinished games, thus gathering the necessary funds to complete the project.

Crowd-funding also empowered many developers to pursue their dreams, with Kickstarter alone reporting over 10,000 game projects successfully funded. Game engines and console development kits started to get cheaper as well – or were even offered for free.

The rise of mobile gaming and indies also changed the way people thought about game pricing and buying games. While $60 AAA releases were still popular, it became common to have $5-10 low-budget indies or $20 mid-sized games. This may seem like common sense now, but it was a long process – as recently as 2009, Runic's decision to sell *Torchlight* at $20 was still seen as a bold pricing strategy.

The result is that a charming 2D indie can be as profitable as an expensive cutting-edge 3D game. The massive monetary entry barrier that surrounded the industry for years had now fallen.

Foreign markets also grew closer. The first *Dark Souls* was only ported to PCs in 2012 thanks to an overwhelming public petition, but it quickly became common to see games from major Japanese studios on Steam, as well as indie titles such as *Recettear* and *One Way Heroics*, courtesy of several new localisation companies.

This eventually led to what some call the "indie bubble" or the "opening of the floodgates", as more and more games are released each year, making it harder for titles to get noticed. As a result, many developers release a game, fail to profit and end up closing down soon after. Players also had issues with some developers pitching their games under Kickstarter or Early Access but failing to actually finish them, leaving behind a graveyard of abandoned projects.

Still, it's a much welcome change compared to the drought of the mid-2000s, as the amount of choice players have is unrivalled.

Games now come from one-man indies, middle-sized studios and big AAA studios. From the US and Europe, but also from Japan, China, South America and Africa. From expert programmers and from those with an idea in their head and a free engine on their PCs. From nostalgia-driven projects and from those seeking to expand the boundaries.

Truly, what a time to be gaming.

Trends:

Crowd-funding: Online crowd-funding dates back to the early 2000s, with platforms like ArtistShare helping fans finance their favourite artists. But everything changed in 2012, when Tim Schafer went to Kickstarter to pitch an adventure game. Asking for $400,000, he received over three million dollars, drawing everyone's attention and starting a boom of crowd-funded projects – from small indie games to multi-million dollar entrepreneurships such as the OUYA console and the Oculus Rift.



Tim Schafer's Double Fine Adventure project was released in 2014, under the name *Broken Age*.

YouTubers and Streaming: While YouTube was founded in 2005, the 2010s was when gaming channels exploded – celebrities such as PewDiePie, Markiplier and TotalBiscuit overshadowed traditional news websites, as people began to rely on YouTubers for information. Streaming (and watching) games became a massively popular hobby, with Twitch emerging as a dedicated platform, consoles adding built-in streaming features and events like eSports tournaments reaching millions of viewers.



The 2014 *League of Legends* World Championship finals were watched by over 27 million people.

Motion Gaming: In 2010, both Microsoft and Sony released their answers to the Wii's surprisingly popular motion controllers: the Xbox 360's Kinect and the PlayStation Move. Both companies strongly pushed their accessories, but neither managed to connect with their audiences and fulfil expectations. Microsoft still tried to force its new Kinect 2.0 alongside the Xbox One but eventually abandoned it, while Sony ended up integrating the Move controllers into its PlayStation VR.



The Kinect sold over 24M units and the PlayStation Move about 15M units, but neither of them were considered successes.



The **iPad** is released. The middle ground between mobile phones and dedicated consoles, it became a popular platform for indie games.



The **Nintendo 3DS** is an evolution of the DS, packing stereoscopic 3D effects and a great library of games. It has sold over 65M units so far.



PlayStation Vita was released to compete with the 3DS, but was quickly abandoned by Sony. Estimate sales were around 10M.



Steam Greenlight allows anyone to submit their games to Steam, "opening the floodgates" to thousands of smaller developers.



The **PlayStation 4** is released. In 2016, Sony would also sell the PS4 Pro, a more powerful version of the system designed for VR and 4K gaming.

2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014



Twitch is born, as a gameplay streaming side-channel of Justin.tv. Over the next few years, its popularity would explode, reaching 100 million visitors per month in 2015.



Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure popularises the concept of using collectible toys to interact with video games. Both Nintendo and Disney would later release their own line of toys.



Oculus Rift is presented via a Kickstarter campaign, raising $2.5 million and setting virtual reality as "the next thing". In 2014, the company was acquired by Facebook for 2 billion dollars.



Wii U is released, keeping its predecessor's movement controls and introducing a new touch-screen gamepad. Suffering from a lack of third-party support, it sold only 13 million units.



The **Xbox One** is released, originally bundled with a Kinect 2.0, which was later abandoned. As of Jan 2016 it had sold about 18M units, around half of the PS4's reported sales at the time.

Borderlands



Gearbox Software, 2010
Windows, OS X, PS3 and Xbox 360

***Borderlands'* art was changed months before release and became nearly identical to a 2007 short animation called *Codehunters.* Gearbox later acknowledged the inspiration, but never properly credited the original artist.**

Ask someone to describe a *Borderlands* game and the first things they'll mention will probably be the comedy setting and the faux hand-drawn art style. These features set the series apart in the crowded shooter market and make *Borderlands* visually striking and unique.

The odd thing is that these attributes were basically last-minute additions. The original *Borderlands* began development as a grim game with a serious art style, and didn't become the Borderlands we know today until the last few months of development. This is a series where its defining attributes didn't take shape until the last possible moment, and it had to overcome a lot of internal pressure to do so.

In *Borderlands*, you play as one of four Vault Hunters (basically outer space treasure hunters) searching for fame and fortune in the world of Pandora. In your way stands a never-ending army of psycho bandits, indigenous wildlife, and killer robots. Each Vault Hunter has their own set of powers that favour a particular playstyle. Some will lend themselves to risky up-close engagements, some are suited to using long-range weapons, and others are stronger in support roles for those that want to play co-op with their friends.



Each character has a particular playstyle and three unique skills trees. Mordecai, for example, can specialise in pistols, in sniper rifles, or improve his pet's attacks and skills.

As you gun down waves of enemies, they drop randomised weapons and gear. In a lot of shooters the gameplay can eventually get stuck in a rut, with the player eventually settling on one or two weapons that suit their playstyle, to the exclusion of all else. But in *Borderlands* the constant supply of absurd weapons can keep the gameplay fresh.

Maybe right now you're really attached to a shotgun that shoots explosive rounds, but an hour from now you'll find a pistol that sets people on fire and allows you to throw unused bullets like grenades if you reload prematurely. After that you might fall in love with an assault rifle that can melt through enemy armour with corrosive damage and has a scope attachment that allows you to use it like a sniper rifle.

They follow the traditional coloured rarity tiers of *Diablo II*, with some of the legendary weapons having more exotic abilities. The variations in recoil, damage output, reload speed, magazine size, accuracy, and fire rate are endless, so that every gun feels unique. On top of this, the player levels up on a regular basis, which means they're always gradually out-levelling their guns and thus need to be on the lookout for replacement gear of higher levels.

While the comedy and art style give *Borderlands* its unique personality, the gameplay is what sets the series apart and keeps players interested for hundreds of hours. The *Borderlands* formula is a marriage of two vastly different genres that combine to become more than the sum of their parts.

Half of *Borderlands* is derived from the loot-driven Action RPGs like *Diablo*, where the player cuts through waves of foes in search of rare items. Most of the game is spent furiously clicking on monsters, with the player stopping only to sort through their loot, look for interesting items, and sell off the rest in town.

"The thing that compels us towards growth, discovery and choice in RPGs, that sort of long-range loop, it's not mutually exclusive with the short-term, visceral, base-level joy we get from moving and shooting in a shooter. [...] if we marry them together, there's a real opportunity there to pave new ground. That was *Borderlands* from the very beginning."

– Randy Pitchford, *Gearbox's co-founder*



Besides thousands of weapons, you'll also have to pick a shield and grenade mods, as well as manage all the different ammo types.

This shower of loot creates a cycle of anticipation and revelation similar to luck-based games like slot machines or loot boxes. Only instead of paying money and opening boxes, the player is wiping out clusters of foes. There's always the promise that the player might find something really special in the next encounter. This system of randomised loot tickles the reward and pattern-matching parts of the brain, and is what gives these kinds of games a reputation for being "addictive".

The drawback with the *Diablo*-style gameplay is that it can be a little monotonous and dry. Sure, the player might get a little tingle of excitement every few minutes when an item drops and they stop to see if they got anything good, but between those moments there's a lot of mouse-clicking and pressing the same few hotkeys. It's not a terrible experience, but it doesn't really hold up on its own. Imagine playing a *Diablo* clone with the random loot removed. It would make for a game of very limited appeal.

The other half of the *Borderlands* experience comes from your typical first-person shooter mechanics. The player needs to shoot bad guys, dodge incoming attacks, manage ammo and strike a balance between taking cover and doing damage. It's fast, violent, and visceral.

The drawback of first-person shooters is that they can suffer from a bit of "intensity fatigue". If you've ever tried to play a classic shooter like *Doom* or *Quake* for any length of time you've probably noticed that the constant redline action can become paradoxically boring. An experience can't sustain maximum action forever and eventually the sound and fury can get to be numbing.

By blending these two genres, *Borderlands* creates an experience that has the advantages of both while mitigating their shortcomings. The wild gunplay is a lot more engaging than *Diablo*'s mouse-clicking. At the same time, the shower of loot and the ever-changing selection of weapons is there to save the player from intensity fatigue and from falling into the two-weapon rut. In a world filled with clones and imitators, *Borderlands* stands out as a unique franchise with a gameplay style and personality all its own.

The two follow-up titles have refined the formula without straying from the original. *Borderlands 2* (2012) zeroed in on a genre-savvy meta-humour, and *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* (2014) introduced new gameplay tweaks.

Pre-Sequel has the stronger mechanics, while *Borderlands 2* had stronger jokes, characters, and story. I think we're still waiting for the ultimate realisation of the *Borderlands* formula that takes the best parts of all the entries and brings them together in a single game. **SY**

In 2014, Telltale Games began to release *Tales from the Borderlands*, an episodic adventure game based on *Borderlands*.



Borderlands 2 polished the experience with a slicker design, new characters and a bigger focus on the meta-humour.



Pre-Sequel expanded the gameplay, adding double-jumps, low gravity, a ground-slam and a better in-game economy.

Din's Curse



Soldak Entertainment, 2010
Windows, Linux and Mac

Back in 2007, Soldak released *Depths of Peril*, an Action RPG where you led a barbarian tribe and had to not only kill monsters, but protect your town and deal with other NPC factions as well.

While it was a dynamic game, it was also a fast-paced multitasking challenge. Miss one tiny bit, and half of your tribe would dead with the other half being raided while you're out hunting savage monsters.

Seeking to improve upon this formula, Soldak created *Din's Curse* – a faithful heir to old roguelikes, married with *Diablo*. The game controls like *Diablo*, uses the same coloured loot system and also has an unfortunate town built over a multi-level dungeon. But there's a key difference – the town and NPCs you must protect are all active, evolving entities.

***Din's Curse* got an expansion in 2011, called *Demon War*. It adds a new class (Demon Hunter), plus new items, areas, monsters, quests and events.**



A log keeps you informed about what's going on while you play – from NPCs in dire need to monsters levelling up.



Din's Curse offers seven different classes, each with three skill trees. You can also create a hybrid that uses two of any skill trees.

Citizens will use equipment that you donate, buy items, go into debt, argue (and kill) each other, be killed by monsters, die of starvation or simply flee. They will also offer quests – from personal favours like delivering packages and gathering ingredients to helping the town by recruiting a new weaponsmith, killing a monster leader, finding water, etc.

If all key NPCs die, it's the end of your town. But not of the game – you can try to save another town.

Monsters aren't static either – they are all active, with their own agenda and allies. Skeletons will get along with zombies, but will kill hell dogs. They will level up and grow in power, and the hell dogs can later arise as undead! Bosses are even worse: they gather minions to attack your town, build nasty things and raise their own minions – which then scatter and start to do the same, repopulating the dungeon.

And so you might be hunting a nasty orc mage then have to immediately return to town to stop an invasion from the dungeon depths, find out who built this monster gate in the city, fight the guilty citizen, help others with their health issues, then be asked to destroy a weather machine that the aforementioned orc mage has built while you were gone.

You get the picture. *Din's Curse* always have something for you to do. But, unlike *Depths of Peril*, you can fully customise how you want to play it.

It's you who sets the pace of quests, dungeon depth, amount and level of monsters. You can make the game easier, disabling town invasions altogether, or make it much harder, speeding things up, buffing monsters or handicapping yourself with restrictions.

All and all, *Din's Curse* is a fascinating mix of Action RPG gameplay and roguelike dynamics. If you can handle its crude, dated graphics and the mediocre interface, I wholeheartedly recommend it. **OB**

ArcaniA: Gothic 4



Spellbound Entertainment, 2010
Windows, Xbox 360, PS3 and PS4

After the botched release and poor reviews of *Gothic 3*, JoWooD Entertainment took the series' licence away from Piranha Bytes and instead hired Spellbound Entertainment (known for their *Desperados* series) to create the next *Gothic*.

However, *ArcaniA: Gothic 4* is the result of more than just a change of developers. The *Gothic* series was never popular in the US, and JoWooD decided it was time to change this, bringing the series to consoles and tuning it to the tastes of this new audience.

What followed was a complete mishandling of the franchise and an all-round failure, so contrived and misguided it's almost comical – as if middle-aged European executives wrote a design document based on what they think "American kids these days like".

As such, you now play as a new, younger hero, and the developers were thorough in removing absolutely any complexity or nuance from the game.

The *Gothic* series has always been known for its brilliant sense of exploration, cleverly designed open world and amazing sense of progression. It had a strong emphasis on verisimilitude, with things such as alternate paths and solutions, the ability to spare enemies, realistic schedules for NPCs, etc.

ArcaniA instead offers a series of minuscule and artificially gated areas, each with a main quest and 3-4 side-quest – all clearly marked on your mini-map. Finish the main quest, the gate opens and you advance to the next area. These areas are pretty but uninspired, mostly filled with generic forests, linear dungeons and the same few enemies. Trying to explore outside the narrow paths will either cause you to get stuck or fall to your death, and you can't even swim anymore.

Not only are the areas are dull – the whole game is based on "kill X monsters" or "bring Y items" quests. Your very first quest has you doing three of these errands to "prove yourself" to your fiancé's father! Sounds like a parody, but it's a taste of the entire game.

Finally, combat and character progression lost any charm or relevance. Attributes were all removed and the iconic system of getting trainers to teach you was replaced by a bland skill tree with "+1%" upgrades. Combat is brain-dead – most enemies can be defeated by mashing the attack button, while the "hard ones" merely require you to dodge when they glow. And magic spells were reduced to simply three flavours of ranged damage (fire, lightning and ice).

For most, *ArcaniA* is just a forgettable game that was reviewed poorly and got barely noticed by the so desired US console gamers. But, for *Gothic* fans, it was the death of a beloved series. **FE**

JoWooD went bankrupt in 2011 and its assets were acquired by Nordic Games. The company removed the *Gothic* subtitle from *ArcaniA* and re-released the game for the PS4 in 2015.



The story brings back many old faces, as you seek vengeance against the previous *Gothic* hero, who became king and was corrupted by madness.



A bridge guarded by two soldiers. Instead of talking, swimming, killing, sneaking, bribing or going around, your only option is to do their quest.

Two Worlds II



Reality Pump, 2010
Windows, Mac, PS3 and Xbox 360

***Two Worlds II* can sometimes refuse to launch depending on your PhysX driver. If you're having any issues, install Nvidia's PhysX legacy driver.**

The first *Two Worlds (2007)* wasn't a critical hit, but some fans enjoyed having an alternative to *Oblivion* and *Gothic 3* in open-world RPGs. Its multiple factions, huge world, classless character system, Old English dialogues and Polish origins gave it a distinctive flair, even if the game wasn't very good.

An expansion named *Two Worlds: The Temptation* was announced, but after years of delays it became a full sequel – awkwardly titled *Two Worlds II*. While at a glance it looks like the first game, a lot was changed.

The Old English writing was abandoned, as the hero now sports a deadpan attitude, with occasional snide remarks, self-aware jokes and bizarre situations adding humour. Graphics have been greatly upgraded, displaying flowing hair and cloaks, dense vegetations, reflections and object physics with such prominence that it seems like a (dated) tech demo sometimes.

While *Two Worlds II* is an open-world game, it isn't very big nor rich, and progression is often gated. There's a small introductory island, a large continent dominated by Savannah and Middle Eastern towns, a second continent with a Japanese-inspired city surrounded by tropical jungles, and a third continent that appears as a huge landmass on the map, but is actually quite small in playable areas.



Two Worlds II combat is solid, but its console focus limits the number of abilities on the action bar to only three at a time.

While there are several side-quests, the game itself isn't very lengthy – a completionist can likely see everything in 30-40 hours. Instead, the real draw of *Two Worlds II* is the diversity of things to do.

The game is a real-time Action RPG, with a classless character system offering the usual Fighter/Mage/Thief abilities, plus a few non-combat skills. Combat is rather clunky but gets the job done, and the physics engine makes hits feel satisfying.

During your journey you'll create new spells, race horses, sail a boat, upgrade weapons and armour, dye your clothing, join guilds, battle in arenas, explore dungeons, play songs, mine, gamble, pick locks, pick pockets, set traps, etc. It's a feature list that rivals some of the best open-world RPGs, but packed into a much shorter and fast-moving game.

Among these features, the magic system stands out. *Two Worlds II* requires you to create all your spells by combining magic cards. You mix an effect card (Fire, Water, Life, Force, Thorns, etc.) with a carrier card (Missile, Area Effect, Summon, Totem, etc.) and then add modifier cards (Time, Damage, Defence, Homing, etc.). Depending on your level, you can stack several of these to strengthen their effect, or even make spells with two or three different phases.

For example, you mix Fire and Missile to make a Firebolt. Then you can add a modifier to make it split into more missiles and/or ricochet between enemies, plus add the Corpse card with the Enchant carrier to hold enemies still for four seconds after being hit.

It's an extremely interesting system, with all sorts of novel powers like resurrecting yourself or creating altars you can later instantly activate to heal or buff. And it ties well to the character progression, as buying more cards and levelling up your skill to mix more of them into a single spell is quite rewarding.



You can dismantle you gear, then use their materials to upgrade equipment, dye them and socket magical gems.



Dialogue is very simple, with few choices besides asking for exposition and refusing side-quests. But it's often funny.



You can mix effects, carriers and modifiers to create your own spells, from walking on water to ricocheting fireballs.



There are numerous activities, such as a *Guitar Hero* rip-off, sailing, playing dice, horse racing and building a village.

There are other good ideas, but poor design choices end up diminishing them. The game has a classless character system that promotes spreading your skills, but requires wielding a staff when casting spells and forbids you from using bows with heavy armour or robes, limiting your gameplay options.

Similarly, equipment is mostly restricted by level, limiting your effective choices to your current level tier, as it will deal a lot more damage than the previous tier (an issue *Two Worlds 1* also had).

That's not to mention odd choices like having dungeon maps always fully revealed or how enemies are all displayed on the mini-map, even "hidden" ones. The game even promotes glaring AI faults: a loading screen tip is to climb on rocks, so that melee enemies can't find a way to reach you and just stand still.

However, the worst sin of *Two Worlds II* is how many of its novel features are criminally underused. You can sail a boat, manually positioning the boom to harness the wind, but there's few places to sail to. You get a horse, but can only use it on the first continent. You can dye armour, but there are few colours and you can only dye certain parts of it. You can make spells to jump higher or walk on water, but there's little reason to use them. You can sneak, steal and assassinate, but that's rarely useful. Luckily, mods like *Worldmerge* manage to salvage much of that, adding content to better explore those features.

Multiplayer is also extensive. There's a separate co-op mode with a linear and combat-heavy 10-hour campaign set sometime between *Two Worlds 1* and *2*, plus modes like Deathmatch, Duel, Crystal, Capture, Defend the Throne and even a Village mode, where you build farms, mills, forges, guardhouses, shops and the like, occasionally defending them from monsters. It's all very simplistic, but nice to have nonetheless.

Two Worlds II's charm comes from this contrast. It's extremely ambitious – but, while it lacks depth, the constant stream of new things to do leads to an addictive experience, always asking "what's next?". It's not a game for everyone, but those willing to endure some roughness and limitations will certainly find themselves entertained for many hours. **FE**

***Two Worlds II* was surrounded by controversy, selling the 2017 expansion *Call of the Tenebrae*, which was previously promised as a free update, and disabling the game's console commands in order to sell micro-transactions.**

Mods:

Worldmerge: The ultimate mod pack for *Two Worlds II*, it fuses the main campaign, the *Pirates of the Flying Fortress* expansion and the multiplayer maps into a single world, with three new difficulty settings. It also adds better AI, tougher combat, hidden secrets to pursue, an expanded character creation, more armour colouring options, the ability to cast spells with any weapon and use bows with any armour, increased draw distance, killable NPCs, new weapons, armour, quests, boss enemies and much more. Highly recommended, even for a first playthrough.

Cthulhu Saves the World

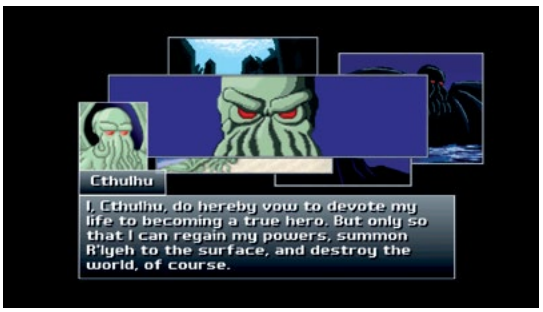


Zeboyd Games, 2010
Windows and Xbox 360

***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 and 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 straightforward 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 may you 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.



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 quickly.

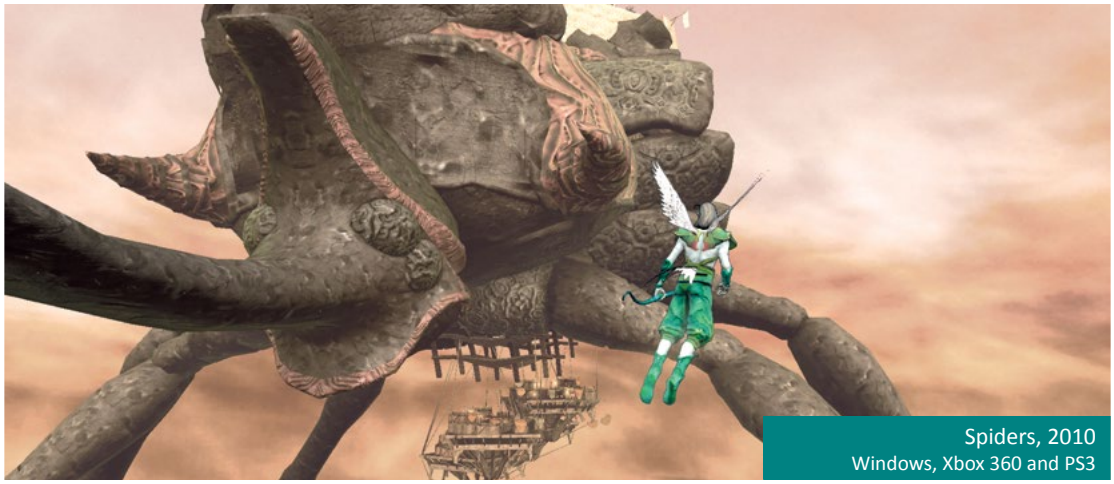
Ironically however, the game's characters are also the game's biggest weakness. While you never get tired of Cthulhu cast in the role of "grumpy and unwilling saviour", or some of his tag-along friends and the sharp developer wit their personalities exhibit, other characters are downright obnoxious and unnecessary. Your first companion, Umi, is a tiresome groupie whose shtick gets old really 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, 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 ragtag saviours, 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 which culture produced them. For this reason alone, the game is worth a glance from any would-be RPG connoisseurs. **CG**

Faery: Legends of Avalon



Spiders, 2010
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3

Middle-of-the-road games have a certain kind of difficulty attached to them it comes to writing reviews. Calling them the worst is disingenuous while lauding certain quirky aspects can sound like undeserving praise. *Faery: Legends of Avalon* is the quintessential example of this.

The game can best be described as a JRPG-lite about adventures in the fairy realm. There are plenty of generic elements that, while not exciting, are easily digestible: you'll engage in quests and dialogues with binary good/evil paths, meet a few new companions, collect simplistic gear and fight in straightforward turn-based JRPG-like battles. But the how and why is not of importance, but rather the where.

The plot revolves around an ever-increasing magical cast of beings that goes journeying in curious places – the World-Tree Nordrassil, the haunted Flying Dutchman, an Arabic city on top of a giant beetle and, of course, the titular Avalon. On top of all of this, there is a simple feature which adds tremendously to the exploration aspect: flying.

Being an enchanted fairy has its perks, one of them is being able to travel by wings across the land. There is a primal kinetic delight to zig-zag left and right while going about with questing and combat. Given how much of the time is spent on going from point A to B in RPGs, you would think more thought would be spent on how to make it more interesting. *Faery: Legends of Avalon* is one of the few games that actually tries to change this vital part and succeeds.

The only other feature worth mentioning is the visual aspect of the game's progression system. When the main character gains a level, they must choose between exclusive spells and abilities, each with different visual representations – horns, wings, tattoos, tails, auras, etc.

Thus the player might have a cat's tail, dragonfly wings and antennae on one playthrough, but looks entirely different in the next, adding a lot of personality.

The fact that *Faery* stands out so much reflects horribly on games. Mystery is one of the driving forces of fiction and the fact this title impresses so much in that department just shows how saturated with Tolkien-esque fantasy the industry is. But even in a world of gaming with endlessly diverse settings, I would still recommend *Faery,* even for a short while, just for its flying and visual level-up representation.

In the end, *Faery: Legends of Avalon* is a simple 6-8 hour game that shows players something new, and that's already more than can be said of some RPGs that are ten times as long. **LL**

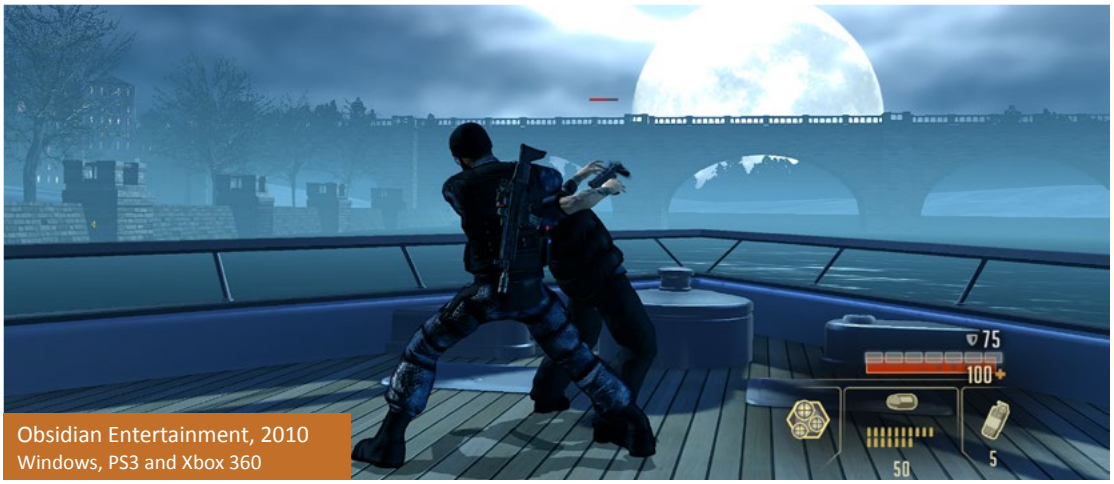


Combat is clearly based on JRPGs, and extremely simple. You just need to learn when to use physical attacks or spells.



Your choice of skills also changes your appearance, such as the type of magic you pick deciding what kind of wings your character will have.

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 backfired, 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 underappreciated 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 organisations, terrorists, rogue spies, gadgets right out of 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 organisation in the United States.

After a brief introduction, you will start your career with an easy tutorial, followed by your first real assignment: travelling 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 predefined character; it's up to players to decide what kind of person he is. An important tool for this is the dialogue system, which at first sight is very similar to the dialogue 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 dialogues 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 customisable 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 affect 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 dialogue 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 dialogue options, and they will all have long-term consequences.

There are several memorable NPCs in the game, although, because the story is 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 psychopathic rogue agent is comedic gold. Just don't be surprised if the guy ties up the hostages, pours some fuel 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 unalert guards, or just draw your weapons and gun everyone down. Being an 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 playstyle.

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 shortcomings in 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 over 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 reticule over the target, the higher your accuracy and the critical hit chance.

Fallout: New Vegas



Obsidian Entertainment, 2010
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

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, *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 levelling 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.



A vast amount of content and usable items create a satisfying, complicated RPG.

And it certainly also helped that the Mojave Wasteland presented in *Fallout: 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 from out of state, and that doesn't feel post-apocalyptic.

Your character isn't a lone scavenger grasping for survival; he's a gainfully employed courier trying to make a delivery. This desert wasteland is 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 revelled in slavery, torture, sadism and warfare. And what made them truly terrifying is that they weren't moustache-twirlers.

"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.

Fallout: New Vegas is a game about economics, after all, so Ceasar'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 systemise a banality of evil.

They rationalise 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 torchlit war camps was a vast American desert full of singing cowboys, lounge lizards, mutated hulks and leather-clad 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.



Travelling with certain companions may tear apart your faction allegiances, if you choose to recruit with them.

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 add-ons 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 favourite 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 cancelled third *Fallout*. Many ideas from that game were salvaged, including Caesar's Legion, the Hoover Dam battle and the Burned Man.

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 *Fallout 3: Wanderer's Edition's* team. It's a huge mod that adds new features, changes to the balancing, new weapons and even implants.

Yukichigai's Unofficial Patch: A huge bug fix mod that aims to increase stability without changing the gameplay or causing issues with other mods.

Fallout - Project Brazil: Offers a whole new campaign, where a civil war erupts inside your vault.

Autumn Leaves: A professionally made new quest where you'll have to solve an exotic murder mystery.

No Auto Aim: This mod removes the dice rolls from combat, so that gunplay is more similar to an FPS.

Mass Effect 2



BioWare, 2010
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3

Writer Shamus Young wrote an extensive and detailed analysis of the *Mass Effect* trilogy's story and world-building, especially the changes from *ME1* to *ME2*. It can be found on his website: www.shamusyoung.com

The original *Mass Effect* was both a critical and a commercial success, and the BioWare team had three years to polish the sequel. *Mass Effect 2* ended up selling more copies and winning more awards (Metacritic 89 vs. 94), so both BioWare and Electronic Arts were surely happy. But is it really a better RPG? My answer would be no.

A better game? Possibly. It's a paradoxical game, that suffers from what seems to be executive meddling and a design-by-committee approach.

The best element to showcase this schizophrenia is the writing. The main plot ranks among the worst video game plots in existence – it starts with Shepard getting killed, then resurrected and forced to work for a terrorist organisation, gathering allies and resources for a special mission. Its flaws are too many to list here and I recommend readers to check the excellent dissection by Shamus Young (linked to the left).

However, the companions and their recruitment and loyalty missions, which form the majority of the content, are some of BioWare's best. While the companions themselves are hardly unique and suffer from the "sexier and edgier" treatment, they are mostly well-written and the quests, first to recruit them and later to ensure their loyalty, are excellent.



Character-building has been changed. Dialogue and non-combat skills have been removed, but new powers can be learned from your companions.

More races of the galaxy are represented in the team than were in the first *Mass Effect*, and through the companion stories the surrounding world is expanded. Unfortunately the encyclopaedia from the first game still exists and is utilised as a crutch by the writers – however it's unnecessary to actually consult it, as all the information that the player needs is conveyed by the companions.

Technically, the sequel has not made any notable changes. To this day, the game still looks and sounds good, though it is fairly obvious that the levels are small and the obvious waist-high walls are always a clear signpost that combat is about to start.

Which brings me to *Mass Effect 2*'s big change: mechanically, the game has been turned into a cover shooter, similar to *Gears of War*. It's a puzzling change as mechanically there was nothing wrong in the combat of the original. It doesn't work too well with the special powers either, as aiming them is somewhat cumbersome with this new stiff camera.

To further reinforce the similarities to shooters, gone is the overheating mechanism – we're back to the safety of magazine reloads. Naturally, this change required a nonsensical retcon of existing lore and it really serves no purpose, as bullets are so liberally spread around that there is absolutely no danger of ever running dry, not even if you are a soldier and thus use guns for every encounter.

The special abilities of various classes and their skill trees have also been overhauled. They weren't that interesting in the original and now they are largely meaningless. Every encounter is possible to complete with any squad composition as your teammates are largely useless, thus levels had to be designed to accommodate every class that Shepard could be – a similar issue that plagued *Neverwinter Nights*.

"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's lead producer



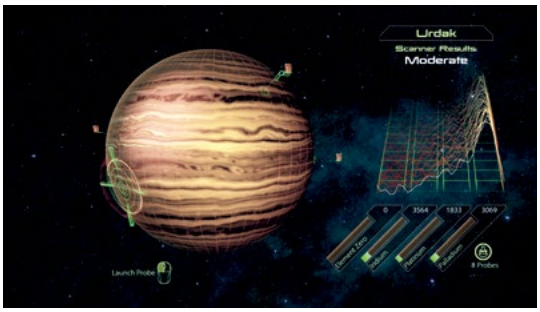
Mass Effect 2 revamps the combat system, now focusing on cover-based shooting, much like *Gears of War*.

Instead of trying to improve *Mass Effect* 's clunky inventory, BioWare axed it as well. Possibly a good thing, because their replacement for Mako is quite possibly the worst time-wasting mini-game in the history of video games: the planetary mining.

In short, the player is shown a rotating picture of a planet and then must scan for deposits by holding one mouse button, then shoot mining drones with the other mouse button. It's insanely mind-numbing. While the Mako driving segments of the original suffered from certain issues, I cannot for the life of me understand how a designer could think that this scanning system is an improvement.

Thus gameplay is a strange mixture of the utter boredom of scanning planets for resources to upgrade your ship and gear, fluid combat that isn't really challenging but is quite entertaining, and talking to people to propel the plot forward. As befitting a BioWare game, that last part is where the game shines.

A new feature, the ability to interrupt some of the conversations to take action – in either Paragon or Renegade manner – is a novel concept and works surprisingly well. Seeing Shepard punch an annoying journalist or throwing a baddie through a window instead of having to listen to their prattle is such a guilty pleasure.



You must gather allies, tech and resources, but exploring planets was been replaced by a dull scanning mini-game.

And what about the continuity between games that BioWare so hyped before *ME2* launched? It really isn't there. Yes, the game gives you little nods here and there to some of the stuff that you did in *ME1*, but it is all cosmetic and has zero effect on gameplay.

The ending of the game is a beacon of hope. The entire party takes part in it and, depending on the choices the player has made throughout the game, certain companions can be permanently killed.

Sadly, *Final Fantasy VI* (1994) is still the reigning champion in this aspect, as Shepard can still only take two companions along in the actual combat while the rest of party is assigned to various tasks in the background. If only this mechanic had been used more in the game and in more detail instead of this gimmick that only happens in the last segment of the game.

Thus my reasoning for the opening statement of *Mass Effect 2* being a paradoxical game – the main plot is awful but the companions are good. RPG elements have been stripped out but gameplay is fluid and entertaining. There is good in here, as well as bad – it all depends on what you value more. **GA**

***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.**

Mods:

Coalesced.ini Mod Manager: Makes modding easy by handling changes made to the configuration file.

Better ME2: Adds some gameplay tweaks, a bit of rebalancing, a cleaner HUD and gamepad support.

Hybrid Combat: Makes combat similar to *ME1*, changing how reloading works plus other tweaks.

Flash's Mass Effect 2 Mod: Aims to make the game more balanced and faithful to the lore, e.g. it makes that enemy's shield regenerate, just like yours.

A Lot of Textures: A large pack with new HD textures.

Casual Outfit Beyond Normandy: A pack of casual clothes that you can now wear even outside the ship.

Academagia: The Making of Mages



Black Chicken Studios, 2010
Windows

An updated version of *Academagia* was released on Steam in 2017, featuring a new interface and including all previous DLCs.

Academagia starts with the player character, a 12-year-old child on the floating island of Mineta, being invited to attend the Academagia, a magic school. The player first customises their character – choosing stats, traits, backgrounds, a familiar, etc. – then is immediately presented with a dizzying array of options for what to do with his or her time during the school year.

The gameplay is a combination of RPG and Choose Your Own Adventure book – each day is broken down into three time slots where the player chooses what to do. Their character can attend classes, study, make friends and go on adventures, during which they'll be presented with various choices to overcome obstacles, where success is determined by their stats.



Like in *Princess Maker* you must plan your daily schedule, but *Academagia* offers more options, such as where to study and how much effort to put in.



Interactions are all text-based. Random events will pop up, offering the chance of a reward or (on failure) humiliation.

The game includes one entire school year (the developers are currently working on a sequel with the second year), but it doesn't give any concrete goals beyond "pass all your classes", so the player is free to do pretty much whatever they want. The fun of *Academagia* comes from a combination of exploring role-playing options and interacting with the world, learning how to navigate all the systems to accomplish whatever goals the player sets for themselves.

There are a huge number of skills (over 300!), and training them up will often unlock new actions. By the end of the game they can have dozens of choices of how to spend every time slot. They can train their familiar, study illegal magic, go shopping, befriend (or bully) other students, cast spells, go on adventures, explore the school grounds and town, and more.

The writing and the freedom players have is the strong point here. One of my favourite adventures involved improving the school's terrible cafeteria food. My character burgled prize recipes, incited a riot in the cafeteria, blackmailed the head chef, put on a fancy dinner party for the school faculty, and finally managed to get a new menu implemented. At the end I was feeling a genuine sense of accomplishment.

Academagia does have some flaws – since it was put together by a fairly small team, they didn't have the resources to make sure all the different systems were balanced and useful. For example, shopping for items is a pain since characters can only visit a single store per action, rather than being able to browse among all the stores at once.

However, if you can look past or work through some imbalances in the gameplay, you'll be rewarded with an immensely rich, expansive game and the ability to guide your young wizard from a novice to an expert magician. **JO**

Dungeons of Dredmor



Gaslamp Games, 2011
Windows, Mac and Linux

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 customisable, 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 offers 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 is the 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) 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 armour 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, a very acessible introdution to newcomers, and it has something to offer for anyone who's willing to play it. **JR**

***Dungeons of Dredmor* has three DLCs that add numerous new items, monsters and classes. The first DLC was released for free, as a gift to the community.**



An unexpected mini-boss can suddenly end an adventure. Or not, if you disabled permadeath.



Dredmor offers the rare chance to play as a dual-wielding vegan geologist pirate with mathemagical powers and communist leanings.

E.Y.E.
Divine Cybermancy



Streum On Studio, 2011
Windows

Released in 2011, *E.Y.E: Divine Cybermancy* is the debut of French Streum 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.

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.*

The game takes place in an amalgam of various settings that you might recognise 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 organisation 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 each other's 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 special 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 realise 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 standardisation 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*



Nothing is certain in *E.Y.E.*, the weird dialogues and unusual narrative will keep you second-guessing the whole game, and there are multiple endings to uncover.

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, hitbox-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 gun drone to follow you around. The enemies obviously respond in kind, 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 customisation 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 (or everyone) you encounter in different ways – destroy, leech stamina or even 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 dialogues and flavour texts have some seriously broken grammar and bizarre choices 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**

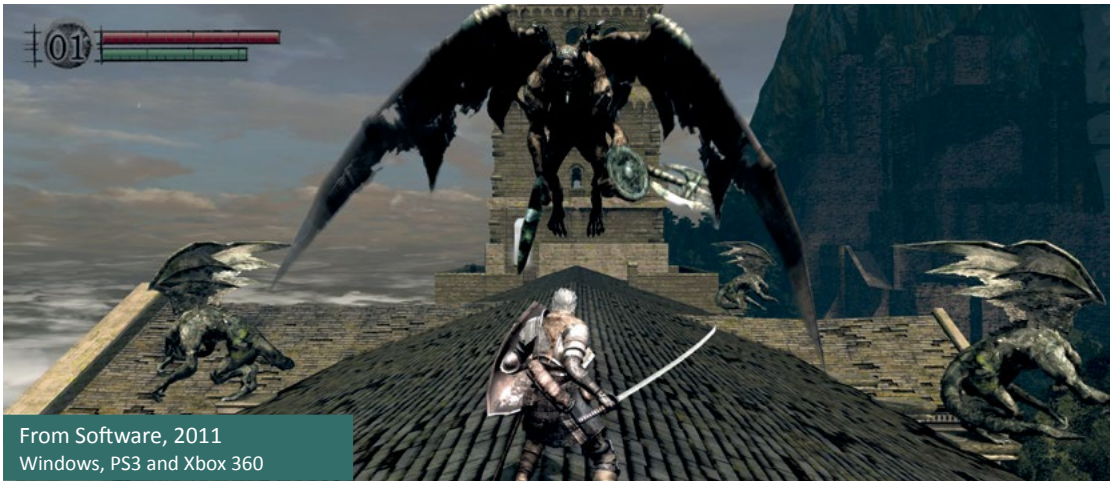


The hacking mini-game has you selecting actions to invade an AI that can – and will – hack you back.



Some of *E.Y.E.'s* inspirations are a little less subtle than the others, such as this "cybernetic demon".

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 Action-RPG released on PlayStation 3 to little initial fanfare (to the point of being passed over by Sony for localisation, , 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-realised 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* feel 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.



The eccentric NPCs in *Dark Souls* present an organic style of side-quests, as their stories progressing as you play, shaped by your actions.

Over the course of this endeavour, 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 realise that they are happening, and that their actions might have changed some outcome.

Analysing *Dark Souls* in comparison with other RPGs, it falls into the category of classless ARPGs with an open story and world structure. While players choose a starting class when 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 to 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, opting for a smaller number of more dangerous foes. Neither are they trying to emulate pure action games with their complex systems of combos. 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 – e.g. using a polearm in a 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.



Almost every equipment piece in *Dark Souls* is a viable choice, allowing for extremely diverse playstyles.

The game allows players to place messages in the form of glowing runes on the ground. These can point out hidden paths, treasure, traps, enemies – or they can be false and made to lead trusting players to their deaths. Similarly, player deaths result in bloodstains in other players' 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 based on the concept of phantoms 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 multiplayer into a single-player RPG.

Dark Souls' combination of challenging battles, exquisitely designed levels, deadly bosses and punishing death mechanics had such influence that it gave birth to its own sub-genre, with *Dark Souls II* (2014), *Bloodborne* (2015), *Dark Souls III* (2016) and several others that followed, such as *Lords of the Fallen* (2014), *Salt and Sanctuary* (2016), *Nioh* (2017), etc. It's a punishing but rewarding experience, as all 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**

In 2018, From Software released *Dark Souls Remastered* for PC, PS4, Xbox One and Switch, adding improved graphics, frame rate and online features.

Mods:

DSFix: Released the same day as the game's lousy PC port, this mod unlocks the game's resolution and/or frame rate, among other improvements. A must-have.

Prepare to Die AGAIN: This mod aims to give veteran players the excitement and mystery of playing *Dark Souls* for the first time by changing the location of enemies, items and bonfires. Great for a replay.

Hyper-Agressive Enemies: Makes enemies able to see you from afar and chase you anywhere. Use it with the *Self Gravelording* mod for the ultimate challenge.

The Witcher 2:
Assassins 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.

A sequel to the surprise hit *The Witcher* (2007), *Assassins of Kings* puts Geralt of Rivia on the trail of the eponymous assassins, who just killed 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.

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. Sound and music follow suit, although the soundtrack by Adam Skorupa and Krzysztof Wierzynkiewicz has more of a traditional orchestral flair than the folk-inspired bagpipe music of the first game.

Gamelay-wise, the original's unusual top-down view and point-and-click movement are gone – the camera 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.



The inventory was entirely redone to better fit controllers, but feels rather awkward when using mouse and keyboard.

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, since meditation does not require a bonfire any more. Inventory has been switched from grid-based to list-based, optimised for controllers. New additions include a rudimentary stealth mode and Quick-Time Events, both appearing a few times in the game. The fist-fighting and dice/poker mini-games mark a return, and a new arm wrestling mini-game was also added.

The 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 prerequisites 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 the alchemy tree), granting a permanent bonus.

The game is comparable in size to its predecessor, with similar ratios 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 colourful 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.

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.

"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.

Combat has been changed from the mouse-driven system of the original game to a more typical Action RPG system with a third-person camera. The three separate fighting stances are gone, with fast and strong attacks instead just mapped to different keys. Geralt still uses two swords – steel against normal and silver against supernatural opponents – but he 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. Defensive moves include rolling and blocking, the latter consuming vigour, which is also the resource used for casting signs – a kind of witcher magic. Signs work more or less as before, except for Quen, which now creates a magical armour that absorbs damage.

One of the strongest points of *The Witcher 2* is the plot, which in my opinion is significantly better than the first game's. What makes it truly unique is the ability to experience the game's second chapter 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 points 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 a deep, complex plot, just like its predecessor. It is simply cut from a different mould. **WM**

In May 2011, the Polish version of Playboy featured one of the game's characters, Triss Merigold, on its cover.

Mods:

In 2013, CD Projekt released the REDKit, an editor for *The Witcher 2*. Sadly, few mods were ever finished, most being cosmetic changes, but here are two highlights:

Full Combat Rebalance 2: Mod created by Andrzej Kwiatkowski, now a gameplay designer at CD Projekt. The mod is huge and includes changes to the game's balance, tweaks to the combat and new animations.

Enhanced Mod Compilation: A compilation of minor changes that offers quality-of-life improvements, like reducing some items' weight and adding auto-loot.



Witchers are hunters, so being prepared is key. Potions, for example, can make you see enemies in dark areas.



The game is full of choices that impact the story, including one that splits the game into two entirely different paths.

Way of the Samurai 4



Acquire, 2011
Windows and Playstation 3*

Often one of the most talked about aspects of RPGs is their size and length. Since the 80s, magazine ads boasted lines like "30 dungeons", "over 200 monsters" and "dozens of hours of fun", and the trend only got stronger with the rise of gargantuan RPGs like the *Elder Scrolls* or *The Witcher* series – games that can take over 60 hours to beat, with some players enduring over a hundred hours in a single playthrough.

However, keeping a lengthy, epic narrative on track is very tricky when the game has to factor in the player's decisions, as many RPGs do. A very common solution is for choices to branch out only for a while, then quickly tie back into the main narrative. It's what games like *Mass Effect* do – choices are accounted for, but even if you are the worst bastard who ever lived you'll still have to do X and Y to save the galaxy.

Going in direct opposition to this philosophy is the *Way of the Samurai* series. The first game, released in 2002 for the PlayStation 2, cast players as a wandering ronin who enters a small remote village. From there on, everything was up to the player – he could get involved in a conflict between local factions, try to protect a woman from bandits, kill everyone he sees or just casually cross the village and leave, "finishing" the game in under five minutes.



You can sometimes talk to enemies during combat to persuade them, or use the back of your blade to knock them out.

Way of the Samurai 4 was the first game of the series released on PC (now also joined by *Way of the Samurai 3*) and it's arguably the best among them. You create a ronin who arrives at the port town of Amihama. The game is set in 1855, during the Bakumatsu period, when the Shogunate was at its end and the Japanese were suffering the incursion of foreign warships into their waters – often on unfriendly terms. This tension is portrayed in three main factions: the Shogunate forces, a visiting British ambassador and a group of anti-foreigner extremists.

As you arrive in town, a fight breaks out between the factions, and it's up to you to pick a side – or simply walk away. It's a game that trades length for width; the town is tiny, with just nine small areas, and there's only a handful of key characters to interact with. But within this limited setup you can explore many possibilities, with entirely different outcomes.

Maybe you want to side with a faction, only to betray it later. Or you'll devote yourself to helping a single character. Perhaps you're in town just to fight in a tournament, or to steal from shops. You can play a silent character that refuses to answer any question, or draw your blade during conversations and attack.

Way of the Samurai 4 is a game designed to be replayed many times, learning about the characters, the world and the consequences of your actions. Your money, items, weapons and, better yet, choices will carry into your next playthroughs in various ways, from store prices to expanding your possibilities.

For example, your Japanese ronin won't be able to understand most foreigners at first. However, if you help build a language school, it will remain there in future playthroughs, so your next characters will now understand the foreigners – and that will open new story possibilities for you to explore.

***Way of the Samurai 4* was first released in 2011 in Japan. It reached the West in 2012, but the PC port came only in 2015, released by Ghostlight.**

"The last game was set during the Warring States period in the 1500s, so we had been aiming for a rough, cool feel, but for this one we wanted flashy, ostentatious visuals and therefore decided to set it at the dawn of intercultural exchange. [...] we did consider to some degree that this era might be appealing in the event that the game was released overseas."

– *Tetsushi Saito, WotS 4's lead designer*



The game plays with the culture shock between Japan and the West in a humorous and often over-the-top tone.

There's a strong meta-aspect to the game, as each time you finish it you'll gain points to unlock more features, like playable female characters, harder difficulty settings, new customisation options, and more combat choices, such as dual-wielding or using guns.

Speaking of combat, *Way of the Samurai 4* makes great use of sword fighting. While you may fight large numbers, battles are always one at a time. There's a strong and a fast attack button, plus a block, and your attacks change with your directional input, from lunges to overhead attacks, depending on your choice of fighting style and your character's mastery of it.

The trick is that you begin with a plain katana and a basic sword fighting style, but you'll collect more weapons and fighting styles as you defeat your enemies. There are over 70 styles to unlock, including various sword stances, dual-wielding, spears, shinobi style and hand-to-hand combat.

Enemies will always drop the weapons they use, and you can equip or disassemble them and use the parts to forge a new blade with special properties. Just remember to repair them often, as they quickly break. There are over a hundred weapons in the game, and collecting exotic swords and styles can become a goal on its own, as some are well-hidden and others are only available on specific difficulty settings.

While a regular playthrough is very short, there's a large amount of side-content to explore, from the aforementioned weapon and style collecting and post-game unlockables to various side-quests and "kill X number of people" challenges. You can even manage a dojo, recruit students and create your own fighting style. While most of these are tasks are fun and will happen naturally, fully unlocking all the game has to offer can be a rather repetitive task.

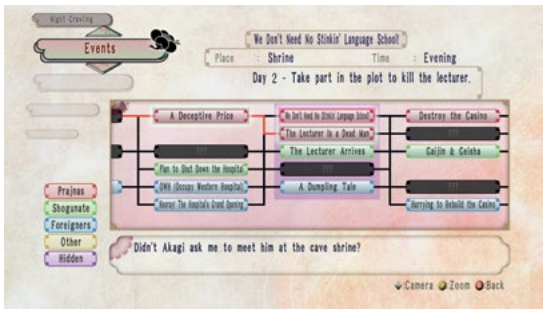
What can also be a bit too much is the tone of the game. Previous games in the series always had some silly Japanese humour and over-the-top characters, but here it reaches extreme levels of wackiness, with a Lolita-like ambassador, a knight named Megamelons, a trio of sadistic sisters who love torture and an absurd "night encounter" mini-game where you must sneak into your lover's bed at night.

Regardless, *Way of the Samurai 4* is a fantastic game that offers a fun and challenging combat, a cast of memorable characters and an incredibly fresh take on game design. Replayability and player freedom are the key here, and it's a joy to slowly get to know the game's characters, areas and events like the palm of your hand, then disrupt its inner workings – helping, rescuing and killing different characters, just to see how the game adapts and weaves new stories. **FE**

***WotS 4*'s excellent soundtrack was composed by Noriyuki Asakura, who also worked on the popular *Rurouni Kenshin* (aka *Samurai X*) anime, set in the same period.**

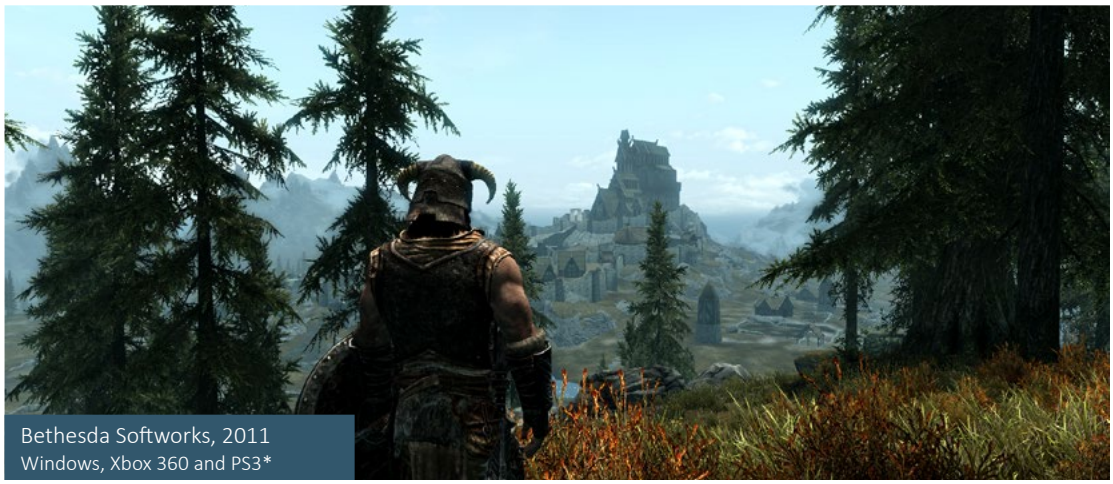


You can disassemble weapons you collect and use them to forge entirely new ones, with various special abilities.



Your journal displays the various events and paths you've gone through, and hints on how to unlock new ones.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim



Bethesda Softworks, 2011
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3*

There is a time early in a child's life upon which they discover a special power that children have: the theatre of the mind. It is during this time that common objects acquire the most delightful properties. A broomstick flies. A trashcan is a shield, a twig becomes a sword, and that shrubbery over yonder is a forest begging to be explored in search of treasure to gather and fiends to banish.

Yet it is the oddest thing, that as children grow into adults they lose this special power. This happens in such a quiet, demure way, that most of us never realise it's gone, or even that we ever had it in the first place. *Skyrim* is the kind of game that makes us remember.

The uncanny valley is in full effect in this grandiose epic: the vastness of its open world and the density of its vegetation brings into full focus the fact that there's something off about that guy's face. Or that, given enough skill and darkness, a mischievous player may very well steal the clothes a character is wearing – without her noticing.

But Bethesda's grand epic shrugs the uncanny valley away with an eye for playfulness and a knack for re-awakening that repressed power of imagination dwelling somewhere within its players' skulls.

This is first-person action role-playing by the numbers, then. Press left to strike, right to block, both for a shield bash, or hold for a charge attack. Ranged combat is simpler even, while magic simply lets you assign a spell to each button. There is a nice heft to the clash of sword (or fang!) on shield, and an audible tautness to the bowstring, but there is little more to combat than sloppy timing.

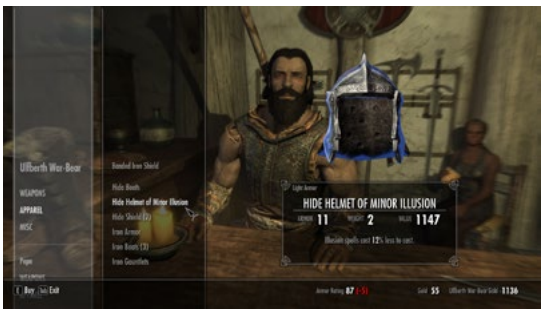
Character development, too, feels slightly underwhelming. *Skyrim* uses classic "skill up by using" system, and it is well-implemented, but in many areas improvement doesn't seem to translate to the screen well enough. On the other hand, there are the powerful Dragon Shout spells to acquire by exploring the world, and even several talent trees on which to invest points. These are hit-and-miss, with some very worthwhile and fun abilities to be found, and several underwhelming ones.

It's all about the world, really. Criticism can fairly be levelled at nearly every other aspect of the game – the swordplay feels floaty, magic is different flavours of projectile combat, crafting is grindy and uninspired, the enemies are mostly damage sponges rushing you, and those ancient ruins all look strangely alike.

***In 2016 Bethesda released *Skyrim Special Edition*, a remaster for Xbox One and PS4. Later the game also received a Nintendo Switch port and a VR version.**



Once again you can play in both first- and third-person modes, but this time the combat feels a lot more weighty.



The interface is slick and allows you to examine objects in 3D, but it plays horribly on keyboard and mouse.

"We give the player a lot of credit, we trust him. We give him all these tools and we teach him this stuff and he's an excellent player-director. He wants downtime, he goes to town and talks to people. Says he wants some challenge – 'I'm gonna fight that dragon I heard about'. It becomes much harder to put the game down. He is the director of his experience."

– Todd Howard, Skyrim lead producer



Riding a horse across the vast plains in pursuit of a dragon is the kind of emergent experience that *Skyrim* excels at.

And yet, these negatives seem small, pitiful even, when standing at the edge of the Throat of the World and looking down, past the fog and into the green fields west of Whiterun, recognising that small outcrop of rocks where you once stumbled into a cadre of Redguard assassins.

The negatives float away when, low on health and provisions, you find yourself running for your life from a high-level dragon (and asking yourself: "why did I install the mod that makes dragons deadlier?!") – and all of a sudden, into the legs of a mountain giant. You then make your escape into a nearby cave while the two behemoths clash outside – and venture into whatever new discovery awaits inside. And there's always something to be discovered.

Skyrim is a game of moments, of small random occurrences, of carefully orchestrated plans going to hell because of stupid NPCs, of moments posing in front of breathtaking views, of sitting by the fire, an action with no gameplay benefits whatsoever, done simply because you feel like hearing that bard sing again about how Ulfric is the High King – and in his great honour we shall drink and sing. It is this tapestry of micro-experiences that breathes life into a player's sojourn onto the icy lands of northern Tamriel.

Skyrim is not meant to be a simulation, or a twitch experience. It is, quite frankly, not even much of a role-playing experience – unless you use your rediscovered imagination to fill in the blanks. Then, it shines like few others. **LM**

***Skyrim* had three expansions: *Dawnguard* and *Dragonborn*, which add extra areas and content, and *Hearthfire*, which adds the ability to build your own house.**

Mods:

SkyUI: Absolutely essential, this mod replaces *Skyrim*'s default interface for one better suited for keyboard and mouse, with sortable columns and other cool features.

Unofficial Skyrim Patch: There's one of these for each expansion, and they provide important bug fixes.

Skyrim Redone (aka SkyRe): A massive mod that overhauls most of the game, altering combat, magic, stats, perks, enemies, crafting and much more.

Alternate Start - Live Another Life: Allows you to skip the long introduction and start the game in one of many wildly different locations and situations.

Immersive Creatures: A huge mod that adds over 2,000 creatures, including new quests and bosses.

Immersive Weapons and Armour: Adds over 100 new weapons and 50 new armour sets, all lore-friendly.

Climates of Tamriel: Changes the weather and lighting, for more atmospheric visuals and darker dungeons.

Requiem: A hardcore overhaul mod, it changes *Skyrim* into a harsh and more realistic game. For experts only.

Deadly Dragons: This mod adds unique dragons to the game and makes them smarter and tougher to defeat.

Enderal - The Shards of Order: Developed by the same team who made the excelent *Nehrin* mod for *Oblivion*, this is an entirely new game created using *Skyrim's* engine, with a new world, new levelling system and a much heavier focus on storytelling.

RealVision ENB: ENBs are graphical mods that heavily alter the game's visuals, adding effects such as grain and depth of field. There are many, but RealVision is the most popular, achieving results such as this:



If you want to heavily modify *Skyrim*, visit the *Skyrim Total Enhancement Project* wiki, a comprehensive modding guide available at www.wiki.step-project.com

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 reply – 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 school life. It's clearly inspired by *Princess Maker* (1991) and *Academagia* (2010), but with a more light-hearted and accessible presentation.



Your character has four attributes: Smart, Strong, Cute and Weird. The last one is the funniest to focus on.



Using clever solutions, like teleporting a monster away instead of fighting it, awards you school merits.

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 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 five 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**

Dragon Age II



BioWare, 2011
Windows, Mac, Xbox 360 and PS3

With the world-threatening invasion of the Blight solved by the player in *Dragon Age: Origins*, we now unexpectedly turn our sights to the lives of those affected by the war.

A quick glance at the concept of *Dragon Age II* and you'll be in awe at how ambitious it is. This is the tale of Hawke, a war refugee who just arrived with his family at the dark city of Kirkwall, not a penny to his name. Over the next years, he will have to find a way to survive not an inhuman ancient evil, but the worst of humanity itself – greedy slavers, desperate thieves, religious zealots and a hateful mage-hunting inquisition. To crown it all, the story is told by an unreliable narrator: a sleazy companion of Hawke under interrogation by a mysterious woman.

Unfortunately, this bold premise was met with BioWare's demand for a streamlined, fast-paced RPG, to be released between *Mass Effect 2* and *3*. Thus, the team reportedly had little more than a year to make *Dragon Age II;* and it shows. While the art style is vastly improved, the limited development time led to cuts, reused assets and very few locations to explore.

This wouldn't be such a big problem, if not for the drastic simplification of the game's systems. Gone are elves and dwarfs as playable races, the prestige classes, crafting, non-combat skills and even your companion's armour. What's left is an action-heavy, console-friendly combat system that has some interesting ideas, such as cross-class combos and friendship/rivalry talents, but it still gets repetitive fast – in part because it's paired with poor level and encounter design that just throws wave after wave of respawning enemies at the player.

However, *DA2*'s true flaw is the execution of its story. It spans a decade, showing Hawke's life alongside his family and friends in Kirkwall but, rare intimate moments aside, it's just a generic power fantasy.

The railroaded plot drags you from set piece to set piece in contrived ways and clashes terribly with the gameplay. Hawke will summon meteors and slay armies during combat – with exaggerated animations and huge blood splashes – then endlessly moan about "being powerless" during dialogue. *DA2* fans will say the companions are the game's saving grace, but while Varric and Aveline are well-written, others seem to exist only to further the plot or fulfil romantic fantasies.

To be fair, it's impressive how much the developers delivered in such a short time. Nonetheless, *Dragon Age II* is a repetitive and schizophrenic game that promised to revolutionise RPG storytelling with a personal tale about coexistence, only to deliver yet another pandering tale about saving the world and romancing everyone. **FE**

***Dragon Age II* got four story DLCs, which added three new companions. An expansion called *Exalted March* was planned, providing closure on Hawke's story, but was later cancelled.**



The dialogue wheel is similar to *Mass Effect*, but introduces a Humorous attitude, besides Diplomatic and Aggressive.



DA2 is entirely set in the city of Kirkwall and its immediate surrounding areas. Although it spans several years, its locations barely change.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution



Eidos Montréal, 2011
Windows, Mac, PS3, Xbox 360 and Wii U

Deus Ex: Human Revolution had a lot of things going against it. It was the first game developed by Eidos Montréal, and none of its developers had worked on a *Deus Ex* before. *Invisible War* (2003), though well-received by critics and commercially successful, was a heavily streamlined sequel poorly received by fans. When *HR* was announced by Square Enix, many expected the same outcome or worse.

The new developers, however, loved the original and wanted to stay faithful to its design, which proved to be a remarkable challenge. The first two years of development were focused on prototypes, as the team struggled to find the *Deus Ex* gameplay they wanted. Once found, the team ended up with roughly only two years to make the full game. This did cause issues, but it also makes its accomplishments look more impressive.

The team also wanted to preserve the series' story, so they made *HR* a prequel set in 2027, 25 years before the first game. The protagonist is Adam Jensen, chief of security at Sarif Industries, an advanced biotech company. After an attack at Sarif's HQ in Detroit by a group of mercenaries, Jensen suffers near-fatal wounds. The company then saves Jensen with the most advanced augmentations available, making him one of the most heavily augmented humans at the time.



Augmentations empower your playstyle, allowing you to move heavy objects, hack computers, see through walls, persuade NPCs, and so on.

One of the narrative's main influences is the myth of Icarus, featured in some of the trailers and the beautiful theme song. It's a theme seen in both *DX1* and *HR*, along with conspiracy theories, mega-corporations, surveillance, liberty, technological progress affecting social classes, and others. The story suffers from a rushed ending, but its numerous themes are well-explored, and the side-missions do a good job fleshing out the setting.

Human Revolutions's gameplay follows the series' pillars: a versatile combination of FPS combat, stealth, exploration and social interaction, albeit with a different execution. The level design also follows similar principles, but areas are less open-ended in favour of more detailed environments. A surprisingly good hacking mini-game was added and plays an important role, while the new dialogue system makes conversations play out like a puzzle.

Combat as a whole is improved as well, but some mechanics can make it a bit too easy, mainly the cover system, takedowns, and the XP system. The game is played in a first-person view, but entering cover switches it to a third-person camera, allowing players to peek around corners and see what's behind them. It's an optional tool, but many areas were designed around it, so some may find it awkward to avoid using it.

The takedown is the game's only melee attack. Available in lethal and non-lethal forms, it quickly neutralises any non-boss target (or two, with an upgrade) in a single attack, during which you cannot be detected or harmed. The game plays fine without it, so players wanting more challenge can ignore it entirely.

The game offers experience rewards for finishing a mission completely undetected and without raising alarms, but other rewards don't feel so appropriate.

"Initially it was also very tough to convince the team to be totally on board, because you would have to go to them and say things like, "OK, you have to work on this piece for the next two months, and and only 30% of players are going to see that'. Most games have the philosophy of 'if we spend money and time on something, all players must see that'."

– *Jean-François Dugas, Deus Ex: Human Revolution's director*



Some dialogues are like a puzzle, where you must convince other characters to help you by observing their personalities.

For example, hacking always gives XP, but using passwords you found doesn't. It's not a major issue, as you'll earn enough experience no matter how you play, but the game clearly favours specific playstyles and approaches. Similarly, *HR*'s most infamous flaw is its boss fights. Due to time constraints, they were outsourced to a different studio, and the result feels as out of place as it sounds. The player is forced to fight bullet-sponge enemies in small, closed areas, contrary to all other missions in the game.

Luckily, the game received a Director's Cut in 2013, which added stealth and hacking options to allow for more playstyles. It also added an extensive director's commentary and Making Of documentary, plus as all the DLCs and slightly improved graphics.

Speaking of which, the game's aesthetic, heavily inspired by cyberpunk themes and the Renaissance, is perhaps its most memorable quality. These themes are strongly reflected in the character designs and environmental storytelling. The stark contrasts, mainly between gold and black, often resemble a chiaroscuro approach that sets a unique atmosphere.

The ever-present yellow filter was divisive, but was toned down in the Director's Cut. Overall it's an area where the game truly shines, and Michael McCann's excellent score makes it all even better.

Judged by itself, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* is one of the best AAA RPGs from the last decade. As a *Deus Ex* prequel, it falls short of the first game in some areas, but comes remarkably close. It is a rare triumph among its contemporaries. A lesson that a modern AAA reboot, despite being made by a new studio with none of the original creators, can find success and its own identity while staying faithful to its roots.

The same cannot be said about *Mankind Divided*, *HR*'s direct sequel, released in 2016. The graphics are prettier, hacking is more fun, and the hub area in Prague is very nice, but it's worse than its predecessor at just about everything else.

The level design is way too simple, the story feels like it was cut in half (possibly because Square Enix had plans for a trilogy), the writing has a lot more exposition, and the game as a whole is way too easy. To make it worse, they added micro-transactions to the campaign and a tacked-on multiplayer mode.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution was a best-seller and won several Game of the Year awards. *Mankind Divided* was well-received by critics, but it didn't go down well with the public, resulting in underwhelming sales. Much like *Invisible War*, it did enough damage that the franchise was put on hold by Square Enix, tragically taking *Deus Ex* back into the fridge. **FAX**



Like in the original *Deus Ex*, the inventory is quite limited, forcing you to carefully choose which items to bring along.



Mankind Divided includes a gorgeous and quite immersive recreation of Prague, but the rest of the game is uninspired.

Mass Effect 3



BioWare, 2012
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

Streamlining the original *Mass Effect*'s gameplay systems allowed its sequel to reach much higher commercial and critical success, so it was only natural for the third game to follow the same path, which is exactly what happened.

Mass Effect 3 is a very iterative addition to the series, focusing on new content, polish and refinement in certain aspects. It even introduces a fresh batch of lore inconsistencies to supplement those already present in *ME2*, and is equally shameless about this.

The story follows directly from *Mass Effect 2's* final DLC (*Arrival*), with Commander Shepard grounded on Earth (having apparently returned to active duty in System Alliance after his/her Spectre and Cerberus episodes) and facing a hearing regarding the warnings of an imminent Reaper invasion – which the government still doubts is a threat or even exists!

Reapers show an ironic sense of humour and invade at this exact moment, forcing our hero to jump straight into action and once again travel across the galaxy in search of a way to defeat the enemy, as well as gathering allies and resources for a counter-attack.

As usual, Shepard is aided in this task by a team of trustworthy companions, who are a mix of old friends returning from previous games and a few new faces.

In addition to difficulty levels, *Mass Effect 3* features the "Action" and "Story" modes. The former changes dialogues into cinematics, while the latter makes combat extremely easy.



The character system remains similar to that of *Mass Effect 2*, but now most powers can branch into two different playstyles.

While there are way fewer squad-mates than in *ME2*, they offer many skills to choose from and match to your personal tastes. Almost all companions are potential 'love interests', to the point where it seems this feature was a priority when deciding on the cast. Sadly, there's no Krogan party member this time.

Being the trilogy's finale, *Mass Effect 3* offers resolutions and follow-ups to various story arcs from previous games. Some of them are an impressive display of storytelling and attention to player choice, while others are somewhat lacklustre, with near-identical replacement characters showing up to take the place of those who did not survive. Still, the sheer amount of effort put into creating a coherent player-affected narrative between the three games warrants respect.

However, it's impossible to defend some plot points, especially Cerberus' ridiculous omnipresence and Shepard's unexplainable plan to stop the Reapers. The contrivances felt in *ME2* are back in force, as the game often ignores previously established concepts or forces players to helplessly watch certain events.

Gameplay-wise, *Mass Effect 3* is basically the same as *ME2*, but more polished in every way. The action part feels better than ever with gunplay easily on par with contemporary shooters and a variety of characters' abilities introducing another layer to the combat dynamic. All the classes have been changed and rebalanced, encouraging players to try out new builds and allowing for vastly different playstyles.

In addition, Shepard is now much less restricted when it comes to loadout, as every class is able to use every weapon. Weapons can also be customised by modifying them with various components, such as extended magazines or accuracy-improving scopes. These welcome changes allow for some very interesting and fun combinations of guns and abilities.

"*Mass Effect* has been a shared experience between the development team and our fans – not just a shared experience in playing the games, but in designing and developing them. An outpouring of love for Garrus and Tali led to their inclusion as love interests in *ME2*. A request for deeper RPG systems led to key design changes in *ME3*."

– Casey Hudson, *Mass Effect series' executive producer*



Enemies now have several abilities and will throw grenades, deploy turrets, use shields, buff allies and pilot mechs – which you can steal for yourself.

Level design is a noticeable improvement over the linear corridors of *ME2*. There are more open spaces, alternative paths and optional branches, which usually net a loot cache or additional story elements like datalogs (though the hacking and bypass mini-game were entirely removed). Sets of chest-high walls and crates are also less obvious this time, so you are not immediately alerted of an incoming firefight.

All this makes the "walking around" experience more enjoyable, not just a downtime between combat and dialogue. Environments are visually impressive, with some truly awe-inspiring backgrounds, from beautiful alien cities to war-torn battlefields.

Audio layer is worth mentioning too, with music created by several composers, led by Hollywood veteran Clint Mansell, and sound design rewarding playing the game with good audio setups. Voice acting is also superb, as per series tradition.

ME3 caused a certain controversy on launch, due to one important squad member being locked behind a "Day 1" DLC (*From Ashes*), which is (to this day) not included with the base version of the game. Fans of the series will definitely want to play the third game with this and other DLCs, especially the final one (*Citadel*), which serves as a send-off for Shepard and will cause a surge of memories from previous games.

ME3 also adds separate multiplayer missions, tied to the in-game galactic war. By playing these missions (or the *Mass Effect: Infiltrator* game for iOS), players earn additional "war assets" that are used in the single-player campaign, influencing its outcome.

Regardless, the game's – and therefore the whole trilogy's – ending(s) were deemed unsatisfactory by many and led to an online uproar. BioWare later released a free DLC (*Extended Cut*) addressing these concerns, but some fans still consider it a letdown.

The *Mass Effect* trilogy stands as a landmark. While some will always be disappointed by the (many) unfulfilled promises, its successful blend of cinematic Action RPGs with strong squad member relationship elements ensured the direction of future BioWare games – and of many other RPGs. **MS**

Mods:

Expanded Galaxy Mod: Adds new features, events, items and several extra missions across the galaxy.

ME3Recalibrated: An unofficial patch, it addresses many bugs, as well as some lore inconsistencies.

MEHEM: Gives the game a different, happier ending.

A Lot of Textures: A large pack with new HD textures.

After only featuring a male Shepard in *ME1* and *2's* cover and promo material, BioWare held a vote to choose the official female Shepard. She was voted a redhead by 19k fans, and so *ME3's* box came with a two-sided cover art – one male, another female.

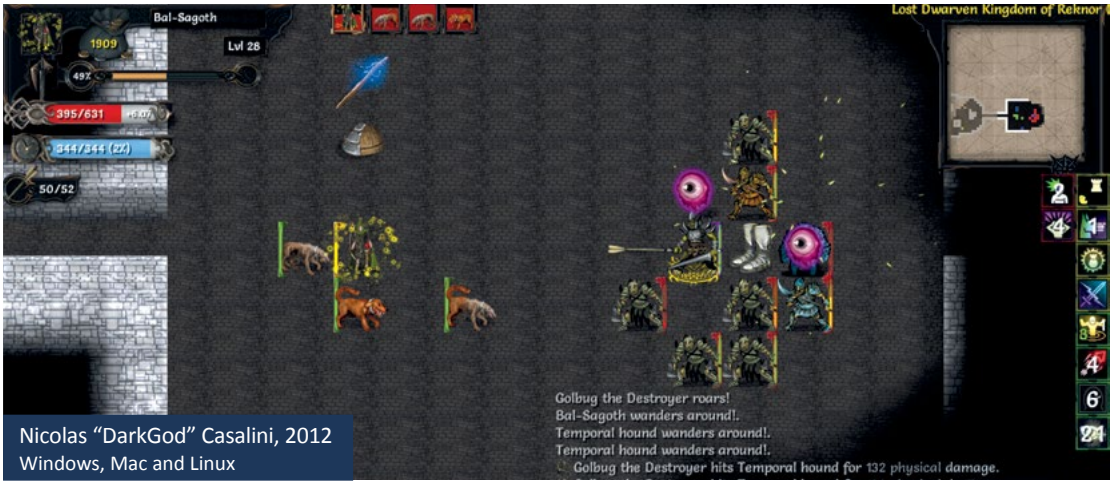


Weapon mods are back, and you can now customise your loadout, restricted only by the weight limit of each class.



The endings change depending on how many war assets you gathered, either in missions or in the multiplayer.

Tales of Maj'Eyal



Nicolas "DarkGod" Casalini, 2012
Windows, Mac and Linux

***Tales of Maj'Eyal* is open-source and freely available for download, but it's also for sale on Steam and GOG, with its two recent expansions requiring a donation or purchase.**

Since I first heard about roguelikes, I've always wanted to love them. The concept of highly complex RPGs with infinite randomly generated adventures was exciting, but I never felt fully satisfied by playing *ADOM, NetHack, Angband, Brogue* and other classic roguelikes. Something was missing.

More than nice graphics or a friendly interface, I missed a sense of place – all those carefully hand-placed details that give a special quality to dungeons, towns, quests and NPCs – that offer interesting goals and tease cleverly hidden secrets for players to pursue.

Luckily, I found all that I wanted in *Tales of Maj'Eyal*. Also know as *ToME4*, its development began back in 1998 as *Tales of Middle-Earth* (or *ToME1)*. A variant of the classic roguelike *Angband*, it was constantly expanded for over a decade until 2012, when the team decided to release a fourth major version that replaced the Tolkien-based setting for an original one and changed the name to *Tales of Maj'Eyal*.

From a quick glance one can already see several differences from traditional roguelikes – instead of ASCII graphics, *ToME* uses charming 2D graphics and an accessible, mouse-driven interface. However, the biggest difference is how it blends the roguelike formula with more traditional CRPG bits, becoming an "RPG/Roguelike hybrid", if that makes sense.



There are six main stats and each class has its own unique skill trees, but extra skills (even from other classes) can be unlocked by performing special quests.

For example, there's still permadeath, but you can disable it or play in "Adventure mode", where you can die a few times before your character is erased.

ToME also makes selective use of randomness. Its world map, towns, NPCs and quests are fixed, allowing for a quality far beyond that of traditional roguelikes. It even offers choices and consequences: there's a faction that hates magic due to past events and will attack magic-users on sight – but also share secret anti-magic techniques if your character renounces magic forever. Another option is to ally yourself with renegade mages and destroy said faction.

Dungeons blend random layouts, enemies and treasures with fixed themes, key rooms and bosses. This gives them a lot of personality – you'll follow giant sandworms as they dig tunnels, battle in space, free slaves, dive underwater, race against time, etc.

Another unusual mechanic is how most races and classes have unique starting points and quests, but must be unlocked first. Say you start as a Dwarf Berserker – you'll begin your adventures in the Dwarven kingdom, learn about their culture, do some race and class-specific quests then venture into the world map. If you're lucky, by the time you die you'll have done something special and unlocked a new race or class, and can now, for example, play as an Elven Archmage, which starts in a different area with different quests.

The game currently has 16 races and 35 classes, offering several widely different playstyles. Each class has a set of skill trees that slowly unlocks as you level up, providing direct damage skills and passive bonuses, but there's also many "utility" abilities: teleporting, redirecting damage, raising walls, magic shields, etc. Instead of random potions and scrolls, you're given a clearly defined set of versatile tools and must manage their resources and cooldowns wisely.

"To me, accessible means that any player should be able to start the game and feel at home as fast as possible. In this day and age, this means having mouse control, tooltips, hotkeys and so on. The user should never have to fight the UI, it's the UI that should adapt. But behind the simple UI is hidden a beast. I tend to describe *ToME* as a tactical RPG roguelike[...]"

– *Nicolas "DarkGod" Casalini, Tales of Maj'Eyal's creator*



The main towns and dungeons are always in the same place on the world map, but there are random optional areas and roaming parties of NPCs.

This gives *ToME* a very rare quality which I love: true power comes not from big numbers, but from versatility. A Chronomancer can split time, test multiple tactics for a few turns and then choose the timeline that worked better; a Doombringer can take an enemy with him into a demonic plane to duel; a Necromancer can perform a dark ritual to turn into a Lich and avoid (perma)death once, and so on.

It's a game that's always challenging (partly due to enemies level-scaling up), but building a good mix of abilities and equipment that can provide tactical options is far more important than min-maxing stats.

If unlocking new classes/races, trying new quest solutions and following the main story isn't enough to keep you motivated, *ToME* also offers over 1,700 achievements to pursue and special online events – you might be happily playing when a developer comes online and opens a portal to a mysterious plane!

The game is still in constant development, with new features and expansions being introduced. *Ashes of Urh'Rok* (2014) and *Forbidden Cults* (2018) added more content to the main campaign, but the real attraction is *Embers of Rage* (2016), which adds an entirely new campaign where you play as Orcs and their allies, using technology like pistols and steam-powered saw-blades, as well as a new crafting system.

ToME also has an Infinite Dungeon mode and an Arena mode for those who care more about fighting, so you can see why it's a game I've spent hundreds of hours playing – and will still keep playing.

If classic roguelikes never felt satisfying for you, or even if you're a long-time veteran, I recommend trying *Tales of Maj'Eyal*. You can get the basic version for free on the official website, but this is a game that has more content, creativity and passion than most big-budget RPGs out there. Don't miss it. **FE**

There are several fan-made add-ons for download at *ToME*'s website and on Steam Workshop, adding new races, classes, UI improvements and translations into Chinese and Japanese.



ToME is a highly tactical roguelike, that gives players many versatile abilities, plenty of information and tests them against all sorts of challenges – both random and fixed.

Legend of Grimrock



Almost Human Ltd., 2012
Windows, Linux and Mac

In January 2014, a live-action web series based on *Legend of Grimrock* was funded on Kickstarter, made by the same team responsible for *Nuka Break*. Sadly, the project was never concluded.

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 just that and made *Legend of Grimrock*, a game that honours the real-time grid-based dungeon crawlers (aka blobbers) from back in the day.

In terms of game design and UI mechanics, *Grimrock* picks up exactly where games like *Stonekeep* and *Anvil of Dawn* left off in the mid-90s, and then adds some new tricks of its own. The de facto standards of a full-screen view, minimal UI, inbuilt 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 like me who grew up playing many of the predecessors to *Grimrock*, this felt like an old dream coming true: playing an archaic game genre with modern-day luxuries.

The plot is simple 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 through a well-crafted dungeon filled with puzzles and monsters.

The game goes for the classical "four party members" approach, but its bare-bones character creation system is somewhat disappointing. With only four races and three classes, three of the races are custom-tailored towards each of the classes and then humans are thrown in as all-rounders.

Further customisation is gained through the skill system, where there are plenty of skills to learn but not enough skill points to go round. As a result, Fighters will have to choose a preferred weapon and Mages must pick a preferred school of magic. Obviously they could have done better with both systems, but it works as is.

Another valid point of criticism is the interface. Its minimal approach is a good thing, but its tiny size leads to many unwanted misclicks, especially with the keypad-esque spell interface, where players must input specific rune combinations to cast spells.



While not a very difficult game, *Grimrock* makes clever use of enemies and traps to create elaborate puzzles.



There's a secret mode where you can enter the dungeon alone as Toorun, a unique all-round 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 to the 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 know the correct rune input, usually found in scrolls.

One problem that has plagued games of this ilk from the beginning is how easy it is to trivialise combat with the so-called "combat mambo". Attack a monster, then quickly sidestep and turn to face where the monster will move. Repeat until it dies.

Past games tried various monster AI routines, which *Grimrock* also does but then goes one further and subtly builds the levels around the monster's strengths, giving them the home-field advantage.

The game feels lonely at times as there is no one around to talk to, but this benefits the overall atmosphere as the sense of isolation adds an element of survival to the game, making players rely more on their supplies and the game's crafting system.

Legend of Grimrock turned out to be a surprise hit, selling nearly one million units and paying for its development in less than a week. A sequel was therefore inevitable, and *Legend of Grimrock II* roared onto the scene in 2014. Instead of a mountain prison, the party is now stranded on a remote island, allowing for non-linear exploration in every direction.

The sequel is superior to the original in almost every sense, adding underwater areas, boss battles, smarter monsters and a stronger emphasis on vertical movement... and yet it somehow failed to rival the impact (and sales) of the first game.



The second game is set on a remote island, offering a huge non-linear dungeon crawler surrounded by gorgeous vistas.

The *Grimrock* games are first and foremost an homage to a school of game design that is considered outdated, but clearly not unwanted. Already, several games have tried to cash in on their success by riding in its wake, but so far none of them have matched it. It's not often that one game can revive an entire gaming sub-genre, but that's exactly what *Legend of Grimrock* did. **ÁV**

Fan-Made Dungeons:

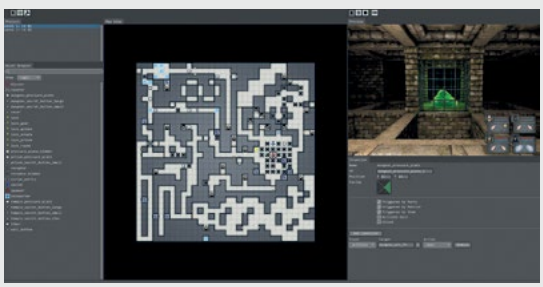
One of *Grimrock*'s high points is the dungeon editor. As grid-based dungeons are easy to plan and build, there have been plenty of fan-made dungeons made, especially for the first game. Here are some highlights:

The Master Quest: The first game's 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 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's not as enjoyable as this one.

The Forbidden Halls: 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 level editor is easy to understand and provides a great deal of freedom when in able hands.

Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning



Big Huge Games, 2012
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

Alongside *Amalur*, 38 Studios were developing an MMO set in the same setting. The game had been in development for six years, but, after the company went bankrupt, Curt Schilling said the game simply "wasn't fun".

In the current low-risk, heavily consolidated AAA development scenario, it's becoming increasingly rare for companies to invest in new IPs. Small projects aside, nowadays most AAA titles are sequels, reboots, spin-offs or spiritual successors.

As such, *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning* took the world by surprise. Not only was it an original IP, but it was helmed by a dream team: Ken Rolston (lead designer on *Morrowind* and *Oblivion*), Todd McFarlane (founder of Image Comics and creator of *Spawn*) and R.A. Salvatore, the best-selling fantasy author famous for his Drizzt Do'Urden novels.

Behind this ambitious super-project was retired baseball player Curt Schilling, who founded his own game development company (38 Studios), purchased Big Huge Games from THQ and then secured a loan of 75 million dollars from the US state of Rhode Island to develop *Amalur* and a tie-in MMORPG.

With R.A. Salvatore creating an original setting and McFarlane directing the art style, Rolston set out to create a new brand of open-world RPG. He envisioned a game that offered Bethesda's expansive worlds, BioWare's narratives and Blizzard's addictive progression systems, but focused on fast-paced action combat inspired by games like *God of War*.



Amalur is very reminiscent of *Fable*, especially in the art style. But the camera has a narrow FOV and tilts down, focusing more on the floor than on the environment.

The game begins with your character dead. Then he/she gets better. This rather *Planescape: Torment*-ish event removes you from the Wheel of Fate and allows you to interfere with other people's destiny. But don't expect deep philosophical dilemmas – you basically can kill people before they were fated to die.

To do so, *Amalur* offers a variety of weapons, spells and skills, divided into three classic archetypes – Might, Finesse and Sorcery. Every level-up, you get three points to spend on the archetypal skill trees. You can mix them however you wish, and the game reacts to that by unlocking "destiny" bonuses you can equip. For example, investing six points in Might and six points in Sorcery gives you the Guardian destiny, which boosts defense and converts damage into mana.

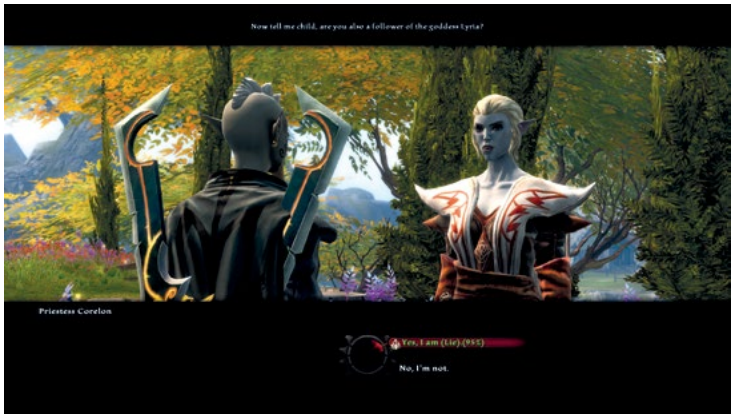
Combat is really the meat of the game, and it's a satisfying blend of arcade action and RPG. You equip two weapons at once, each assigned to a button (a controller is advised), and you can freely mix their attacks. The nine weapon types all play very differently and there are several moves at your disposal – dodges, parries, timed blocks, 3-hit combos, charge attacks, delayed attacks, damage spells, sustained buff, traps, summons, etc... You can also sneak and backstab unsuspecting foes, though it isn't often useful.

The enemy variety isn't big, but they all have very distinct moves and skills. And, to seal the deal, *Amalur* uses a *Diablo*-like loot system, with random items of several qualities, legendary unique, item sets, gems and even a salvage and crafting system. It isn't deep, as the item bonus lack diversity, but it's addictive.

Sadly, the game's balance is severely lacking. Combat is a cakewalk unless you play on Hard, and even then the respawning monsters and huge amount of side-quests means you'll eventually become too powerful and breeze through it. A shame, really.

"A good RPG has four aspects – exploration, narrative, advancement and then combat. And, as it turns out for the first three things, people have been doing a pretty good job with them. But the combat... we really just haven't been asking enough of ourselves with that and haven't really known what an alternative would be. So, we decided; the world needs an RPG with good immersive combat."

– *Ken Rolston, Amalur's design director*



Choices you make can unlock unique "destiny" bonuses, but both the dialogue system and the rare use of the persuasion skill are very simplistic.

Even though unbalanced, *Amalur*'s combat is fun and the progression system is solid. What doomed it was the decision to favour quantity over quality, delivering a 200-hour RPG that plays like a single-player MMO.

Amalur's world is massive, packed full with quests. But, while you can go almost anywhere from the start, it feels railroaded and limited. You can't jump, areas are surrounded by jarring walls, dungeons are linear and quests are very simplistic, lacking any sense of scale. For example, you're sent to find the Theatre of Fate – a legendary place most people don't even believe exists –, yet all you really do is exit town and follow a short road, guided by the all-knowing quest compass.

The NPCs are also poorly done. Entirely devoid of personality, they are mere quest dispensers and lore encyclopaedias, ready to dump monotonous lines on how Gadflow, the Unseelie King, ordered his Tuatha Deohn to destroy the Dokkalfar and please Tirnoch... It's uncanny how the lore is both incredibly generic and dense, making it almost impossible to care about.

Non-combat skills like Persuasion and Lockpick try to diversify the gameplay, and you can also own houses, steal, pickpocket, kill NPCs, get arrested, etc. However, it's all very limited and robotic, closer to the small-scale artificiality of *Fable* than to the immersive living world Ken Rolston created in *Morrowind*.

Still, Rolston made his point. *Amalur*'s combat is much more satisfying and deep than rivals such as *Skyrim* or the *Dragon Age* and *The Witcher* games, highlighting a flaw in modern RPGs. Its arcade-like gameplay isn't tied to the narrative as in the *Gothic* and *Souls* series, but the mix of a satisfying arcade combat with a massive open world is thrilling.

Sadly, any chances of a sequel improving the formula are long dead. While *Amalur* sold over a million copies, 38 Studios had severe management issues trying to develop a tie-in MMORPG and the company filed for bankruptcy shortly after.

Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning is easy, limited, unpolished and often dull. But it offered something fresh, that no other open-world RPG did. That is, until *Dragon's Dogma* came along two months later... **FE**

***Amalur* had several DLCs, including pre-order exclusives and an online pass. Of note are the *Legend of Dead Kel* and *Teeth of Naros* DLCs, which add new monsters, items and areas, plus some interesting quests to try.**

Mods:

Widescreen Fixer: Allows you to increase the game's extremely narrow FOV and zoom out the camera.

HeartCore (aka YSA) Mod: A Cheat Engine file, it makes the game harder by nerfing your hero, decreasing XP, buffing enemies and increasing the game's speed to 115%.

Reckoning Remapping Tool: Greatly improves the poor port job on the keyboard and mouse controls.

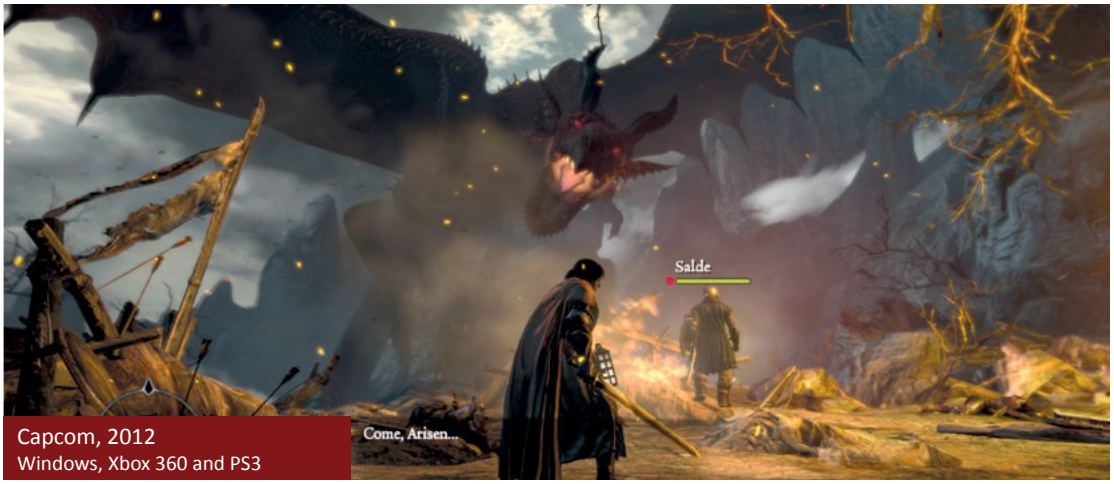


The *Diablo*-like loot is addictive, with some cool-looking unique weapons. Sadly, their bonuses are all very similar.



A special bar fills up as you fight, allowing you to slow down time, power your attacks and execute foes for an XP bonus.

Dragon's Dogma



Capcom, 2012
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3

***Dragon's Dogma* was released in 2012 for consoles. The *Dark Arisen* version came in 2013, and only in 2016 did Capcom finally port the game to PCs.**

Your lantern sputters to half-lit status, only dimly illuminating the massive form of the cyclops as it lurches towards your party. Hearing your fighter pawn yell, you move closer and allow yourself to be launched into the air, grabbing hold of the cyclops's arm and climbing to its armoured head. As the cyclops swipes at you, it misses and knocks its helmet to the ground below. Your mage pawn casts a flame enchantment on your strider pawn, who takes the opportunity to shoot an arrow straight into its eye. Welcome to *Dragon's Dogma*.

The heart of *DD* is its action-based combat system, and the interactivity it allows. Inspired by Capcom's 1990s fantasy beat 'em ups, it also encompasses a great amount of more recent influence, from the monster-climbing of *Shadow of the Colossus* to the weightier realism of *Demon's/Dark Souls*, as well as Capcom's own *Monster Hunter* and *Devil May Cry* series (*Dragon's Dogma* director, Hideaki Itsuno, also directed *Devil May Cry 2, 3* and *4*).

In combat, characters may grapple a small opponent to hold it in place, pick up and hurl an explosive barrel at foes, or climb onto large monsters and hack away at weak points. Frequently, they call out tactics to each other, depending on cooperation for success.



Equipment is diverse, and can be upgraded by finding the necessary items. Tasks range from mining rare ores to breaking a monster's tusk during battle.

Monsters, too, take advantage of interactivity, and a player may find himself dragged into the air by a harpy's claws, bitten and held down by a wolf, or seized and crushed by the hands of a cyclops or ogre.

Magic also possesses a rarely seen physicality. Spells differ not only in elemental effects but also in how they manifest themselves, from a wall of flame, to a pillar of ice (which you can climb over), to a maelstrom sucking up smaller foes and flinging them.

You play as the Arisen – a hero destined to battle the Dragon. In a unique online component, you can be joined by up to three AI-controlled pawns – a main pawn that you create yourself, plus two others recruited from a pool of pawns created by other players (or randomly generated, if you're playing offline).

Pawns are drawn from six vocations (i.e. classes), each with access to a multitude of skills and categories of weapons with only some overlap, causing each vocation to play distinctly from the others. Rangers have a more powerful and further reaching bow but are less effective at melee than Striders; Sorcerers sacrifice some of the healing and support magic of Mages in exchange for powerful offensive spells; and Warriors hit harder than Fighters but are less defensive. The Arisen also has access to the hybrid vocations: Mystic Knights combine melee ability with magic spells, Assassins can mix the weapons of the Fighter and Strider vocations, and Magick Archers combine dagger-wielding with magical bow abilities.

There are interesting nuances in character creation. Unlike other games where appearance is purely cosmetic, in *Dragon's Dogma* the choices you make determine your height and weight class, which has tangible effects such as making heavier characters more difficult to knock down while smaller characters can fit through small openings.

"One of our key concepts was to give players around the world the chance to feel like they had genuinely encountered and taken on these mythical beasts that we all have in our collective consciousness. Our art directors and designers tried not to stray too far from the imagery found in ancient legends and iconography."

– Kento Kinoshita, Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen's director



Combat is refreshingly tactile, from climbing larger monsters to grappling with smaller creatures to cutting the heads of hydras.

The story is somewhat rudimentary, linking the Arisen to the Dragon from the beginning, and thereafter following a largely linear series of main quests. There are many optional noticeboard quests of the type "kill 5 wolves", but more interesting are the side-quests initiated by talking with characters, where decisions can lead to or block further quests, sometimes even eliminating prominent NPCs.

Dragon's Dogma contains an impressive but poorly explained depth as features such as making forgeries of important items (to keep the original for yourself or to sabotage a quest, changing its outcome) and the NPC Affinity system (which controls your relation with every single NPC and determines your romantic interest) have lasting consequences, yet the game barely mentions them.

Initially intended to be an open-world game, the scope was drastically reduced during development, leaving *Dragon's Dogma* with the vestiges of open-world design but a setting too small to match. Aside from the city of Gran Soren and the fishing village of Cassardis there are no real settlements to speak of, only a few forts or camps. The game's many quests will take the player across the map multiple times, forcing unwitting players to waste time backtracking and fighting the same respawning mobs of low-level foes.

Thankfully, the *Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen* version released a year later expands the existing fast-travel system, greatly reducing the amount of backtracking necessary. Although *Dark Arisen* also makes various minor changes to the base game, its real draw is Bitterblack Isle, a vast dungeon that introduces new treasures and monsters – including deadly necrophages that attack by surprise, attracted by the corpses of slain enemies. Intended for high-level play, the Isle is separate from the main game and can be ventured into as early or late as one desires.

Curiously, *Dragon's Dogma* fails to play into its strengths as much as it could have, with the larger monsters – both climbable and featuring a range of interesting behaviors – appearing only sparingly at first, and a number of creatures emerging only in the final stage of the game. Important systems such as NPC Affinity and Pawn Inclinations (which control Pawn behaviour) are opaque and poorly explained, often resulting in frustrating outcomes and leading wiser players to seek online sources of information.

Still, *Dragon's Dogma* manages to recapture much of the spirit of group adventuring. Those willing to give it a try will not only encounter many legendary creatures but also that rarest of beasts – an RPG with action-based combat done right. **ZD**

In 2015, Capcom released *Dragon's Dogma Online*, a free-to-play MMO spin-off. The game is only available in Japan, but Western players can use VPN and fan-made English patches to play it.



Whether at night or in a dungeon, the realistic darkness forces you to rely on your lantern, enhancing exploration.



There are five elemental enchantments, plus several status effects such as slow, poison, silence, burning, wet, etc.

Of Orcs and Men



Cyanide Studios and Spiders, 2012
Windows, Xbox 360 and PS3

The unusual choice of having a goblin rogue as protagonist paid off, and in 2014 Styx got its own spin-off game: *Styx: Master of Shadows*, a stealth game.

Purely from a writing standpoint, this game is one of the most overlooked gems of the RPG genre. If you love story-driven RPGs, I highly suggest considering this game. Tons of games talk about "mature themes", but this one really hits the nail on the head – not just with the adult language (which there's a lot of, but it fits the game's themes well).

The story covers racism, slavery, political ambition, violence, and betrayal. This is not the clichéd story of a hero setting out to stop a great evil that threatens the world. The war between orcs and humans has been decidedly one-sided and, in a desperate bid to prevent the enslavement of all orcs, an elite orc military unit receives orders for a suicide mission: kill the human emperor.



Combat is real-time, but you can shift into slow motion and queue up to four actions for each of the characters.



Styx can sneak around and try to assassinate guards, but he can't go very far from Arkail.

In a bold creative choice, *Of Orcs and Men* puts you in control of the "monsters" – Arkail, a brutish orc, and Styx, a stealthy, smart-ass goblin. Both of them are well-written and it's interesting to see how their interactions with each other change as the story progresses. The plot also contains a few unexpected and well-developed twists, which turns the original plan into something much greater.

The developers have also done a good job connecting the characters' personalities to their fighting styles. The combat is real-time-with-pause, allowing you to switch back and forth between characters and queue attacks – but before charging into battle you can try sneaking around with Styx and quietly assassinate as many enemies as possible.

The orc, Arkail, is a great embodiment of the berserker-type warrior, and not just in the writing. He sports a rage meter that fills when he takes damage. Once full, he goes into a literally uncontrollable rage. It can turn the tide of a battle in your favour due to the damage boost, but can also cost you heavily thanks to the lack of defence and its potential to accidentally kill Styx. Some combo attacks are also available, such as having Arkail throw the goblin into enemies.

Unfortunately, the game is extremely linear, with almost no exploration or player agency. The maps are repetitive, mostly long corridors full of combat, with minimal detours to occasionally find some loot. There are a handful of side-quests, but they usually just offer more of the same. And there's pretty much no choice and consequence – the game is going to play out in a certain way no matter your dialogue choices.

Of Orcs and Men is definitely not for everyone, but if you enjoy story-driven RPGs there's a very good chance you'll find yourself sucked in, wanting more of the amazing characters and world. **RR**

Defender's Quest: Valley of the Forgotten



Level Up Labs, 2012
Windows, Mac and Linux

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 humour 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 an 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 armour.

Diablo III



Blizzard, 2012
Windows, Mac, Xbox 360 and PS3

Among the initial complaints about *Diablo III*, some players thought it was too cartoony and colourful. They created a mod called *DarkD3* to make the game darker. Blizzard replied by making a secret level full of ponies and colourful art.

The history of *Diablo III* is one of immense highs and lows. After the outstanding success of *Diablo II* in 2001, Blizzard soon began working on a sequel. Little is know about this project, but reportedly it had fully 3D graphics and several MMO elements, with a large open world.

However, disputes between Blizzard North and Vivendi Games led to several key developers leaving the company and, ultimately, to Blizzard North being closed in 2005. Their version of *Diablo III* was scrapped, and development began on a new one.

In May 2012, 11 years after its predecessor, *Diablo III* was finally released. Expectations were impossibly high, and the game broke PC sales records, selling over three million units in the first 24 hours.

Superficially, the game's core gameplay is very familiar. You have five classes – Wizard, Barbarian, Demon Hunter, Witch Doctor and Monk – who must battle the forces of evil across four story Acts.

Highly polished, the game brought in fully 3D graphics and a physics engine that makes each blow feel extremely satisfying. Blizzard opted for a more stylised art style and a greater focus on story, added elements such as events across the maps and crafting, then streamlined some aspects of the game, such as removing the need to stockpile potions and scrolls.



Diablo III places a premium on mobility, as Elite enemies fill their surroundings with poison, lasers, lava and other hazards, then try to push, pull or lock you in place.

The biggest change came in the character system. While *Diablo II* was about picking stats and skills as you level up, *Diablo III* focuses on flexibility, offering a range of skills that can be freely changed at any time.

Each character has six slots for active skills and three slots for passive ones (four with the expansion). If at any time you're unhappy with your character build, you can easily change it. Each active skill can also be equipped with a Rune, slightly modifying the skill – reducing cooldowns, changing damage types, adding more effects, making it last longer and so on.

A more controversial decision was that *Diablo III* required an Internet connection, even for single-player, which led to some huge server issues on launch.

Another disappointment was the game's difficulty, divided into four modes you had to unlock one at a time. Many players (myself included) got burned out by playing 15-20 hours of an incredibly easy game before begin allowed to try a harder difficulty. And there was no endgame besides a pointless grind.

Yet, what nearly killed *Diablo III* was a single, greedy idea: adding an in-game Auction House.

It was made for players to sell their loot, not only for in-game currency, but also for real money – of which Blizzard would take a cut. To be sure people would use it, rare items were dropped sparsely. You could play for hours without seeing a single good drop. And when you got one, chances were that it was for another class, pushing you to sell it at the Auction House for something you can actually use.

Furthermore, the damage of every skill and ability was tied to your weapon and gear, making even the best player useless without decent equipment. Progression became inherently tied to the Auction House, the best items selling for over 50 dollars. *Diablo*'s "kill and loot" gameplay loop was broken.

"What happened is that players started playing the Auction House and not the game, because of how stingy we were when we launched *Diablo III* [...] In the process they were wrecking their reward loop, they were robbing themselves of the magic of *Diablo*, of killing a monster and seeing the legendary drop and picking it up."

–*Josh Mosqueira, Diablo III's game director*



Diablo III packs dozens of skills, plus legendary items, sets and gems with unique powers. With more items being added each season, players have many possibilities.

It took two years for Blizzard to acknowledge the obvious – the Auction House had to go.

In March 2014, they released the *Reaper of Souls* expansion, removing the Auction House and adding a revamped "Loot 2.0" system, dramatically increasing item drop rates and making them more relevant for whichever class you're currently playing.

If *Diablo III* was a good game ruined by poor decisions, *Reaper of Souls* is a cohesive pack of great ideas. Together with a fifth story act and a new class – the Crusader –, the expansion added an Adventure mode, where you freely travel across all areas of the game collecting bounties – brief missions like "complete event X", "clear area Y" or "kill boss Z".

Completing bounties yields rare items, crafting ingredients and is a good way to level up or gather items without having to replay the campaign again.

Other key additions include legendary gems with unique powers, a more robust crafting system, enchanting and fully reworked difficulty settings, offering players much more freedom in how to play.

Moreover, a solid endgame was finally added with the Rifts – special dungeons where you must kill a certain number of enemies to battle a tough boss. On Greater Rifts you have a very strict time limit, and the difficulty levels are virtually endless.

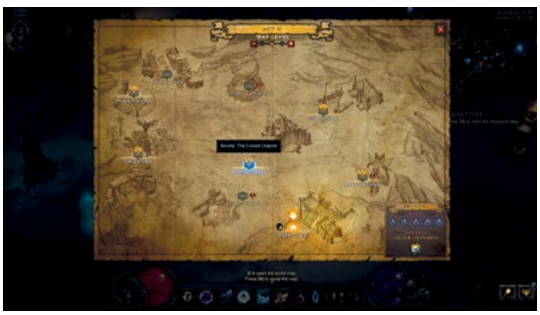
Together with the expansion came the Seasons, which every few months reset the leaderboards and add new content that only freshly made characters can experience (at least initially), persuading people to restart the game from Level 1.

This worked particularly well with the more flexible skill system, as the steady addition of gems, legendary items and armour sets with special powers provides new playstyles to try every few months. Also worth mentioning are the Set Dungeons, hidden areas where players who gathered complete equipment sets can test their skills with the powers granted by the set in custom challenges.

Blizzard also added an abundance of cosmetic rewards, such as portrait frames, pets, banners, wings and unique appearances you can apply to your equipment. Most of these are won by earning special in-game achievements – *Diablo III*'s only DLC came in 2017, adding the Necromancer class for $15.

While the Auction House heavily damaged the game at launch, *Reaper of Souls* later managed to turn *Diablo III* into a friendly, addictive and highly polished package. It may lack the more hardcore experience found in *Grim Dawn* and *Path or Exile* but, for most mainstream players, *Diablo III* is all they need until *Diablo IV*. **FE**

***Diablo III's* always-online DRM led to several issues, as players were unable to connect to the servers and play the game for weeks after launch. The outrage reignited when Blizzard made the console ports able to play offline, but refused to do so with PCs.**

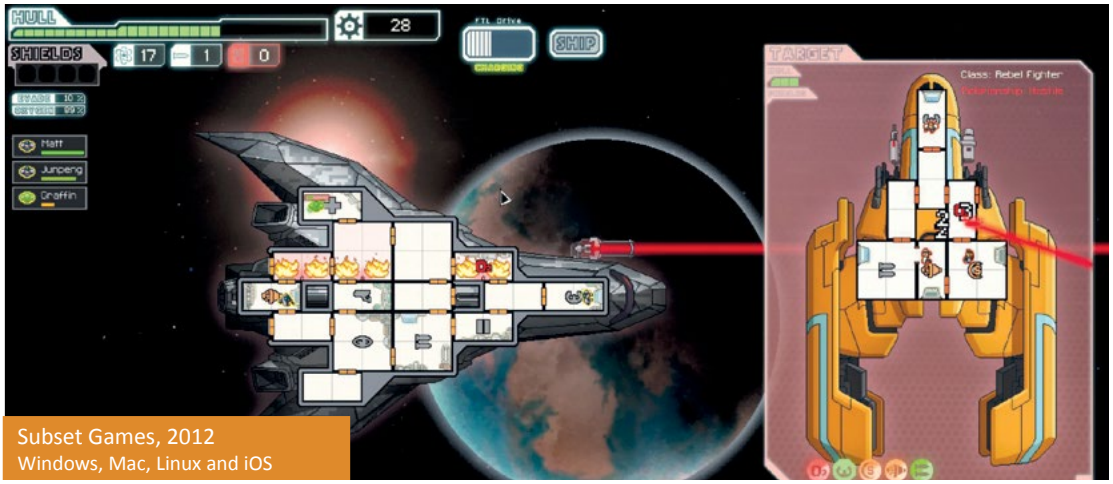


Reaper of Souls added the Adventure mode, where you can freely travel the world completing bounties.



Rifts present an interesting endgame, as you must finish increasingly difficult dungeons under a strict time limit.

FTL: Faster Than Light



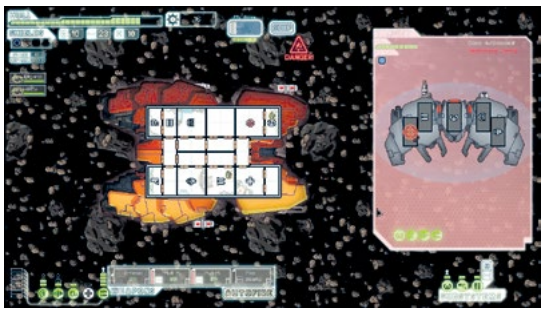
Subset Games, 2012
Windows, Mac, Linux and iOS

FTL was funded by a Kickstarter campaign in April 2012. Subset Games received 200,542 dollars, from an initial $10,000 goal.

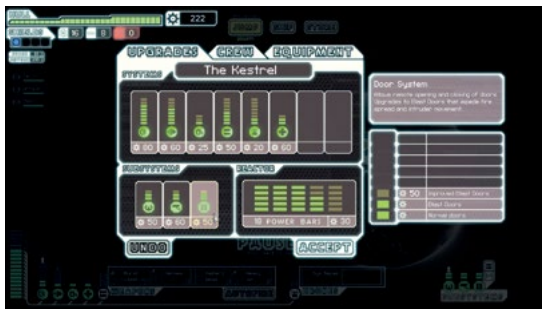
"Frustrating", "thrilling", "unique". These are just a smattering of the words used to describe the brutally difficult, insanely addictive roguelike RPG that is *FTL: Faster Than Light*.

FTL tells the story of a crew of Federation soldiers fleeing the advancing hordes of a rebel force across eight sectors of a galaxy, representing the eight stages of the game, each more dangerous than the last.

Dogged at every turn by the insurrectionists, your implacable enemy slowly moves from left to right across each starmap, pushing your ship inexorably toward the next sector, or doom, if you decide to turn and fight. Your crew will encounter pirates, automated drones, distress beacons, ion stars, ship fires, enemy boarding parties and giant alien spiders, to name just a few things that want to kill you.



Some battles can have special hazards, such as fighting against an unmanned drone ship while inside an asteroid field.



Not only do you have to choose what systems to upgrade, but also how to distribute your ship's energy between them.

What most wants to kill you, it seems at times, is the game itself. *FTL*, like many roguelikes, has a simple random number generator which determines the outcome of every jump between the stars, every shot fired from your Burst Laser II, every time you send a crew member into harm's way. While certain crew skills and upgrades to your ship increase the percentage chance that the randomly generated number will come up on your side, there's always the possibility of an extraordinary string of bad luck that ends an otherwise successful run prematurely.

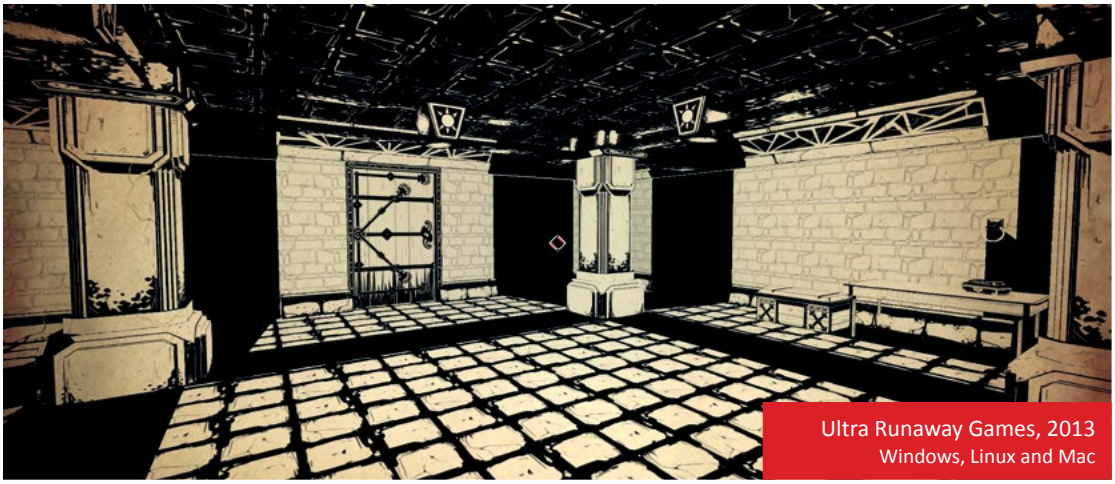
Another roguelike element is permadeath. When your ship is destroyed, your run ends and you must start over again in Sector 1. This adds real weight to every decision you make, and how it will affect your ship and crew.

RPG elements abound in *FTL*: in order to overcome the Rebel flagship at the end of Sector 8, a prudent commander must upgrade his or her ship's systems, find, purchase, or salvage new weaponry, as well as recruit and train crew members. These elements contribute directly to a successful run, and it is almost impossible to win without them.

Finally, many mods await the experienced commander. The *Captain's Edition* mod installs a host of new features including new weapons, random events, space station battles, and sector hazards, to name just a few. *Turning the Tide*, another mod, allows a courageous (or perhaps foolhardy) *FTL* captain to turn and face the demons in pursuit, and not only escape, but push the rebels back. All of these mods and more are compatible with *Advanced Edition*, a completely free DLC which adds a new ship and race, new weapons, subsystems, and a few tweaks to the game.

Don't be daunted by *FTL*'s difficulty – dying is half the fun. No, really, it is! **JU**

Paper Sorcerer



Ultra Runaway Games, 2013
Windows, Linux and Mac

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, terrorising innocents and wreaking havoc, so a group of heroes 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 *Wizardry IV*.

The monochrome visual style is original and beautifully minimalist, with the sleek ink design illustrating the central theme of a world within a book.

The core gameplay of *Paper Sorcerer* consists 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.

As in *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, witches, ghosts, vampires, cultists, werewolves, trolls and other nasty monsters, each one possessing a wide variety of skills and magic, giving you plenty of party compositions and battle strategies to play with.

Battles can be very tense, as you'll have to plan for the long run. All characters have Defense points, which block physical damage but decrease with 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 an interesting dynamic, where you'll have to weigh up which stat to invest in and what sort of restoration spells to use.

Beside the main dungeon there's also a safe zone called the Sanctuary, with a room to rest, a trainer to learn skills, a creepy house that leads into an optional dungeon and a store to buy equipment and potions.

Paper Sorcerer comes with four difficulty settings available: Easy, Normal, Hard, and the super brutal "1980s mode". The downside is that the random loot drops can be rather unfair, especially on higher difficulties, punishing players and promoting save-scumming (loot is generated when you open a chest).

All in all, *Paper Sorcerer* is a lovely crafted game with superb artistic presentation. While some bugs are present, it's nonetheless a very admirable effort from Jesse Gallagher who, by himself on Unity, created this parchment world for us to discover. **CV**

***Paper Sorcerer* was made by a single man, Jesse Gallagher, funded by a Kickstarter campaign in 2012. Jesse received 13,151 dollars, from an initial $5,000 goal.**



Characters have an energy pool, necessary for casting most skills. It slowly regenerates each turn, so resource-managing is key in battle.



The dungeons hold many secrets and interactive objects, often cleverly hidden by the game's unique art style.

Shadowrun Returns



Harebrained Schemes, 2013
Windows, OS X, Linux and Android

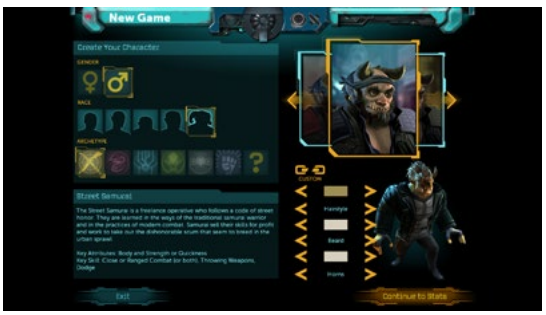
Shadowrun was a popular tabletop RPG during the 90s, with hundreds of source books, its own magazines, two console games, trading cards and over 40 novels. Its latest version was released in 2013, called _Fifth Edition_.

In 1989, *Shadowrun* entered the tabletop RPG market, one year after *Cyberpunk* (not yet 2020). *Shadowrun* brought with it a different angle on the genre: in addition to the grimy futuristic hellscape of tech and corporate rule, it also wove in the return of magic to "our" world, placing orcs, mages, and dragons alongside cyberdecks and street samurai.

Two video games hit home consoles in 1993 and 1994, for the SNES and SEGA Genesis respectively. The two were vastly different; the latter was an open-world action RPG with roguelike elements. The SNES game was a more linear, plot-oriented Action RPG.

After this, the video game licence languished in North America until 2007, when Microsoft released a lacklustre first/third-person deathmatch game for Windows Vista and the Xbox 360 which has thankfully mostly fallen from memory. At the time, it seemed like the death knell for this part of the franchise for fans of the earlier console games.

Enter Kickstarter. In 2012, Harebrained Schemes put up a campaign proposing *Shadowrun Returns*, a single-player isometric turn-based RPG for PCs and tablets, designed by the original creator of *Shadowrun*, Jordan Weisman. They asked for $400,000. What they got was over $1.8 million.



There are five races (human, elf, dwarf, orc and troll) and six archetypes to pick from, but you can also create your own, mixing the game's various skills and stats.

The game dropped in July 2013 with the promised campaign, called *Dead Man's Switch*. It was... fine. Not perfect; the licensing agreement with Microsoft caused a to-do about the DRM (later resolved), and the game had no ability to save manually. This wasn't terrible, but the campaign was heavily combat-oriented, with long levels, and the turn-based battle system was heavily reminiscent of the new *XCOM*, with RNG lurking around every turn.

The campaign escalated stakes awkwardly, featuring a cult that was secretly a front for bug spirits that threatened to destroy Seattle. When the storytelling was personal, it was decent, but it strayed too often into combat and cameos from godlike NPCs from the tabletop game. Promised ties to the console games proved to mostly be the return of the main character from the SNES game as an NPC, and otherwise the cast was lacklustre. But the game played OK up until the final level, where you were forced to use inaccurate, low-damage weapons in order to defeat the otherwise endlessly respawning bug spirits.

If that had been everything *Shadowrun Returns* had to offer, it would have been a decent, but not exceptional game for long-time fans. However, as a stretch goal in the Kickstarter campaign, they promised an entire second campaign, set in a city of backers' choice. Polling settled on the Flux State of Berlin.

Dragonfall hit as an expansion in 2014, and blew expectations set by *Dead Man's Switch* out of the water. The PC was still a player-generated blank slate, but you were given more leeway in dialogue options to define your character. Also, you were given a team, rather than a rotating mass of hired shadowrunners that filled out your party during fights. The flow of the game changed from being wholly linear to hub-based, with a slate of missions you could choose from.

"Shadowrun mixed the cyberpunk meta-theme of the dehumanisation of humanity and the destruction of nature with the optimism of nature reasserting itself via the return of magic and all the flora and fauna that comes with it. Where as cyberpunk can become a monochrome of grey, *Shadowrun* became a universe of vivid contrasts, with everything from mage wage-slaves to troll biker gangs."

– Jordan Weisman, *Shadowrun's* creator



Combat is turn-based and plays similarly to the new *XCOM*. Characters have only 2-3 action points and can use cover, but also have access to spells, summons and drones.

The story was complex, with sharply written dialogue trees with decisions that deftly avoided clear "best" options. This made for a dark mood – maybe a little too dark in the end; there were multiple endings, but they all led to the canon ending laid out by the *Shadowrun* metaplot, which left the impression that there was no real way to win in the end.

Still, *Shadowrun* is a setting that prizes getting personal victories where you can, while you watch the world go to hell around you.

Dragonfall was so much better than the original campaign that the developers re-released it later that year as an expanded stand-alone title, named *Dragonfall: Director's Cut*.

The good bits became better; you got the chance to delve deeper into your team's stories, they gave you better customisation, and expanded the already great soundtrack. The bad bits improved: the combat system was overhauled, making it more tactical, and the UI was redone. You also finally had save slots. Overall, *Dragonfall* would have been a fantastic send-off for the series.

Yet, there was still more to come. Berlin had won the original poll, but Hong Kong was an extremely close second, so Harebrained launched another Kickstarter in 2015 – this time raising $1.2 million.

Shadowrun: Hong Kong dropped later that year, featuring even more system refinements and gameplay tweaks. Whether it was better than *Dragonfall* is mostly a matter of taste – *Hong Kong* had a larger, mostly less close-knit cast on your team, and though the stakes were of a similar scale, they felt smaller, closer, part of the family-oriented plot.

The developers followed it up yet again by adding *Shadows of Hong Kong*, a whole extra campaign set after the first, along with the usual fixes and polish, releasing *Shadowrun: Hong Kong - Extended Edition*.

Harebrained is on record that they're done with making games on this engine, leaving *Shadowrun: Hong Kong* as the capstone for the series for the time being. With *Dragonfall* and *Hong Kong* in particular, they've done what few have been able to do: take classic video games and not only give respect to players' nostalgia with new entries, but in many ways surpass the originals. **TAB**

After *Shadowrun*, Harebrained kickstarted *BattleTech*, another setting created by Jordan Weisman. They raised $2.7 million in 2015, and the game is scheduled for 2018.

Editor and Steam Workshop:

Harebrained released an editor for each of their *Shadowrun* games, allowing players to create new adventures and share them via Steam Workshop. We suggest *Antumbra*, *The Price of Conviction* and *From the Shadows*.



The original game assigns specific NPCs each mission, but *Dragonfall* offers a BioWare-ish cast of fixed companions.



You can hack into terminals, sneaking past security to steal data. Originally turn-based, this became real-time in *Hong Kong*.

Hyperdimension Neptunia - Re;Birth 1



Idea Factory, 2013
Windows, PSP Vita and PS3*

***The game was originally released for the PS3 in 2010 as *Hyperdimension Neptunia*. The 2013 *Re;Birth* version for PS Vita and Windows is a complete remake.**

A game that no one expected to see on PCs, *Neptunia* is set in the world of Gamindustri, where four nations – Lowee, Lastation, Leanbox and Planeptune –, are locked in an eternal conflict called the Console War. The first three nations clearly represent the Wii, PlayStation and Xbox consoles, while the last one is a reference to the SEGA Neptune, a cancelled console from the 90s.

In one of the most bizarre industry metaphors, the game begins as the "console goddesses" join forces against the Planeptune goddess and remove her from the Console War. And so you must help Neptune, a powerless and amnesiac personification of a cancelled console, to return to her rightful place and save all of Gamindustri. Hard to find a weirder premise.



Dialogues are filled with references, puns and 4th-wall breaking jokes that were well handled by the translation.



A 2D world map gives you access to various dungeons, which can later be "re-programed" to have new monsters and items.

Neptunia as a whole is a light-hearted tribute to video games, especially the Japanese indie scene. Your first two companions, Compa and IF, are the personification of Compile Heart and Idea Factory, the game's publisher and developers, respectively. You'll meet more characters alluding to Japanese companies and series, as well as countless other video game references in the form of enemies, dungeons, attacks, items, jokes and even entire game mechanics – like how you can burn game discs with status boosts of your liking and equip them as accessories.

The unusual setting aside, *Neptunia* is a standard yet solid JRPG. The story is told via 2D cutscenes (with its fair share of puns and fan-service), while the simple dungeons are explored in a 3D third-person camera.

Touch an enemy and you enter turn-based combat, where characters can freely move a certain distance and each weapon/skill has a different range. The game shines on the impressive amount of depth underneath, with a robust equipment and crafting system, special goddess forms, diverse enemies, multiple status effects and many companions to use (even more with the DLCs). You can customise their powers, attack types, appearance, battle formation and pair them with other characters to gain special bonuses and combos.

Battles can be very tough, so you'll have to grind at some points, usually by doing side-quests at the guild and revisiting dungeons in pursuit of XP, items and materials for crafting. An interesting feature here is the ability to "re-program" dungeons, adding new monsters, different item drops or raising the difficulty.

A huge hit, the game quickly got three sequels (and three remakes), manga and anime versions and a series of spin-offs, such as a turn-based tactical RPG and an idol-raising sim. *Neptunia* is an extremely niche game, but one that perfectly resonates with its audience. **FE**

Heroine's Quest: The Herald of Ragnarok



Crystal Shard, 2013
Windows and Linux

Crystal Shard is not new to adventure games. This indie studio has been developing them since 2001, but most of them are made with Adventure Games Studio and, on top of that, they are all free. So I didn't expect much of *Heroine's Quest*.

I was wrong. Imagine a parallel universe where Sierra released *Quest for Glory* in 2013, with the same VGA graphics, but bigger, with more RPG stats, and tuned to the Norse mythology. That's *Heroine's Quest*. Yes, it's that good.

Any fan of *QfG* will immediately feel at home. It's all very familiar: the similar graphics, the good old Sierra interface, the three classes – Warrior, Sorceress and Rogue – and the distinct battles with monsters. But it's a parallel universe, remember? So, apart from some jokes about *Harry Potter*, *The Hobbit* and other modern references, the game is quite original.

Your heroine arrives in a small town during an unusually long winter. As it happens, this winter is unnatural, a sign of the forthcoming Ragnarok – the end of the world at the hands of monsters and frost giants. And, of course, it's up to you to save the world, regardless of your initial less-then-average physical conditions and zero equipment.

The Adventure part is quite solid: most tasks are logical, and very rarely require guessing. Moreover, key tasks are marked on your map, so you'll never lose track. Most quests can be solved in several ways, and each class has their own personal quests and goals. As a result, playing each class feels like a distinctively different game that follows the same plot and setting, so you could easily play it at least trice.

The role-playing aspect is also very well-thought-out. Your success in certain puzzles is determined by several stats and skills, which improve during your adventures while you use them, quite naturally.

Thus, climbing a tree will raise the "Climb" skill and also the "Strength" stat; casting "Fire shield" will raise the correspondent skill and the "Magic" stat; while battling with random monsters will raise almost everything – if you live to tell the tale.

Finally, there's also a day-and-night cycle and three conditions you must constantly monitor: Cold, Sleep and Hunger. Sadly, while they offer some challenge at first, later they become simply a distraction that prevents you from finishing the game too fast.

Regardless, *Heroine's Quest* is great, and I fully recommend it to any adventure lover – especially to those fond of the *Quest for Glory* games. **SS**

***Heroine's Quest* is free, available for download on Steam or on the developer's website: www.crystalshard.net**



Battles are very similar to those of *Quest for Glory I-III*, but can offer a lot of options depending on your class, skills and items.



The game uses an icon-based interface similar to that of classic Sierra games like *King's Quest V* and *Quest for Glory III*.

Path of Exile



Grinding Gear Games, 2013
Windows and Xbox One

Path of Exile's **business model relies on selling cosmetic items and quality-of-life features such as extra stash room or character slots, as well as supporter packs with physical rewards and perks like designing an item.**

Designed from the ground up as a Free-to-Play Action RPG that "will never be pay-to-win", *Path of Exile* began with 250,000 players during Beta, grew to over 11 million registered players in 2015 and keeps expanding to this day.

One of the things that drives such impressive numbers and keeps the community active to this day is *Path of Exile*'s tireless pursuit of innovation and the developer's attention to player feedback.

Clearly inspired by *Diablo II*, the game captures what many fans felt was missing in Blizzard's third entry in the series: atmosphere and complexity. Expertly mixing old and new design trends, *Path of Exile* brings back that experience of spending hours pondering over abilities, items and stats, trying to create your own perfect build.

The game has seven classes: Marauder, Duelist, Ranger, Shadow, Witch, Templar and Scion. There are only three base stats – Strength, Intelligence and Dexterity –, and that's reflected in the class roles. Three classes focus on one stat (i.e. the Ranger relies on Dexterity), three are "hybrid" classes such as the Templar (Strength/Intelligence), and the Scion is an all-rounder. However, any character can use any item or skill, as long as they meet the stat requirements.



Some of the game's maps make extensive use of puzzles and traps, which can be as deadly as any boss fight.

Most Action RPGs usually focus on two main features: abilities and loot. In *Path of Exile* these two are intertwined, as all abilities come from Ability Gems which are socketed into your equipment. Moreover, you can use up to five Support Gems to modify a single ability. You could make a Fireball jump between targets, split into multiple projectiles, freeze enemies, drain HP or auto-cast on critical melee hits – perhaps even all of these at once!

This allows for a great degree of customisation which is perfectly complemented by the game's defining feature: the Passive Skill Tree.

Path of Exile features a huge, daunting skill tree composed of 1,325 nodes! These provide all sorts of passive benefits, from increasing stats and damage to more radical changes, such as converting all Evasion into Armour, using Health to cast abilities, or having only 1 max HP but being immune to Chaos damage. All classes share this same tree, they just start at different points. As such, players can focus on the nearby nodes, which provide bonuses associated with his class, or travel all across the tree, mixing bonuses from several different classes.

It may be overwhelming at first, but, no matter how good or bad your build is, you're always learning and evolving – the next character will be easier to make, and you never feel like you wasted your time.

Which is great, since *Path of Exile* is designed as a replayable, long-term experience. It features an extensive and challenging endgame, which constantly grows bigger. As of late 2017, the game had seven expansions, adding new features such as challenge leagues, new NPCs, player hideouts, corruption, etc. The downside of this is that the game has a bit of content-creep and can be intimidating at first, but the developers keep a close eye on the community.

"The problem that we found was that, because of this classless system, you kinda only needed to play one or two characters – you know, the one you like, and maybe a second one. It wouldn't be this cool thing that they had in *Diablo*, where you intend to play every other class. [...] People had no need to make a Ranger because they just played a Witch with a bow. That's why we added the Ascendancy classes."

– Chris Wilson, Path of Exile's producer and lead designer



Path of Exile tries to innovate in every aspect, including loot. Even "white" tier items are valuable, as they can be used to craft powerful unique items.

Initially *Path of Exile* had only one chapter, then grew to four, which had to be done on all three difficulty settings to reach the endgame. The developers listened to feedback saying it felt repetitive and overhauled the entire system. They removed the difficulties and instead doubled the number of chapters – reusing the same assets and locations, but adding some visual changes and new, much more difficult battles.

Other recent changes are the Ascendancy classes, endgame specialisations that provide powerful new playstyles but are restricted to each class, thus giving players more incentive to try out all classes, despite the game's mostly classless nature. To unlock an Ascendancy class you must beat The Lord's Labyrinth, a roguelike-ish experience where you delve into a maze full of traps, treasures and extremely difficult boss battles, and must finish it without dying.

These are joined by other creative mechanics, such as the lack of currency, a rich crafting system, random maps with special modifiers, buff potions that refill as you kill, etc. Everything in *Path of Exile* feels familiar, but offers interesting new twists.

The game is always online, with other players being visible when inside towns, so you can trade, create parties or jump on a PvP match. This makes the game feel alive even when playing alone, but those seeking an even bigger challenge can lock themselves off from all online interaction in Solo Self-Found mode.

In the end, all these mechanics and features serve *Path of Exile*'s main strength: player choice. Even with the best build and items, no character will be able to excel at everything. Every choice brings trade-offs, and the end result is an experience that's unique and memorable for the player. **TF**

Since the game doesn't have a currency, online trades are based on bartering. The developers intentionally avoid adding an auction house, so players often use services like www.poe.trade to index their trades.



The massive passive skill tree features 1,325 nodes. Some offer small stat bonuses, while others will radically change how your character plays.

Cataclysm: Dark Days Ahead



Kevin Granade, 2013
Windows, Linux, Mac and iOS

***Cataclysm: Dark Days Ahead* is based on the original *Cataclysm*, a 2010 roguelike by Zachary "Whales" Jenkins that was later abandoned.**

Cataclysm: Dark Days Ahead could be best described as a lovingly crafted amalgamation of *Fallout*, *Minecraft* and *Deus Ex* with a heaped spoonful of Lovecraftian horror. A free roguelike, *DDA* is still recieving daily updates and is a long way from finished but, while it needs some polish, that hasn't stopped me from sinking hundreds of hours into zombie-(and other abomination)-infested New England.

DDA has multiple starting scenarios, but the default one drops you into an emergency shelter with some winter clothing, a knife, a lighter and a bottle of water. From there, you can craft, hunt, scavenge, steal or murder your way from just another (un)lucky survivor to a being of near-godlike power.



Crafting is a key feature of *DDA*, allowing you to cook, farm, craft weapons, build walls, set traps, board up houses and even repair (or build) vehicles.



The character system is highly complex, with four stats, dozens of skills, positive and negative traits, over 100 professions, locational damage and much more.

Just don't expect it to be easy. The learning curve for *DDA* is quite steep and dead bodies litter the conscience of every veteran player, but each one had a reason and each taught a valuable lesson for how to survive. Or just how to not die.

There are dozens of distinct locations to explore, hundreds of items and thousands of things to do. You can spend your time sneaking past a zombie horde to get that last can of beans, spelunking through a science lab for untold treasure or even just cooking yourself a nice meal with the finest apocalyptic ingredients.

Sounds very *Fallout*, doesn't it? But you could also cut down some trees with your trusty chainsaw to build a log cabin, or take some morphine and jam second-hand bionic implants under your skin until you glow in the dark. Grab some mutagen and grow yourself some wings and a tail. With plenty of skill and certain books you could even put together your very own laser cannon. *DDA* is a deep ocean of content for you to explore, and the tap of open-source development is on and making it deeper by the day.

The game also has no set goals. Presumably the player would like to survive and grow in strength until they can slaughter their way through hordes with impunity, but they don't have to. Some choose to simply turn off cities and zombies to play the game as a wilderness simulator, or they pick specific starting scenarios to role-play as a knight, schoolgirl, scientist or even a lost BDSM practitioner. Wandering NPCs might give you a quest or stab you in the face, and you can follow quest lines to help fellow survivors.

While most games offer a story and some tools to apply in order to reach them, *DDA* offers a huge range of tools, and you must supply your own goals. It's a brutal playground and will bring you hours of fun – if you can get over the initial difficulty hump. **D1**

Aarklash: Legacy



Cyanide, 2013
Windows

Inspired by the *Confrontation* desktop miniature game, *Aarklash: Legacy* is a highly tactical real-time-with-pause RPG. It's set in a world engulfed by war, with every race is fighting for supremacy of the continent. You control a group of debt collectors called Wheel Swords, who have been wrongly accused of crimes they did not commit and thus need to fight to reveal the conspiracy that threatens their order.

It must be said that *Aarklash* is not very deep in terms of RPG elements. There is no choice and consequence, level design is linear and the story and characters are but a means to an end. Where it really shines is in its smart and complex combat system, that mixes genres in challenging and interesting ways, with a relatively long learning curve.

Your party is composed of four characters from a panel of eight heroes. The standard MMO trinity – Tank, Healer, DPS – applies here, but each role has been tweaked to be interesting, highly customisable and useful in more ways than one.

Wendaroo for example, one of the two healers available, can heal and do damage – but won't regenerate mana. To keep healing the tank, he must steal life from other party members, potentially leaving them vulnerable. Every character plays with risk and reward, which makes each feel very unique and fun to play, making you think before every click.

Aarklash is entirely linear, pushing you across several maps with nothing but battles and some story bits. An advantage to this approach is that each encounter is handcrafted, without any trash mobs. Fights work like a puzzle, providing new challenges that keep the game fresh. Each enemy has its own active and passive skills which the player must learn how to react to. Knowing which enemy must be killed first is very important, and positioning is crucial.

You'll have to micromanage all four of your characters, use buffs, debuffs, heal, silence enemies, increase defense, and so on. One wrong decision during battle – whether that be your positioning, focusing the wrong enemy first or mistimed ability – can and will kill you.

Still, every time I died I managed to understand exactly what I did wrong. It is tough, but fair.

Aarklash is not a *Diablo*-like loot fest – you won't even find new weapons or armour, only accessories. It's not an RPG with significant story or reactivity either, but don't let that turn you off. I didn't expect much going into it, but *Aarklash: Legacy* proved itself a hidden gem for those who want good tactical combat and don't mind the fact it doesn't offer much else. **RI**

***Confrontation* was a popular tabletop wargame released in 1997 by French publisher Rackham. The company closed in 2010, but Cyanide acquired its IP to produce a PC version of the game in 2012 and, later, *Aarklash*.**



The RtwP combat will be familiar to fans of games like *Baldur's Gate*, but it requires much more micromanaging.



Each hero only has four abilities and can't change their equipment, but they can be customised via a skill tree or just swapped anytime for other heroes.

Card Hunter



Blue Manchu, 2013
Windows, Mac and Web Browsers

Card Hunter was first released in 2013 as a web browser-based flash game. In 2015, it also got stand-alone Steam client for Windows & Mac.

If *AD&D* and *Magic: The Gathering* had a baby, it would be *Card Hunter*. Jonathon Chey, co-founder of Irrational Games, hired Richard Garfield, the creator of *Magic*, to help him develop a tactical role-playing card-based free-to-play game. The end result is unlike anything else out there – quick, funny and deeply tactical, without taking itself too seriously.

A recent trend in game design circles is to eschew RNG (and therefore luck) in favour of other mechanics. *Card Hunter* is a giant stride forwards in this direction. Stats, abilities, skills, and perks have all been eliminated by simply making everything a card. Equip a pair of Boots of Buttkicking? Some movement and armour cards are added to the character's deck. Removed a Perplexing Mirror trinket? Its spell cards come out.



Some battles have special objectives, such as controlling victory points, surviving X turns or defeating the enemy's leader.



You build your party of three heroes choosing from three classes, thee races and countless spells and equipment.

The game still has some dice-rolls but these are only for some cards and only to enact their special power. A good example is armour, which is played as a "counter". Some armour always slightly reduces damage, while others reduce more but only on a successful dice-roll of, say, 3+. It's a well-balanced system that feels right even when the dice-rolls are not in your favour.

Thus, equipment upgrades are agonising choices compared to the obvious DPS increases found in so many games. One weapon gives you two great attack cards and one lousy one, while another weapon offers three good attack cards. Which is better? You decide.

Battles follow an original formula: at the start of the round each character draws up to their hand limit. Then each side takes turns playing cards: attack cards to attack, movement cards to walk or run X squares, and counter cards (like armour) to cancel opponents' cards. When you have no cards left to play, or don't like your remaining cards, you pass. Once both sides pass, a new round begins. Characters keep up to two cards into the next round, with the remaining discarded. There's strategy in when to play and when to pass.

Adventures are played in self-contained modules, much like classic *D&D* modules. The campaign map provides increasingly diverse modules to choose, plus shops to buy cards and taverns to recruit/replace heroes.

A free-to-play game, *Card Hunter* is constantly in development, with new expansions and features (such as co-op) being added at regular intervals. Players can use real money to buy adventures, cosmetic changes, gold, loot chests and club membership – which offers an extra piece of loot in every chest for a period of days.

An anomaly in today's RPG scene, *Card Hunter* is a shining example of what a few seasoned AAA developers can do if they go indie. With a little help, they can turn a genre upside down. **TH**

Bound by Flame



Spiders, 2014
Windows, PS3, PS4 and Xbox 360

French studio Spiders is one odd developer. Their first RPG, *Faery: Legends of Avalon* (2009), was an extremely unusual title, where you would play as fairies, battle in JRPG-style turn-based combat and freely fly across maps such as the giant world tree Yggdrasil or the Flying Dutchman.

They followed with *Of Orcs and Men* (2011), a more "standard" kind of CRPG with RTwP combat, yet bold enough to cast players as the monsters – an Orc and a Goblin tasked with killing the human king. Then came *Mars: War Logs* (2013), an Action RPG about a veteran soldier and a boy escaping prison in a dystopian sci-fi society ruled by Technomancers.

All these games were very unusual and creative, but suffered heavily from tight budgets and some poor design choices: small and linear areas, repetitive combat, extremely limited exploration and character progression, rushed endings, etc.

Bound by Flame is an attempt to fix all that, polishing the systems from *Mars: War Logs* and solidifying their BioWare influences. The game is still divided into hubs, but they are larger than before. The combat has been greatly enhanced, featuring three fighting styles (Warrior, Rogue and Pyromancer), varied weapons, five romanceable companions, and a very well-done crafting/customisation system.

However, the story became a clichéd medieval fantasy hero's journey. You're struggling against the world-destroying Ice Lords and their undead scourge when something goes wrong and you're possessed by a fire demon. You're granted power, but must often choose whether to keep your humanity or allow the demon more control in exchange for power.

For the first two hours or so, *Bound by Flame* is an impressive game. But, sadly, as you go on, the same old problems begin to rear their heads.

Combat and enemies quickly grow repetitive, there's too much backtracking, few choices matter, the pacing is inconsistent, it lacks polish and the game's quality declines as you advance, up until an abrupt ending to what should've been an epic saga. Thus, *Bound by Flame* is hard to recommend. While arguably the best Spiders title gameplay-wise, it feels lacking next to most RPGs and, worse, it lacks that bold, exotic creativity that their previous games had. Plainly put, it's generic and underwhelming.

Still, it might be interesting for those just looking for a story-driven Action RPG with decent combat, romances and all that – a low-budget BioWare-like game. But if you're looking for something fresh, then I suggest giving *Of Orcs and Men* a try instead. **FE**

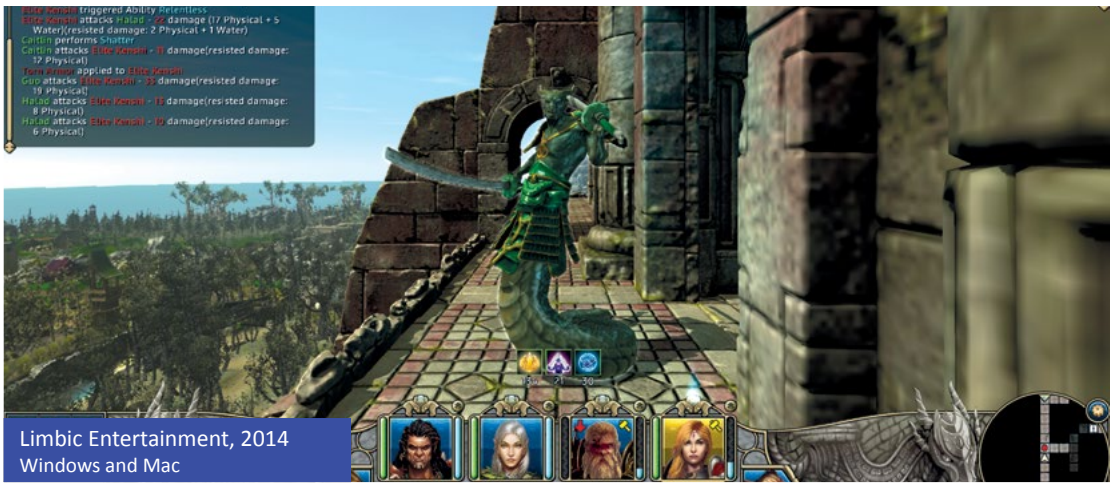


Combat is in real time, but you can freely pause to cast spells, use items or give orders to your companion.



The crafting system stands out and allows you to add or replace parts of your weapons and armour to customise them to your playstyle.

Might and Magic X



Limbic Entertainment, 2014
Windows and Mac

M&M X only got one DLC, entitled *The Falcon & The Unicorn*. It adds a post-game dungeon that strips your party of all its high-level gear, and is much harder than the core game.

After the failure of *Might and Magic IX* in 2002, Ubisoft bought the series and kept making *Heroes of Might and Magic* games and spin-offs like *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic* (2006) – but never returned to the main RPG series.

However, the unexpected popularity of *Legend of Grimrock* in 2011 led to passionate developers at Limbic Entertainment to propose to Ubisoft an old-school RPG revival: *Might and Magic X - Legacy*.

You begin by creating a party of four heroes, choosing from Humans, Elves, Dwarves and Orcs, each with three unique classes. Faithful to the series, you can later hire up to two NPCs to help you with passive bonuses, learn additional skills and perform special quests to earn a class promotion.



The game offers a segmented open world with some gorgeous vistas. The day-and-night cycle also plays a role in some puzzles.



You'll collect several rare relics and artefacts, as well as blessings that allow you to enter previously unreachable areas.

Surprisingly, *M&M X* abandons the free 3D movement of *M&M VI* to *IX*, replacing it for a very old-school grid-based system, with the party moving square-by-square. In spite of this dungeon crawler-ish gameplay, the game features an open world, with towns, forests and mountains to explore.

Compared with other open-world titles, it's closer to *Gothic* than *Skyrim*, as you can wander freely (some road blocks aside), but enemies in certain areas will tear inexperienced parties apart.

While exploring the world you'll come across monsters, side-quests, merchants, optional dungeons, secrets, puzzles and the series' usual trainer NPCs, which are necessary to improve your skill tier.

In line with its old-school ambitions, the game also returns to turn-based combat. Battles can be very challenging, and there's plenty of skills, spells and status effects to handle, making *M&M X* arguably the most tactical game in the series, despite a rather annoying over-reliance on unfair ambushes.

From a graphical point of view, the whole game was built on a tight budget, reusing many assets from *Heroes of Might and Magic VI*. And it shows, alternating very pleasant landscapes with really bad textures. On the whole, however, exploring the various areas and environments is a satisfying experience.

Unfortunately, the game is very badly optimised, leading to frequent frame rate drops and graphical issues, plus other annoying bugs. Ubisoft's Uplay store and invasive DRM can also be a hassle.

Overall, *Might and Magic X - Legacy* is a good and surprisingly old-school RPG. Clearly developed by fans of the series, it offers modern accessibility improvements, but also high difficulty and complex systems. Sadly, it sold poorly, so Ubisoft pulled the plug and another sequel is unlikely. **AM**

The Banner Saga



Stoic, 2014
Windows and Mac

The Banner Saga is the first game in a planned trilogy of story-driven, tactical RPGs with a nice smattering of choice and consequence and beautiful hand-drawn artwork.

Banner Saga is built around the concept of an ongoing apocalypse, told from the perspective of two different groups and their respective caravans, and the developers had no problems presenting the harsh choices that such an event would entail. Although the story is fairly linear, which characters remain alive depends greatly on player choices throughout.

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's also needed to upgrade troops or buy items.

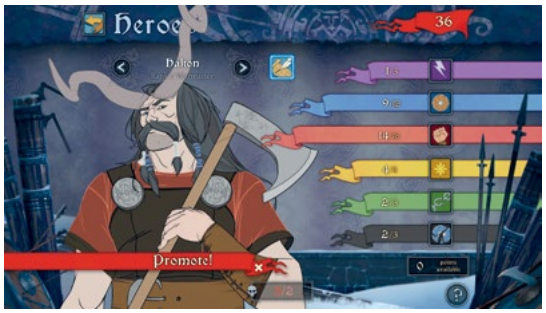
The combat is turn-based, and there's a variety of classes with specialised skills, offering a wide range of tactics. You can also move your characters' stat points around between six different attributes, allowing for greater customisation of roles and playstyle.

For example, you can spend points making a unit into specialised armour breakers or boost the number of times they can perform a special ability. One of said attributes is Will Power, which dictates a unit's ability to go above and beyond their typical limits, moving further than normal or boosting an attack.

A unique mechanic that separates *Banner Saga* from other games is the shared health/strength pool for units: damaging an enemy reduces their damage. However, outright killing a unit might not be in your best interests since the game uses an "I go, you go" system. Therefore, it can be valuable to leave weaker, heavily damaged units alive to prevent full strength units from getting more turns.

The big drawback of *Banner Saga's* combat is the limited number of enemy types, many of which lack special abilities, which does erode the tactical depth. Despite that and the linear nature of the main story, I thoroughly enjoyed the game and its mechanics. The artwork also deserves a lot of praise, providing a unique look, with elegant hand-drawn animation and gorgeous Eyvind Earle-styled landscapes.

Banner Saga 2 arrived two years later, continuing the story and adding improvements such as more enemy types and less arbitrary choices. It also allows you to import your saves – along with all the consequences of the choices you made. If the final game manages to properly concludes this dark, but engrossing story, then *Banner Saga* could become an all-time classic. **RR**



Upon achieving enough kills, all basic classes can level up and later upgrade into one of three specialised classes.



You can use skills to attack your enemy's health, reducing their HP and strength, or attack their armour, reducing their damage absorption.

***The Banner Saga* was one of the first big Kickstarter games, raising $720,000 in 2012 and inspiring many similar titles. After self-funding *Banner Saga 2*, Stoic returned to Kickstarter with *Banner Saga 3* in 2017, raising $410,000.**

NEO Scavenger



Blue Bottle Games, 2014
Windows, Linux, Android and iOS

From a quick glance, *NEO Scavenger* is just a Flash-based roguelike developed by a one-man team. However, like an expert scavenger, it knows how to make the most of its limited resources and manages to create something truly valuable.

You start by choosing your character's traits. The game uses an advantage and disadvantage system that should be familiar to *GURPS* fans, allowing you to gain points by picking negative traits (Insomniac, Feeble, Myopia, etc.) and spend points 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 labelled "Philip Kindred", and 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 a unique approach to presentation.

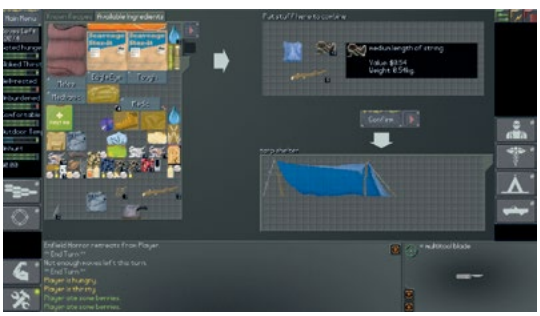
Combat, for example, is turn-based and doesn't feature a single frame of animation. Instead, you select commands, such as "shoot", "kick" or "sneak towards", and the combat log will describe what happened. While this may seem crude, it allows for actions that even triple-A games find too complex to animate, 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 judgement. 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 graphics- and DPS-driven era. More importantly, they succeed in transmitting a unique sense of tension, as you mentally visualise yourself rolling in the mud, tired and wounded, attacking another desperate survivor with a tree branch and wondering who will drop dead first.



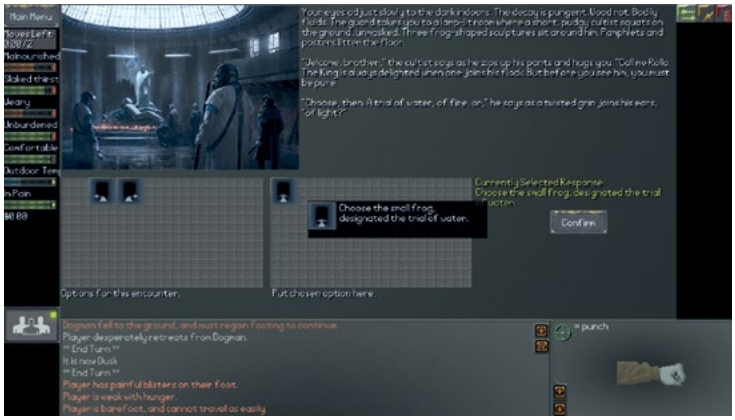
Items degrade, plastic bags rip open and there's never enough room to carry everything you want – or need.



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, treat your wounds, protect yourself from the cold and medicate against diseases. Of course, not all 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 OK, 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 rumours 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-out balance changes.

Mighty (mini)Mod of Doom: Despite the name, it also adds a huge amount of content and rebalancing.

Science & Sorcery: This WIP mod aims to give a *Shadowrun*-ish feel, adding magic to 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 sledge.

Blackguards



Daedalic, 2014
Windows and Mac

Known for old-school point-and-click adventure games such as *Deponia* and *Edna & Harvey*, German developer Daedalic took gamers by surprise by releasing *Blackguards* – a tactical turn-based RPG based on *The Dark Eye* tabletop ruleset.

While the story sells itself as a dark narrative where you play as outlaws, it's rather cliché and heroic. *The Dark Eye* ruleset is the true drawing point. While some of it was cut, such as most non-combat talents, it remains a solid and complex (if rather intimidating) classless system, offering ample freedom when creating your character. It's a joy for hardcore players, but very poorly explained for newcomers, and the forced party members end up limiting some of your party-building possibilities – sometimes even forcing a restart.



The game excels on its diverse combat scenarios, like battling zombies on a crypt lit only by occasional lightning strikes.



The character system is complex and allows for a lot of customisation, but *Blackguards* is sadly lacking in equipment variety.

Blackguards knows its limitations and uses some unconventional design choices to compensate for them, betting everything on its battles – cities are presented as simple animated backgrounds with stores and NPCs to talk with, exploration is limited to a 2D world map full of icons, dungeons are but a semi-linear sequence of battles without rest, and the story is told via simple cutscenes, with an occasional decision to be made. This leads to a unique "Western *Final Fantasy Tactics*" feel, and while the game's first hours are very linear, it later opens up to a wide range of interesting side-quests.

Daedalic's background as an adventure game developer is felt here in an unusual way. There are no random battles in *Blackguards*, meaning that every encounter happens in a unique arena specifically designed for it, often with unique challenges or tactical puzzles. There are traps, time limits, holes that spawn enemies, movable and destructible objects, healing orbs, falling chandeliers, mechanical blades, flying dragons, swamp gas, giant tentacles, mind-controlling plants, drawbridges, collapsing passageways, a giant cage on a crane, etc. There's not a single RPG out there that offers so many interesting combat scenarios.

This alone makes *Blackguards* a must-play for any tactical fan – or RPG designer. Unfortunately, the game stretches out for far too long (40 to 60 hours), and the limited variety of enemies and equipment results in a rather stale second half of the game.

Even more unfortunate was Daedalic's failure to realise what made the game fun. *Blackguards 2* (2015) streamlined the RPG elements to focus on an ambitious strategic campaign, and the tightly crafted encounters were replaced by poorly balanced battles against hordes of respawning enemies. It pleased reviewers, but not players, selling at only a fraction of the first game and likely ending the *Blackguards* series. **FE**

Transistor



Supergiant Games, 2014
Windows, PS4, OS X and Linux

Role-playing games usually try to find a balance between world-building and game mechanics, but very few of them try to merge them. *Transistor* is an intriguing attempt at doing so. At first glance, it uses the same concepts as *Bastion,* with an ominous narrator, real-time combat and a strong reliance on music for storytelling. But it quickly demonstrates its own individuality.

The story revolves around Red, a singer living in the retro-futuristic city of Cloudbank. Escaping from a murder attempt, she comes into possession of the Transistor, a tremendously powerful sword. With this blade in hand, your goal is understand the mystery behind it and stop the Process, an army of robots bent on destroying Cloudbank. Confusing in some aspects but very straightforward at heart, the storytelling succeeds in creating a touching experience.

Programming terminology cleverly parallels every game concept and shapes Cloudbank into a unique setting. Music, in particular, is the key of *Transistor*'s identity, tying to Red's character, evolving according to the situation and retelling the story through songs. Needless to say, the soundtrack is gorgeous.

Using an isometric point of view, you guide Red and her huge blueish sword through the gorgeous landscapes of Cloudbank, fighting various units of the Process on your way. Combat is in real time and four functions (special attacks) can be equipped, from quick shots to massive area attacks. The catch is that enemies are fast, possess various types of annoying abilities and some might even respawn.

This is where the Transistor's powers become useful. By activating a power called TURN(), Red can stop time to plan and queue actions in advance. Once ready, your plan is instantly executed and a cooldown starts to use TURN() again.

Experience expands Red's powers by opening secondary slots or obtaining new functions. The latter can be equipped as direct attacks, as improvements on other functions or as passive bonuses. For example, Red's initial function CRASH() is just a powerful blow, but in an upgrade slot it stuns enemies, and used in a passive slot it makes you immune to slowing effects.

There are 16 functions in total and experimenting is super fun. Some combinations are overpowered, but you can also use handicaps, which make the enemies stronger but assure you some nice experience bonuses.

The most compelling aspect of *Transistor* is how everything blends together: its beautiful soundtrack, gorgeous art direction, interesting world-building and surprising battles. Even if it's a short game. **TR**



The beautiful world is shown through an isometric view. Combat is in real time, and you can equip up to four active skills at once.



When TURN() is activated the game pauses, allowing you to plan and instantly execute a short sequence of actions.

Divinity: Original Sin



Larian Studios, 2014
Windows, OS X, Linux, PS4 and Xbox One

_D:OS_ was crowd-funded on Kickstarter in 2013, raising $900,000. The sequel was also funded by Kickstarter, raising 2 million dollars in 2015.

The *Divinity* series isn't the story of a world, but an ambition. Since 1999, Larian Studios and its CEO Swen Vincke have had the dream of not merely walking in *Ultima VII*'s mighty footsteps, but finally surpassing it.

It's been a bumpy road, with 2002's *Divine Divinity* biting off more than it could chew, and subsequent games being marked by fantastic, original ideas – be soulbound with an evil knight! Turn into a dragon! – often undercut by more mundane concerns like shaky core foundations, and simply trying to keep the lights on.

With *Divinity: Original Sin*, however, all the pieces finally came together. Kickstarter proved the thirst and funding for classic-style RPGs was there (though *D:OS* was far from old-school), while a new approach to development provided the much needed foundation for Larian's crazier ideas, such as elemental-focused combat that swiftly turned any battlefield into a flaming hellscape, letting you cast rain for everything from putting out a burning ship to extinguishing enemy bomb fuses.

That twist was to focus on multiplayer first – not, as *Neverwinter Nights* had done, necessarily with the goal of prioritising that in the final game, but forcing the team to create systems and scripts capable of anything the player might do.



You start the game by creating two characters. The game offers a few classes to choose, but you can fully customise them, editing stats, abilities, spells and talents.

Murder everyone in town? Abuse teleportation and other spells? *Divinity: Original Sin* had to be ready, without taking cheap cop-outs like just ending the quest if a particular NPC died, or breaking in the event of a sequence break.

Instead, that *Ultima VII* inspiration came back in full force. Ultima VII and *D:OS* actually have very different design styles, with *D:OS* enforcing a fairly linear route versus *Ultima VII* merely strongly suggesting it, but what they share is a commitment to an open world that works naturally. Bosses, for instance, aren't immune to tricks like being teleported out of their arena into one of your choosing. In one of the cooler interactions, you can even run a two-man con on the NPCs by engaging one in conversation and having another sneak behind them and steal things.

The result was a triumph. *Divinity: Original Sin* instantly validated and justified Larian's hard work in the eyes of its critics, as well as delighting fans who'd been there for the long haul.

If it had issues, it was that the overall plot was a bit of a mess, and the company's love of comedy made it feel a bit *too* silly. The linearity was also an issue, with a strict intended path. These were subsequently fixed with a major free update/re-release, the *Enhanced Edition* which, amongst other things, tweaked the plot to make more sense, altered the ending, and added controller support and a full voice-over.

Luckily, one thing nobody can say about Larian is that it sits on its laurels. At first glance, *Divinity: Original Sin 2* (2017) looks like much the same game. Under the hood, however, it takes everything that the first game tried and cranks it up to 11.

Now you have up to four player characters, often with competing objectives in each location, and all after the same thing – their shot at godhood.

"During a demo, I think at the German magazine Gamestar, I was told that we'd probably have to re-educate players because they're not used to this type of gameplay anymore, conditioned as they seem to be by all the streamlining games go through nowadays."

– *Swen Vincke, Divinity: Original Sin's director and Larian's CEO*



Combat is turn-based and uses action points, but its defining feature is how you can use spells, objects and the environment to your advantage, such as igniting a pool of oil, or freezing wet enemies.

It's a game that outright encourages you to split up the party, pretending to play nice while really sabotaging each other with tricks like dyeing a green poison potion "health red" and slipping it into another party member's backpack.

On top of this, each character has their own unique story, the world is packed with encounters and decisions, and the interaction density is almost ridiculous. The first *Divinity: Original Sin* offered a trait called "Pet Pal" that allows you to talk to animals, mostly for jokes, but sometimes for hints and hidden quests. The sequel not only has that, but characters who respond differently based on your race and other traits, magic that makes it possible to camouflage yourself as something else, and the ability to talk to the ghosts of the dead. Then eat their souls for magic points.

The result is a fantastic experience. The humour and imagination is still very much there, just more deftly handled, while the plot is simple enough to keep humming along under the action but big enough in scale to take in any short story that an area designer wants to tell – anything from epic dramatic battles at sea, to the tale of a chicken corrupted by primordial magic, or a magic statue unimpressed by RPG heroics and the idea of the ends justifying the murderous means.

The linearity remains a nuisance, and sometimes the mass of scripting does fall over itself (especially in the final map), but with so much good stuff to find, it matters much less than it might.

As said, though, *Divinity* has been a path as much as a series. It's as notable for how it started as what it's become, and its evolution a credit to both Vincke and his team over the years. While "beating" *Ultima VII* is likely an impossible goal for any RPG, simply because they're not so much fighting the reality of *Ultima VII* as the Platonic ideal of it in the world's memories. There's no arguing that, in following its lead, Larian has done its legacy proud.

More importantly though, regardless of nostalgia, it created a series that can proudly stand in the top tier of modern RPG development, and proved that, wherever they head next, it's going to be worth following. **RC**

Toolset and Game Master Mode:

Alongside *Divinity: Original Sin*, Larian also released the Divinity Engine, a toolset to create your own maps and adventures and/or edit the game's main campaign. This was greatly expanded in the sequel, adding the Game Master Mode – where one player can prepare adventures and act as GM for up to four other players.

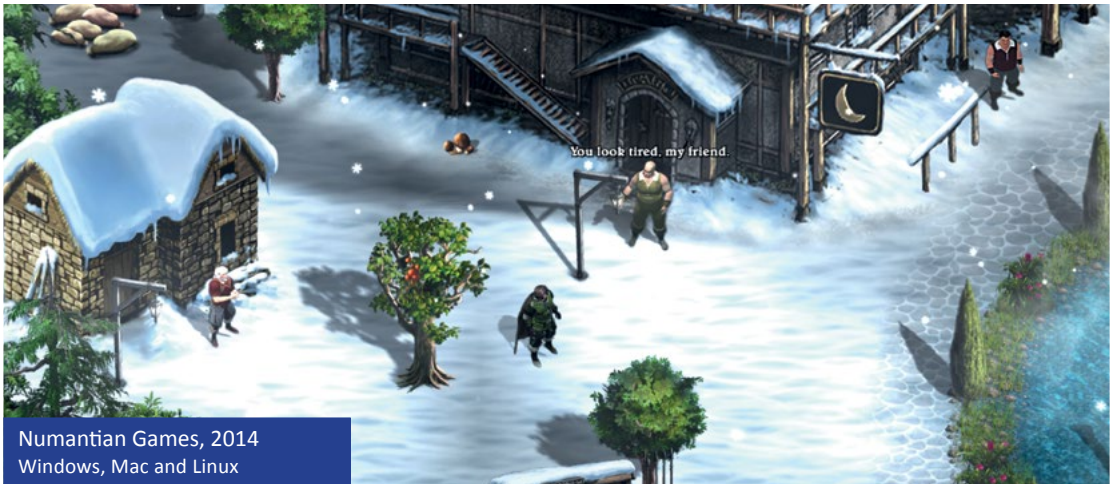


D:OS offers a rarely seen level of freedom, allowing players to steal and kill NPCs, freely move objects around, craft, etc.



D:OS2 added new races, plus the option to play special pre-made characters that have unique stories, goals and skills.

Lords of Xulima



Numantian Games, 2014
Windows, Mac and Linux

Lords of Xulima raised $35,000 on Kickstarter in 2013. Backers got the _Talisman of Golot_ DLC, but beware that this can make the game too easy.

With the rise of crowd-funding, developers began to cater to a nostalgic audience by making "spiritual sequels" of classic RPGs. Sadly, many of these projects became hollow copies: games that mimic visuals, mechanics and themes, but fail to deliver that intangible quality of the originals.

Numantian Games, a small six-man studio from Spain, did exactly the opposite. *Lords of Xulima* doesn't look like any classic RPG, but definitely plays like one. The game tells the story of Gaulen the Explorer, a man chosen to travel to the land of Xulima, cleanse the sacred temples and help the gods return to the world. In an unusual twist, you don't create or customise Gaulen – instead, you create the five party members that will accompany him, choosing from nine classes.



Combat can be very challenging, with monsters destroying your party with nasty status effects. Use the *Deepest Dark* mod for the ultimate challenge.



Xulima uses two mini-games for lock-picking and trap-disarming. They require character skill, player reflex and scarce resources.

Combat is turn-based and in first-person, similar to *Might and Magic*, but with some tweaks. Characters position themselves in a small 2x4 grid and can only attack adjacent units, resulting in a "tactical blobber". It's also quite challenging, and makes heavy use of status effects – wounds reduce stats, bleeding does damage every turn, stuns delay characters' actions, etc. This depth is combined with a large bestiary to create a nice variety of encounters, keeping battles interesting.

Exploration, however, is *Xulima's* main strength. You walk around controlling Gaulen in an isometric perspective, exploring huge and cleverly designed maps. Each area has its share of mazes, treasures and hidden passages, all covered with a thick fog-of-war that makes exploration feel rewarding.

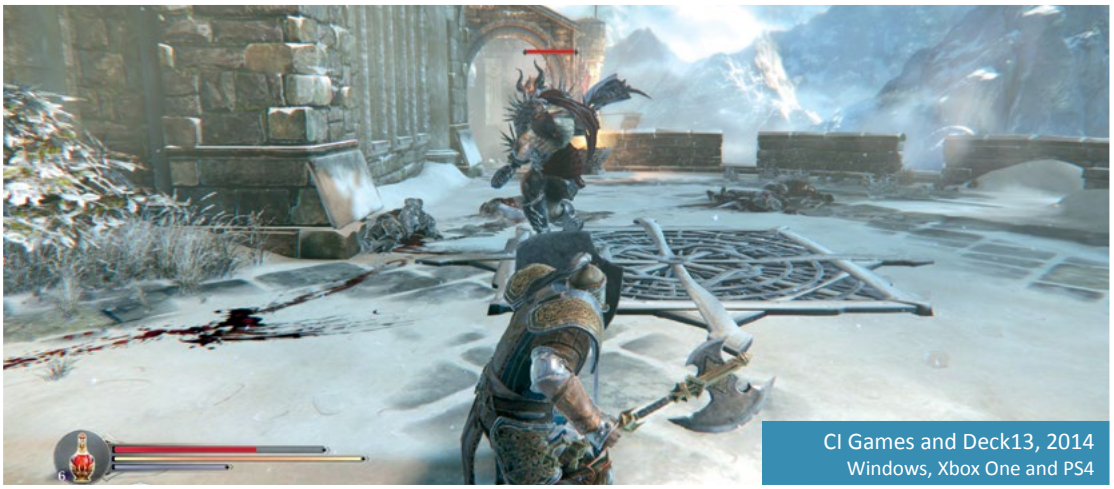
The diversity of environments is staggering, and every area has its own gameplay trick: a labyrinth of poisonous mushrooms; a frozen tundra that quickly exhausts your food; a dungeon full of Tesla coils; a deadly monster that must be avoided; a burning forest; a teleporter maze; a lava lake; a massive desert; etc.

These are complemented by bold design choices. The world is huge and mostly open, with tough enemies serving as "progress gates". Random encounters are finite and occur only in some areas, with other areas reserved for special puzzles (where saving is disabled). The constant need for food keeps exploration tense, and money remains important during the entire game.

However, too much ambition can be a bad thing. *Xulima* is far too long – over 70 hours – and declines in the second half. Character progression stagnates, areas feel empty, recoloured enemies appear in volume and the narrative never goes beyond "purify all temples".

Regardless, *Lords of Xulima* remains impressive – it's a passionate tribute to classic old-school RPGs, but it achieves this while being its own, unique game. **FE**

Lords of the Fallen



CI Games and Deck13, 2014
Windows, Xbox One and PS4

Despite developer's efforts to state otherwise, the best way to describe *Lords of the Fallen* is "*Dark Souls* clone". The game is a real-time Action RPG focused on intense battles, which require thoughtful approach, patience to wait for an opening and careful management of your Stamina bar.

Everything, from the controls to the deadly boss battles and even how enemies respawn when you die will remind you of From Software's *Souls* series.

That's not to say the game doesn't try new things. Most notably, it features a defined protagonist – you always play as Harkyn, a brutish prisoner released to help battle an invading army of demons. All you can choose is his starting class (Warrior, Rogue or Cleric), plus one of three magic types, which are very limited and entirely secondary in this melee-oriented game.

One of the game's best twists is the XP multiplier, which increases with each kill and remains until you rest, challenging players to push as far as possible. Other additions include a combo system based on timing your strikes, runes you can socket into weapons, a magical gauntlet that fires projectiles, and challenge rooms you can complete for special items.

The visuals also stand out, as the graphics are truly impressive. The art-style is gritty and intentionally over-designed, clearly inspired by Games Workshop's *Warhammer*. The game's first enemy is already a huge, armour-clad demon. While cool, it can feel contrived, as the endgame foes look much weaker, ruining the usual "from rats to dragons" RPG progression.

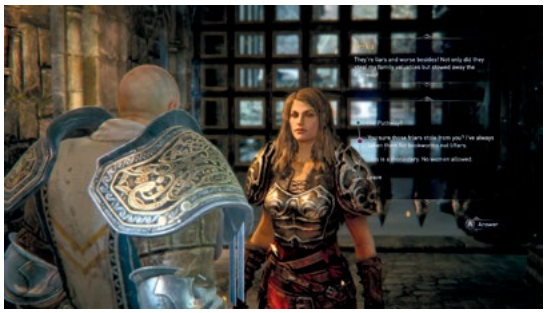
Regardless, the graphics can't make up for how limited the game is. The story is forgettable and just an excuse to kill stuff, but the real sin here is how there are few unique weapons and movesets, few enemies to fight, few areas to explore and, above all, very few reasons to ever replay the game once you're done.

Lords of the Fallen isn't a bad game by any means, but it's impossible not to compare it with the *Souls* games and notice how flat it falls. The core elements are present, but they lack the depth, scope, polish and unique flair that Hidetaka Miyazaki and the team at From Software adds to their games.

Of course, it didn't help that *Lords of the Fallen* came with a new type of DRM that, while it made the game uncrackable for months, also led to instability and performance issues for many PC players.

In the end, if you have a powerful PC and enjoy the combat of the *Souls* games, you'll have a good time with *Lords of the Fallen*, admiring its graphics and battling some interesting foes. But you'll quickly go back to waiting for the next *Dark Souls*. **FE**

In 2017, Deck13 would release *The Surge*, another *Dark Souls*-inspired game, but this time with a sci-fi setting.



There are a few NPCs and dialogue choices in the game, but they are forgettable and of little consequence.



There's a good selection of equipment, but it follows a linear progression, limiting your effective choices.

Dragon Age: Inquisition



BioWare, 2014
Windows, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360 and One

The *Dragon Age* series is undoubtedly one of BioWare's flagship franchises, and considered by many to be one of the stronger fantasy RPG settings ever created. *Dragon Age: Inquistion* is the third instalment of the series and takes place after the events of both *Origins* and *Dragon Age 2* – you can even import your old save files, carrying choices you made in the two previous games.

Alongside *DA:I*, BioWare made the *Dragon Age Keep*, a website where you can import *DA:O* and *DA2* save games to use in *DA:I*. Even if you lost the save files or never played the previous game, you can use the website to craft a custom world state.

Players will see all of the familiar races and classes available to choose from upon loading up the game but, unlike in *Origins*, their choice will have no impact upon the opening sequence. Upon finishing the introduction, players will learn that they are the leader of a newly formed faction: the Inquisition. Your main goal will be to seek out breaches (portals that allow demons to enter the world) and close them using a magic that only your hero possesses.

The faction aspect is not new to the series, as the Grey Wardens played an integral role in *DA:O*. The series has a history of highlighting politics and its impact on the world around you, however none have made it such an integral part of the game. One of the more satisfying aspects of *DA:I* is growing the newly formed Inquisition faction from a small band of followers into a true power in the land of Thedas.



Combat can be played in the real-time Action RPG-like mode of *DA2*, or in the tactical top-down RTwP mode of *DA:O*.

By exploring the massive zones and completing the countless hours of side-quests, you are rewarded with both influence and power, tools vital to the expansion of the Inquisition and unlocking new zones. As your Inquisition grows in reputation, choices that you make will affect how the story unfolds and how those around the world see you. Do you execute an enemy or simply banish him to join the Grey Wardens? These choices provide an impact on how the story plays out and provide significant replay value. Your choices, no matter how little they may seem, matter.

Graphically, *DA:I* takes the series to another level. The game uses EA's Frostbite Engine and, despite a rocky development process and still having to support last-gen hardware, it sports vastly improved player models, environment, combat and skill effects. Some of the most satisfying moments in the game will be taking a break from slaying bandits and fade the demons to simply appreciate the environment around you.

And there's certainly no shortage of environments to marvel at. *Inquisition* dwarfs both its predecessors – it's divided into multiple zones, with a single zone being nearly as large as all of *DA:O*. Each zone is unique and beautiful in its own right, and contain enough secrets, loot and battles to keep even the most experienced *DA* veterans busy for days.

The loot system in *Inquisition* is quite traditional, but where the game stands out from previous instalments is its greatly improved crafting system. This makes rewards from questing and looting more meaningful and provides depth that lasts throughout the entire game. No more will you have to wear the same armour for half of the game, as it is easy to both find and fashion upgrades. These upgrades provide noticeable differences in combat, allowing you to feel the growth in power of your character as you progress.

"Inquisition was bigger than it needed to be. It had everything but the kitchen sink in it, to the point that we went too far... I think that having to deal with *Dragon Age 2* and the negative feedback we got on some parts of that was driving the team to want to put everything in and try to address every little problem or perceived problem."

– Cameron Lee, *Dragon Age: Inquisition's producer*



The Dialogue Wheel was expanded, displaying new emotions and choices that require money, specific perks or classes/races.

The combat in *DA:I* will prove satisfying for both those who enjoyed the more tactical approach of *DA:O* and those who preferred the more action-oriented *DA2*. Encounters are normally played in real time, with the ability to perform basic attacks, cast spells, use abilities and switch in real time between your party members. At any point, combat may be frozen and a tactical overhead view will allow you to plan the attacks of each of your four party members. Once you are satisfied with your tactics you may return the game to live action. Both modes are extremely fluid and transitioning between them is seamless.

Joining you on your quest will be a mix of familiar faces from previous games and a stout cast of new companions. As with all *Dragon Age* games (and BioWare games in general), the voice acting is top-notch and creates some very unique and memorable characters. Dorian and Cole in particular stand out and provide some of the best storylines and dialogue throughout the journey.

Fans of the series will also be excited for guest appearances of some of the more popular characters from the previous two instalments.

Yet, despite several familiar faces from previous games, *Inquisition*'s story is a far cry from the beloved first instalment, *Dragon Age: Origins*.

While it has its moments, it fails to properly create a sense of urgency or really allow you to become properly invested in what is at stake. Compelling individual character storylines are present, but they don't seamlessly fit into the grand scheme.

The same could be said about some side-quests, which can feel like busy work. There are hundreds of them, which can unlock mounts, powerful items and help grow your forces. Some players might find them repetitive and just skip them, but others will be able to ignore the main story for hours upon hours of play.

The game had several DLCs and three expansions – *Jaws of Hakkon*, *The Descent* and *Trespasser*. The first two simply add new areas with more content, but the last greatly expands the game's ending and story.

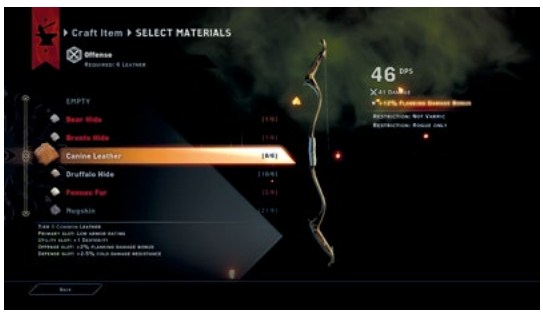
DA:I is also the first *Dragon Age* game that features a multiplayer mode, where you and four other players battle your way through increasingly difficult levels of randomly generated monsters.

Ultimately, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* builds upon the strong foundation of the series and other BioWare RPGs, by adding tons of content and replayability. While it may lack the charm and polish of *DA:O* and some of BioWare's early RPGs, it's still a game you can easily sink over a hundred hours on your first playthrough – and still be eager for more. **CHR**

***DA:I's* first expansion, *Jaws of Hakkon*, was released for all platforms. The following ones, however, abandoned the older consoles and were exclusive to PC, Xbox One and PS4.**



The War Table allows you to manage your Inquisition, dispatching advisors and doing missions to earn resources.



Crafting expands the series' usually limited loot, featuring multiple materials that imbue items with unique bonuses.

Wasteland 2



inXile Entertainment, 2014
Windows, Linux, OS X, PS4 and Xbox One

In the innocent days of 2012, game designer Tim Schafer (*Full Throttle, Psychonauts, Grim Fandango*), using a little-known platform called Kickstarter, went directly to the public to raise funds for the development of a new computer game. His hope was to avoid the necessary evil of publisher oversight, freeing the developers to work their creative magic entirely by their own rules. Schafer asked for $400,000 but ended up raising 3.3 million dollars, changing crowdfunding forever.

On the heels of this accomplishment, producer Brian Fargo saw his opportunity to do the same thing, and revive a project that had been burning in the back of his mind for nigh 20 years. *Wasteland 2* was to be both (officially) a sequel to Fargo's 1988 top-down party RPG, *Wasteland*, and (unofficially) a spiritual successor to *Fallout* and *Fallout 2*, the isometric single-character classics. Fargo's proposed team roster was filled with heavyweights: Alan Pavlish, Jason Anderson, Ken St. Andre, Michael Stackpole, Liz Danforth and others, many of whom worked on the original games.

More important than the names, Fargo's company, inXile Entertainment, promised to revive a style of game that had lain comatose for all that time. They raised over $3,000,000 – including an important $30 of my own.



Character creation mixes stats, skills and perks to offer a lot of possibilities, but not all of them are viable. Some stats, like Strength, aren't very useful, and there are stat thresholds which punish some builds.

I grew up on *Wasteland*, and the announcement of this project represented a chance to relive an uncritical childhood joy. Ultimately, even filtered through the cynicism of adulthood, my gamble paid off.

So what did we get, exactly? *Wasteland 2* is the story of a quartet of newly minted Desert Rangers, post-apocalypse cops somewhat in the vein of *Mad Max*, with a more cowboy feel.

Who are these Rangers? Wonderfully, that is up to you. Sincerely helpful protectors of the innocent? Disinterested mercenaries doing the bare minimum? Hardened killers who solve every problem by butchering both perps and victims? Professional soldiers in leather and fatigues? Drunken lunatics in gorilla suits and lingerie? There's even a path for players who don't want to be Desert Rangers at all. Blow off missions, attack the innocent, steal, raid, and kill your boss; you will find that there are scripted consequences there too, with a full alternate ending.

Wasteland 2 hangs its hat on substantial choices, and it delivers. Side with a paramilitary organisation intent on bringing order to a chaotic trade route, and you'll be forced to battle the cult that currently controls the region; or you can side with the cult and do a completely different set of missions, or play the two against each other, or fight them all. These decisions may have resounding effects on your game.

Part of *W2*'s deep commitment to player agency includes the ability to fail. Try to save a drowning boy and you might end up killing him. Investigate slaver activity in an attempt to rescue an innocent girl and your actions might lead to her suicide. Resounding success in one mission might mean another becomes unsolvable or irrelevant, imbuing your choices with true consequences. Tanking a mission never means a "game over" unless your squad is wiped out entirely.

"One of the things we liked about *Wasteland 2* is there were multiple endings along the way. You didn't have to play the game all the way to the 'normal' ending to win. Because what's a 'win'? It's a narrative, right? You're telling your own story. So we redefined what winning means."

– *Chris Keenan, Wasteland 2's director*



Dialogues allow for several kinds of choices and skill checks, but also features a keyword system; a call back to the first *Wasteland* which feels oddly out of place.

"Failing forward" is a foreign concept to many gamers but, for those of us who appreciate the concept, the freedom on offer here is rare and precious.

Missions range in tone from deadly serious to outright goofy. You'll battle an organised gang of murderers by assaulting their fortress in an hours-long campaign of blood and horror; then save a man from being executed for the crime of dandruff by donating Earth's last surviving bottle of medicated shampoo.

W2's areas are connected by a sprawling world map, replete with lethal radiation, random encounters, and secrets. Once inside an area, the game assumes a ¾ perspective reminiscent of *Fallout*'s, now fully rotating in 3D. Combat is turn-based with light tactical elements, focusing more on statistics than strategy. The addition of "called shots" in the 2015's *Director's Cut* edition gave combat more depth than simple hit point attrition: one Ranger might shoot an enemy's arm to spoil his aim, buying the others time to kill him.

Character-building includes not only stats and skills, but Perks à la *Fallout* as well. My team featured a Bloodthirsty Opportunist who received a bonus when attacking wounded targets and scored extra Action Points for finishing off enemies, and a Thick-Skinned, Hardened, Weathered melee Slayer who moved with the grace of a buffalo but was virtually indestructible.

Which brings us to the issue of balance. It isn't great – by the end of the game on "Ranger" (Hard) difficulty, all my characters had a 100% chance to hit every shot, and an outlandishly steep gear curve meant my armour shrugged off any attacks short of nuclear weapons. I still had fun, but for a substantial challenge, "Supreme Jerk" difficulty is recommended.

The game is packed with content; a typical playthrough may take 40 or 50 hours. This is a double-edged sword in that it makes *W2* hard to replay, which in turn makes it difficult to appreciate the choices you're making and the consequences unfolding around you. Who knows how things might have turned out at the end if I'd made different decisions at the beginning? Is it worth another 40 hours to find out?

Still, not seeing all the outcomes made my choices feel more my own. One doesn't read a CYOA book from cover to cover; that misses the point. Meeting friends, making enemies, deciding who lived and who died – my journey was not quite like any other. I uncovered a lie and spread the truth, and a whole region descended into violent chaos. I shot an innocent man and let a guilty one go free, and covered up my crimes for what I thought was the greater good. Did I do right? Could I have done better? Maybe some day I'll tell the story again in a different way and see what happens. **RJS**



The UI features some poor design choices, but also quality-of-life improvements such as automatically distributing loot.



You explore the wasteland via a 3D overworld map, dealing with radiation, random encounters and limited water supplies.

South Park: The Stick of Truth



Obsidian Entertainment, 2014
Windows, PS3 and Xbox 360

The Stick of Truth was censored in Germany for its Nazi imagery, and in some other countries due to scenes involving anal probing by aliens.

The first time I saw *The Stick of Truth*, it felt like I was watching the TV show – maybe something like their famous "*Make Love, Not Warcraft*" episode. This was partially because the visuals of the game perfectly match those of the show, and all the voices and even some of the writing is done by the show creators, Matt Stone and Trey Parker.

However, what truly makes *The Stick of Truth* feel like the show is its pacing. RPGs have a tendency of being long, overwritten and full of pointless filler (something Obsidian often struggles with), but here you have a game that is short, concise and fast-paced – just like the TV show. It's a comedy about kids playing an RPG, and all its rules, stats, battles and other genre tropes are used as tools to deliver jokes.



You control your kid and a friend during combat, using melee attacks, ranged weapons, skills, items, summons and farts to beat your foes.



The menus are displayed as if they were a Facebook page, with characters adding you as a friend and commenting on recent events.

You play as "the new kid", who just moved into South Park and joins Cartman and his friends in playing an elaborate RPG-like game. The entire town is available for you to explore, and it's a fan-service overload, packed with jokes and references to the show.

As your kid explores and completes quests, he'll make friends (who can join him in battle) and find new equipment, allowing you to customise his look and skills. Each area is short and only has a few battles, most of which can be skipped by using the environment – such as farting on a candle to burn nearby enemies. This helps keep the pace tight and avoid repetition.

Combat is turn-based and very similar to the *Paper Mario* series, where you can empower attacks and block with timed button presses. It's easy and unbalanced, but its goal is not to challenge players – it's there to deliver jokes, allowing you to listen to funny taunts, use farts as magic, dodge giant testicles mid-battle and summon Jesus to kill your foes.

Lasting only about 10-15 hours, the game ends before becoming repetitive or running out of ideas – something that more RPGs should do.

The sequel, *South Park: The Fractured but Whole* (2017), ditched Obsidian in favour of Ubisoft's internal studio, which brought several changes. Now the kids are playing as superheroes and parodying Marvel and DC movies, but the game lacks the novelty and tight pacing of its predecessor. It adds a more complex character system and grid-based tactical battles, which pleased some players, yet feels somewhat misguided. Spending a lot of time fighting tactical battles in a comedy game is a bit like playing *Doom* for the story.

Nevertheless, both titles are a joy to South Park fans and will please those interested in a funny and short adventure. But if you're looking for a deep RPG, there are way better options out there. **FE**

UnderRail



Stygian Software, 2015
Windows

UnderRail is, quite simply, one of the greatest CRPGs created since the turn of the century. It exemplifies the concept of building living, breathing worlds, popularised once upon a time by the old Origin Systems tag line: "We create worlds."

A post-apocalyptic game clearly reminiscent of the original *Fallout*, *UnderRail* certainly pays homage, but also manages to stand as its own unique game.

The character system is very traditional: there are seven base attributes; over 20 skills divided into Offense, Defense, Subterfuge, Technology (item-crafting), Psi (mental powers), and Social; and loads of feats tailored for various paths and playstyles.

Players can create just about any type of character: a blockhead who wears tailored heavy armour and swings an electrified sledgehammer; a blaggard who sneaks around with a poisoned serrated knife; a psi-user who traps enemies behind force walls and pulps their brains with a thought; a commando who uses his customised assault rifle, flashbangs, and grenades to blast his way out of everything; a ranger who uses stealth, deadly traps, and a silent crossbow to eliminate his enemies one by one; a diplomatic sniper; and many, many more viable combinations.

Yet, for me, the exploration aspect of *UnderRail* is its greatest achievement. Rooms are packed with interactions, from the usual boxes and crates to vents you can peek or crawl through, locked doors to pick, ladders to climb and hidden nooks to uncover. The game's level design makes clever use of intricate, interconnected, multi-level rooms and terrain featuring dead ends, one-way passages, and so on, in such a way that navigating the environment is a challenge by itself.

It's also rewarding, thanks to the Oddity system, which awards XP for exploring and uncovering hidden items – an alternative non-combat experience source.

Heavily inspired by *Fallout*, *UnderRail's* combat is turn-based, isometric, and based on action points. It's simple but challenging – and highly satisfying, thanks to the sheer variety of weapons, skills and enemies. The denizens of *UnderRail* have many unique tricks that the player must learn to recognise and counter in order to survive. Many times during some of my playthroughs, I'd inch my way into a room, toss a flashbang in a likely direction, then dash back out again, hoping to flush out possible lurkers and avoid being back-stabbed.

UnderRail isn't without flaws, lacking in intricate dialogue trees and meaningful choices and consequences. Still, considering that it was mostly made by one man, these are understandable shortcomings. *UnderRail* is a massive incline, and no CRPG fan should miss it. **JBH**

***UnderRail* was first released in 2012 on Desura, where fans could buy the alpha version to help fund its development; it was a popular crowd-funding system before Kickstarter and Steam Early Access.**



While you control only one character, the combat succeeds at providing plenty of interesting options and challenges.



The crafting system is very detailed; you can create almost anything that can be equipped or used, and the wide variety of materials offers plenty of customisation.

The Witcher III: Wild Hunt



CD Projekt RED, 2015
Windows, PS4 and Xbox One

After *Witcher III*'s release, CD Projekt created 16 DLCs, including new quests, items, and a New Game+ mode – all freely available for download.

After the success of *The Witcher II* and the positive buzz about its post-release support, expectations about the *Witcher III* were high. The development team abandoned the linear structure of its predecessor in favour of an open-world approach, yet managed to make it a world worth exploring.

The player revisits the role of the eponymous witcher (a monster hunter), Geralt of Rivia. Early on, he learns that his adopted daughter, Ciri, is being pursued by the otherworldly Wild Hunt. The story unfolds through hundreds of main and secondary quests, some of which let you play as Ciri, allowing you to explore the story through her point of view and utilise her latent magical abilities.

The game takes place in three main areas, of generous size. Life is poor, nasty, brutish, and short for the inhabitants of rural Velen, where folklore is more than old stories. The bustling city of Novigrad, and its environs, offer all the lures and insidiousness of a more civilised region. Finally, the isles of Skellige are rough, wild places inspired by Norse sagas.

The combat and movement mechanics have been refurbished since the second game. Geralt is more agile and he can ride horses, use boats and swim to explore the massive game world.



Monster-hunting is an immersive experience. It requires learning about the monsters then preparing yourself, and rewards you with powerful mutagens.

He can specialise in three distinct skill trees and equip various items although, due to lore, swords remain the most effective weapons. The crafting system is useful without being overbearing and weapon degradation is well-balanced. Reflexes remain important in combat, but alchemy can offer an extra boost. Preparing oils and potions to hunt the larger beasts helps the player inhabit the role of a witcher, especially in harder difficulties.

Geralt can also use his witcher abilities to track prey and provide guidance for quest purposes. Said tracking skills also provide an in-world justification for being uniquely equipped to tackle certain quests. There is horseback combat, horse races, and Gwent, a card game along the lines of *Magic: The Gathering,* which follows a tradition of excellent card games in RPGs, such as Arcomage in *Might and Magic VII* or Triple Triad in *Final Fantasy VIII*.

The Witcher III is technically accomplished and mechanically sound, but its biggest accomplishment is the quality of its quests. Side-quests never feel like they're padding out the game's length, as the game deftly sidesteps those cookie-cutter quests that ask you to gather a number of items or kill a number of enemies.

Secondary quests serve to advance storylines or provide insight into the world; monster hunts are tied to everyday life or to the ecology of an area. Even treasure hunts may lead to interesting locations or uncover personal stories. The sheer length of the game invites shades of déjà vu, but quality remains high throughout the hundreds of hours of the game.

The Witcher III is the rare game that lets you memorise lines for a play you produced, and chastises you for not keeping court protocol. You won't help the bard Dandelion for a reward, but because he's that kind of friend who tends to get in trouble.

"In Poland a different style of [tabletop] RPG was popular – where a story is told and throwing dice is less important. What's important is the psychology of the characters, the way of telling the story and simulating the world. This way of thinking is also visible in *The Witcher.*"

– *Marcin Blacha, The Witcher III: Wild Hunt's story director*



The Witcher III's dialogue is excellent, having a natural writing and great animation. Some dialogues also allow you to use your skills, while others enforce a time limit for replying.

Taking the time to flesh out characters and Geralt's interactions with them makes the game world feel more concrete and lends weight to the efforts of the player. Combat is an integral part of the game and a pacifist run is not an option. However, this concern for the life of daily folk brings the *Ultima* series to mind despite the obvious differences.

The incorporation of elements of Polish folklore helps distinguish the game from run-of-the-mill fantasy worlds. Certain sequences evoke an uncanny feeling, draw misplaced anger or make the player feel sympathy for the circumstances that turned someone into the monster they are about to face. Some of the choices have outcomes that are hard to discern, and yet, bad outcomes may not force a reload since they make an impression either way and feel satisfying from a narrative point of view.

Sequences with very mature themes take place is in the same game where you are solemnly tasked to retrieve a favourite pan, or where you can opt to have a snowball fight before the climax of the game.

It is not the first game that lets you take a break from questing, but it takes pains to create the texture that makes it worth helping a villager or cutting down a monster. The game also features a fitting denouement for the main game and the expansions.

The first expansion, *Hearts of Stone* (2015), upends the trope of virtually invincible endgame characters by casting Geralt against an immortal and a being that can control time. There are the usual opportunities to fight, track, and explore, but at its best moments there's a melancholic, philosophical sheen when exploring the toll of power and the circumstances of the new characters. Bosses have left their kid gloves at home, too.

The second expansion, *Blood and Wine* (2016), places Geralt in Toussaint, a new region inspired by France's Provence. This meatier expansion offers a range of quests straight from chansons de geste and epic poems. Geralt can join tournaments, help a cowardly knight fight an ogre, acquire an estate, etc. However, darker undertones soon become apparent. A certain quest with spoons is a best-in-class dark folk tale, and the game's new advancement system keeps things interesting mechanics-wise.

The Witcher III is the culmination of a long journey for CD Projekt. Their skills have increased to match their ambition and many will be saddened Geralt's saga has come to an end. However, its achievements will remain with us: presenting an interesting world, relevant side-quests and streamlining that does not necessarily sacrifice depth or texture. **AB**

If you want a more realistic experience, try *The Witcher 3 Enhanced Edition* mod. It overhauls the entire game, changing stats, NPCs and combat by removing levels and XP so that the world feels more consistent.



The in-game card game of Gwent became very popular, eventually being released as a stand-alone game in 2016.



Despite all its polish, the game has some interface issues. Especially the inventory, which can get very confusing.

Age of Decadence



Iron Tower Studios, 2015
Windows

If you're unsure about the game, try its excellent demo on Steam. You can later bring the save file into the full game.

It's not often a game spends 11 years in development and comes out well. *Age of Decadence* however, did, and it's far from the only way it defies convention and expectation.

Heavily inspired by *Fallout 1 and 2*, the game takes place in a post-apocalyptic Roman-esque empire. The populace has descended into a sort of cut-throat barbarism, and those that would prey on strangers are more common than those who would help.

The once glorious empire fell into conflict with a rival nation and both sides called gods and men to fight and die in droves. At least that's what you learn at the start of the game. What actually happened and how must be discovered over multiple playthroughs by skilled characters. Uncovering the backstory of the world is very enjoyable, even if the final result is a bit inconsistent.

Graphically, the game is not impressive at all. The Torque engine would not have been remarkable in 2004, and certainly is not today. That is not to say the game is wholly ugly; some locations have enough art design and tricks to them that they feel impressive when you first see them. This is also helped by the difficulty of getting there and the exoticness that certain places are imbued by the setting.



AoD has six main attributes and 23 skills, divided into Social and Combat skills. Instead of classes, it offers eight starting backgrounds.

AoD is not a game that is kind to completionists. If your lock-picking skill is not up to the task, you will not get to see what's behind a door. The same holds for combat, dialogue and other forms of environmental challenges. This difficulty and approach to stat/skill checks requires adjusting to. In most RPGs, a decently built character will be able to beat every combat encounter, charm the crown of off every king and steal all the gold in the land.

In *AoD*, a skilled player might be able to mix two distinct skill sets, but more likely you'll invest everything into a particular method of progress and still occasionally struggle.

For the turn-based combat, this is actually a plus. There are plenty of viable strategies, and, despite being essentially locked into your first choice of weapons and defence (block or dodge) there's plenty of customisability. For the melee weapons, you have daggers that are fast and weak but great with aimed strikes, swords/hammers/axes which can cause bleeding/armour breakage/mini-crits and rounding out the melee weapons there are spears which have high range and can interrupt enemies moving close to you.

For ranged combat, there are bows, crossbows and throwing weapons. Crossbows differ by requiring an action to reload and not scaling with your strength, while throwing weapons are just kind of bad.

Beyond weapons, there's also a decent amount of combat tools and consumables – including crafting and alchemy – to round out your options. Many of these are exceptionally powerful and can easily turn the tide of a whole fight when properly applied.

While in some fights you might wish you had a full party to control instead of AI allies, the combat in *AoD* is nonetheless excellent and incredibly satisfying once you achieve some level of expertise.

"Combat difficulty is integrated into the setting. You can't say that the world is harsh and unforgiving and then allow the player to kill everyone who looks at him or her funny. The game has to be hard, dying should be easy, and you should have reasons to pick your fights."

– *Vince D. Weller, Age of Decadence's creator*



Combat is turn-based and uses action points, offering several types of attack with each weapon.

Sadly, the same cannot be said for environmental challenges and dialogue. Often, they fall into the trap so many other RPGs fall into: you can simply pick the options with the [tags of] skills you have invested in, rarely needing to actually read the text.

In most RPGs, failing a dialogue skill check will simply put you into a combat that anyone with moderate skill can beat. Instead, *AoD* will just kill you mid-dialogue and send you to the main menu to reload or make a new character; sometimes it might also throw you into a fight that's absolutely impossible for your build. In some ways this is frustrating, in others it's pleasantly brutal and unapologetic – the world will not bend to keep you from breaking.

The sins of the dialogue gameplay are really just the same designs flaws essentially all RPG dialogue suffers from. There are, of course, good parts, as there are multiple ways to resolve many quests peacefully. In fact, that's one of *AoD*'s strengths, as it's possible to play pure "talking characters", going through the entire game without ever entering combat.

Some of your choices will also have long-lasting consequences, such as betraying a faction and joining another, or scheming to change the leader of a faction (which changes later quests as they are not likely to have the same agenda).

An interesting part of the dialogue design is the frequent use of "teleports" to reduce walking around. You're routinely offered the option to just immediately go to the person/place that is your goal. If it makes sense in the story, you may even be forced to do so. Sometimes it may feel like you don't have agency, but it's mostly just removing the illusion of agency.

In general, a single playthrough of *AoD* will create more questions than it answers. Each character will typically join one of the six major factions and then be responsible for making events unfold in favour of that faction. However, events will occur even without the player, and learning the reasons behind them will require playing other factions as well.

Of the factions, one is dedicated to pure talking characters, two focus heavily on combat while the remainder generally allow for both types of characters to get through as long as you make the right choices of who to support and who to betray.

Age of Decadence is frequently frustrating, obtuse and a bit constricting. But, with an excellent combat system and Choose Your Own Adventure dialogues that often present interesting non-combat gameplay, it's also a very good RPG. Regardless, it's worth playing simply because it ignores many deeply ingrained design conventions and offers viable alternatives. **JA**

Iron Tower used *Age of Decadence*'s assets and combat system (now with party members) to develop *Dungeon Rats*, a combat-focused RPG released in 2016.

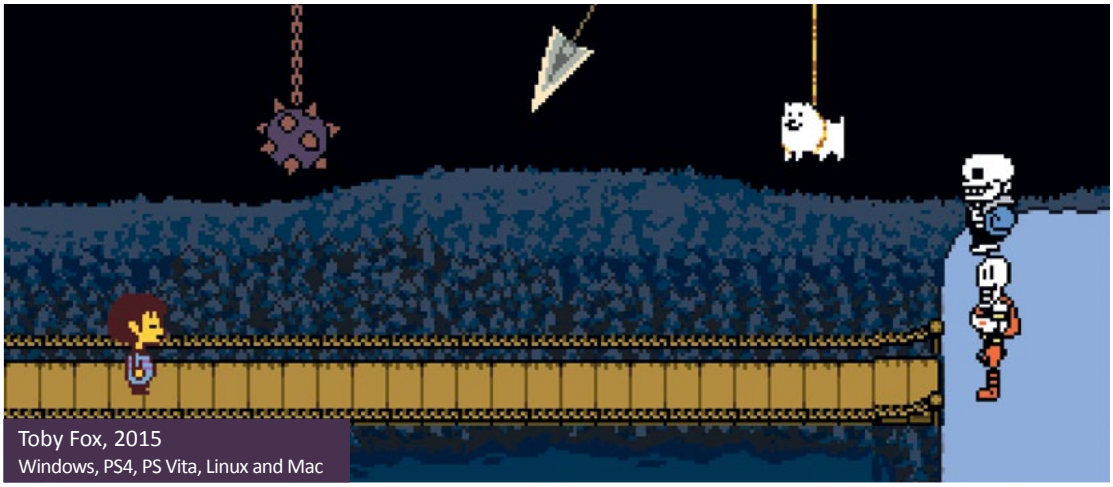


There are several qualities of weapons and armour, as well as items needed for crafting, alchemy, disguises, etc.



Some segments play like Choose Your Own Adventures, entirely based on dialogues, items you carry and skill checks.

Undertale

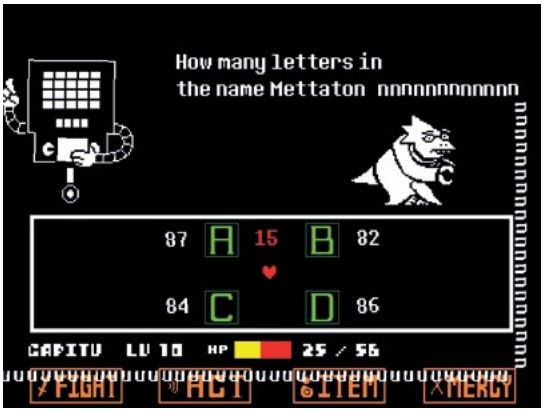


Toby Fox, 2015
Windows, PS4, PS Vita, Linux and Mac

***Undertale* raised $51k on Kickstarter in 2013. It went on to sell over two and a half million copies.**

Undertale was originally pitched on Kickstarter as an RPG "where no one has to get hurt". It drops you, a human child, alone into an underground world of hostile monsters, but gives you the choice to spare them instead of killing them.

And the game makes a strong case for it – the monsters are endearing, with simple desires like being a pet, or some laughs for their bad stand-up comedy. If you give them what they want, they'll leave you alone.



Undertale uses the medium itself as a narrative tool. Battles, UI, music and even the save files are used for characterisation and storytelling.



Dialogue with the charismatic cast of monsters is easily *Undertale*'s strongest point – it's consistently funny and well-timed.

While some RPGs present nonviolence as a series of choices in a text tree which might let you sidestep combat, *Undertale* integrates them into its turn-based battles. You can attack, but for each monster you can instead perform various actions, like "Compliment" and "Threat", which might help pacify them.

During the enemy's turns you control your Soul, a tiny red heart, and must dodge monster attacks in a brief bullet-hell sequence. Boss battles often change the mechanics of dodging by painting your Soul a different colour – when it's blue, for example, your Soul is subject to gravity and can jump. It's a simple enough system, but manages to stay fresh for the whole game.

The morality of *Undertale* leaves no room for ambiguity or nuance, but the game's dedication to it is what stands out. Forming deeper friendships with the strange and entertaining monsters of the underground is interesting and rewarding; killing them feels terrible, and the rest of the cast won't let you forget.

The game even reserves a special kind of hell for any player who would go out of their way to kill everyone "just to see all of the game's content..."

While the game's art is rather simple, the music is outstanding. It's a memorable and catchy mix of chiptunes and piano, weaving various themes throughout its tracks in many different styles. Having made the game all by himself, Toby Fox manages to fully utilise every visual, audio and technical aspect available to convey the desired narrative and tone.

Knowing more beforehand would spoil the fun. *Undertale* is not a long game – you'll beat it in about five hours – but it's an immensely clever game, full of surprises and worth replaying. It's a worthy successor to its clear influence, the *Mother/Earthbound* series, and I can't wait to see what kind of games will inherit *Undertale*'s influence after its stunning success. **MAS**

Mystery Chronicle: One Way Heroics



Spike Chunsoft, 2015
Windows, PS4 and PSP Vita

In 2010, a roguelike called *One Way Heroics* was released in Japan. Developed by SmokingWOLF, it added a clever twist to the genre: instead of exploring deep dungeons, your goal is to march east, running from an all-devouring darkness.

The game plays much like a traditional roguelike: it's turn-based, has permadeath, unidentified items, etc. But, like an old-school side-scrolling game, the screen automatically moves right – if you're slow, you die.

This adds a whole new dimension to the game. Not only must you worry about items and enemies, but also consider terrain and time – "can I get in and out of that house and grab the treasure chest before the screen reaches me? If not, can I break its wall?"

Initially your goal is to walk east until you find the Demon Lord and defeat him, but things get more elaborate as you play. Every time you finish the game (or die) you're rated on how many enemies you killed, levels you gained, distances you walked, money you gathered and feats you performed. This score earns you points used to unlock new classes, perks, NPCs, quest givers and other metagame features.

This mitigates the frustration of permadeath, as even in death you get a sense of accomplishment. Your first playthroughs will also be quite short and simple, slowly expanding as you pursue harder challenges.

Each world is randomly generated, but you can note down their code, visiting the same world multiple times or sharing them with friends. Each day the game offers special worlds, with events like 3x Experience or secret NPCs, that are available only for a limited time. You can also customise the difficulty, with four settings and the option to disable the metagame aid.

The game was quite successful worldwide, and in 2014 it received the *Plus* expansion, which added new classes, items, terrains and UI improvements.

In an unusual turn of events, developers from Spike Chunsoft saw the game and loved it, cutting a deal with SmokingWOLF to remake *One Way Heroics* as a spin-off of their *Mystery Dungeon* series.

The result is *Mystery Chronicle: One Way Heroics*. Extremely faithful to the original, it offers 25 classes, great artwork and some slight changes to the story and mechanics. It also added a competitive multiplayer mode, but sadly it's very rare to find anyone online.

Despite these upgrades, some fans still prefer the original game with the *Plus* expansion, disliking the remake's balance changes and weaker soundtrack.

Regardless of version, *One Way Heroics* remains an excellent game, accessible and challenging while offering a new twist to the roguelike genre. **FE**

The original *One Way Heroics* had an excellent soundtrack. You can use the *OWH Music* mod to play the remake using these songs.



A thick wall or a monster with a lot of health can be deadly, locking you in place until the screen reaches your character.



The game uses stats as a resource: hiring NPCs as companions costs Charisma, while learning spells cost Intelligence. You can boost stats by choosing Perks at the start.

Tale of Wuxia



Heluo Studio, 2015
Windows

Jin Yong is a highly acclaimed contemporary Chinese author. He wrote 15 books based on wuxia (martial arts and chivalry), which together sold over 100 million copies and were adapted into over 90 movies and TV series.

In 1996, Soft-World – a gaming publisher headquartered in Taiwan – tasked one of their teams, Heluo Studio, to make a game based on the novels of famed wuxia writer Jin Yong.

They created *Heroes of Jin Yong* (金庸群俠傳), a tactical role-playing game where the player gets to roam China in an age of honourable martial arts heroes, populated by a mix of all Jin Yong novels' characters and plots. During your travels it's possible to change certain storylines and recruit over 30 characters to brawl it out with various villains and heroes.

Five years later, the same team made a sequel titled 武林群俠传 – loosely translated as *Legend of Wulin Heroes* (not to be confused with the tabletop RPG of the same name), and set one hundred years after the first game, with new characters and an original plot. It retained the open world and tactical RPG elements of its predecessor, but also introduced a new *Princess Maker*-like sim-raising mode, where your character's growth is determined by a weekly training schedule set by the player, presented in a humorous Chibi art style.



Legend of Wulin Heroes was also never translated into English, but it's known as one of the best Chinese RPGs ever made.

You play as a nobody who dreams of becoming a martial arts hero. He is guided by your hand in training, with up to 32 stats (not including hidden ones) being available for the player to improve. All of them are useful in one way or another – if perhaps not in battle, then surely interwoven into various events.

You'll be able to learn several Kung Fu styles, categorised into Saber, Sword, Staff, Palm/Fist, Finger, Leg, Hidden Weapon, and Music, with their corresponding stats affecting the techniques that your hero finds during his journey or learns from his master when he is pleased with his pupil.

The hero's many base stats also affect his overall battle competency in battle, such as Flexibility providing a passive boost to damage and enhancing most sword techniques. In fact, some techniques have a third stat to boost its power, such as alcohol the for the Drunken Fist style. Yes, you can learn to become skilled in alcohol in this game!

Aside from preparing the hero for combat, you'll also have chores like chopping wood or cleaning, and can choose to indulge in activities like fishing, hunting, smithing, herb-gathering and gardening – each with its own respective list of diverse mini-games.

Your performance in these mini-games will determine the skills gained and add rewards such as rare meat from killing a bear while hunting, or a treasure chest as a no-error bonus when mining.

You can also learn more about different aspects of Chinese culture, such as Chinese Chess, Calligraphy, Acupuncture, Music and even Gardening. A lot of care went into these, and not only will you get interesting lessons, but you'll later be asked to identify songs, calligraphy styles, acupuncture points or decide upon a chess move – with your performance impacting the bonus your character receives.



Tale of Wuxia offers a large variety of mini-games, from lock-picking to blacksmithing. Most of them are excellent.



You roll your character at the start of the game, with three passive talents and over 20 stats to consider.



The training mode is presented in a Chibi art style and it's filled with events and lessons on Chinese culture.



Combat is turn-based, and was expanded in the remake to feature hexes and some impressive animations.

After a certain amount of weeks has passed, the hero will be tasked with plot-related missions. While some will only be a series of battles, others allow you to freely roam around town for a time (such as until a ceremony begins), and you're able to explore, talk to NPCs, buy items, do side-quests and find secrets.

There are often long-lasting consequences based on your actions and, depending on which faction you wish to side with, it might even be good to "fail" a mission, although generally not by losing in battle.

These missions also serve as a good wake-up call to let the player know if the hero's Kung Fu is lagging behind – if battles are too difficult you can catch up during the next weeks of training.

Players are given the freedom to exercise their will upon each event and their actions will affect future events one way or the other. Up to 30+ NPCs can be befriended through events and gifts, and they will greatly contribute to your success in future endeavours and possibly unlock certain events that lead to treasures and new Kung Fu teachings. Furthermore, six of these fellow companions are romanceable heroines with unique events for you to pursue!

The game can be difficult for those who neglect to train their hero, but the versatility of approaches in each playthrough and the amount of freedom to raise your hero makes replaying the game highly enjoyable and part of the charm.

Overall, there's enough variety of Kung Fu styles, skills, events, routes, endings, NPCs and achievements to guarantee at least three full playthroughs.

Regrettably, Heluo Studio was later disbanded, a victim of the large shift in the Chinese publishers (including Soft-World) towards MMOs and online gaming. However, *Legend of Wulin Heroes* remained a cult classic among the Chinese fanbase, motivating its original creators to reform Helio Studio with a new publisher and create a modern, fully 3D remake.

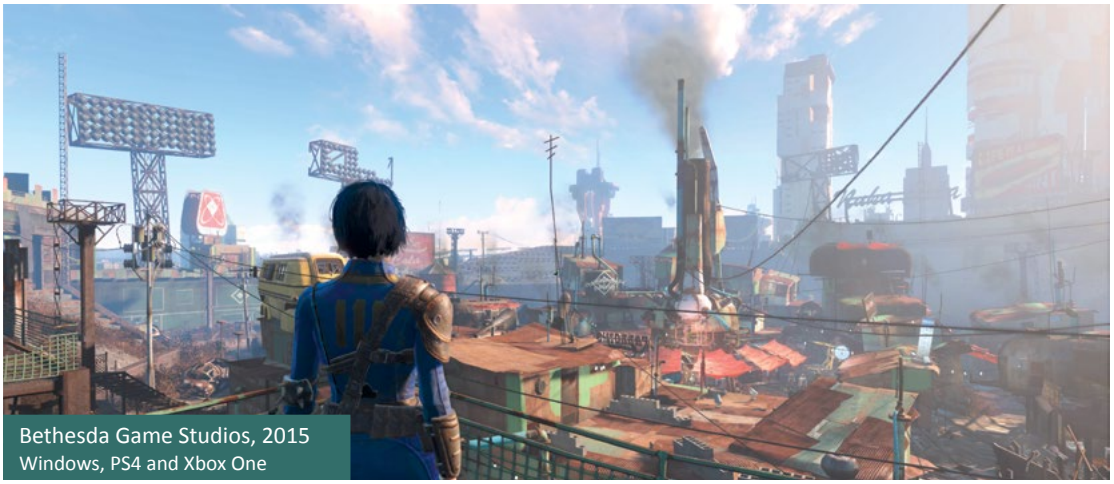
Released in 2015 as 侠客风云传, it was the first game of the series to be officially translated into English, published on Steam in 2016 as *Tale of Wuxia*. Besides the many graphical upgrades, the remake also gave the developers the chance to refine and expand the game's story and events, improve its mini-games, upgrade the combat to a hex-based system, add a new day-and-night cycle with timed NPC schedules and increase the number of romanceable heroines.

The remake was soon followed by *Tale of Wuxia: The Pre-Sequel* (2017), which abandons the raising sim aspect for a more traditional JRPG-style, with full party control and a fixed protagonist.

Tale of Wuxia and its prequel still have some annoying bugs, and the crowd-sourced translation is rather uneven and messy, but they're definitely worth playing. It's a truly one-of-a-kind wuxia experience that you aren't likely to find elsewhere. **NY**

The Chinese version of *Tale of Wuxia* received several DLCs after release, adding more content and new romances, but they were never translated into English.

Fallout 4



Bethesda Game Studios, 2015
Windows, PS4 and Xbox One

Role-playing games have always been hard to judge and categorise due to their hybrid nature. In essence, RPGs are the genres that most aim towards the maxim "better than the sum of its parts". With this in mind, *Fallout 4* is the superlative example of the opposite.

There is not a single element in the game that can be pointed out as utterly sub-par, but the issue here is one of legacy and focus. The venerable *Fallout* franchise started out as the seminal isometric RPG that offered world reactivity in regard to player's character build. In the old games, a low-intelligence brawler was going to have many differences in their experience compared to a smooth-talking pistolero. All of this being wrapped in a post-apocalyptic 50s retro sci-fi atmosphere where the old-world saccharine consumerism contrasted with the realistic struggle for survival in a radioactive wasteland.

Fallout 4 shows its inability to understand the basic premise of its origins right from the get-go. The game begins with a pre-war couple going about their daily lives and answering the door to a salesman before the nuclear bombs hit and they must take shelter in one of the iconic Vaults, where they are cryogenically frozen for two centuries before beginning their adventure.

***Fallout 4* received six DLC packs, released once a month from April to August 2016. They add new areas, new items and more options when crafting or building settlements.**



Stats, skills and perks were all combined into a single system. Each level you gain one point, which can be used to increase stats or unlock a new perk.

This is a woefully improper scene due to the old world being the Mr. Rogers to the new world's Mad Max. These people were meant to be depicted primarily through their unnaturally gleeful cultural artefacts – demystifying them undermines the entire premise. It should also be mentioned that the salesman is encountered again as an immortal ghoul that did not change his clothes or disposition in 200 years. The original *Fallout* games could be ironic, post-modern or just plain irreverent, but never outright stupid. Sadly, this salesman ghoul is indicative of the entire writing quality *Fallout 4* displays.

These changes should come as no surprise, since the franchise's systemic identity is no more. The process Bethesda began in *Fallout 3* was somewhat halted by Obsidian's *Fallout: New Vegas,* but is now complete in *Fallout 4*. Character builds have been reduced from being representations of good and bad traits that affect the game world to a single character build that may deal more damage with some weapons than others. There are no skills such as "Repair", "Scientist" or "Doctor" that get checked in conversation or during encounters anymore. Instead you have a system where one point per level is invested in perks which focus almost entirely on combat or loot, with a few scatter-shot nods to exploration.

Given the prestige of the developer, conversations are now a depressingly low-budget affair, where every player response must have four options since that is how many buttons there are on a controller. This results in yes/no answers being accompanied by absolute filler, usually marked "sarcastic", or the occasional charisma attribute check that might unlock new options but mostly gives a small experience boost. In short, *Fallout* this is not; and even more alarmingly, an RPG this is not.

"We do like to try new things and we have some successes. I think the shooting in *Fallout 4* is really good – I think it plays really well. Obviously the way we did some dialogue stuff, that didn't work as well. But I know the reasons we tried that – to make a nice interactive conversation – but [it was] less successful than some other things in the game. For us, we take that feedback. I think long-term."

– Todd Howard, Fallout 4's creative director



Fallout 4 goes for a cinematic, BioWare-like dialogue system, with fully voiced dialogues and their own, poor take on the Dialogue Wheel.

But even ignoring this series' roots, the most recurring element within this open-world shooter masquerading as a role-playing game is the complete, almost desperate, lack of direction when it comes to how it is put together. It chases after modern trends, instead of chiselling them into a coherent product.

The more polished shooting mechanics – greatly improved since *Fallout 3* – are contrasted with the statistical nature of the combat, which Bethesda inherited but doesn't know how to handle. The result is dreadful game experience, where you'll keep pumping the same enemy with dozens of head shots which the animations try to meaningfully sell.

One of *Fallout 4*'s most publicised features, the ability to build your own settlements, is entirely disconnected from the rest of the game. You could rebuild the entire wasteland and nothing would change, relegating the entire affair to a bloated mini-game rather than something that was meant to work in tandem with the game's other elements.

The main quest tries so hard to come up with dramatic hooks regarding one of your loved ones or the nature of being human, yet they fail so completely due to existing in a sandbox designed for the player to run for hours on end from building to building, shooting and looting everything in sight.

The entire experience of travelling the wasteland that this game presents is one of mixing a dozen different puzzle sets and then trying to make them fit; it is an experience of witnessing developer exasperation as they work on something that works against itself.

My personal feelings are that all of the elements in *Fallout 4* could be part of a great game, but no great game can come from the way these elements are used – only digestible mediocrity, which has been achieved in spades here. **LL**

In August 2017, Bethesda released the Creation Club, a service that sells mods curated by the company.

Mods:

Unofficial Fallout 4 Patch: Fixes hundreds of bugs left by the developers. A must-have for any player.

Full Dialogue Interface: Makes dialogue options display the full text characters will say, not just short lines.

DEF_UI: Similar to *Skyrim*'s SkyUI, it greatly improves the game's UI to work with mouse and keyboard.

Armoursmith Extended: An excellent mod that gives players more options and control over their armour, allowing you to mix and match multiple layers.

Sim Settlements: Overhauls how settlements work, making settlers build and expand it by themselves. This massive mod has its own expansion packs.

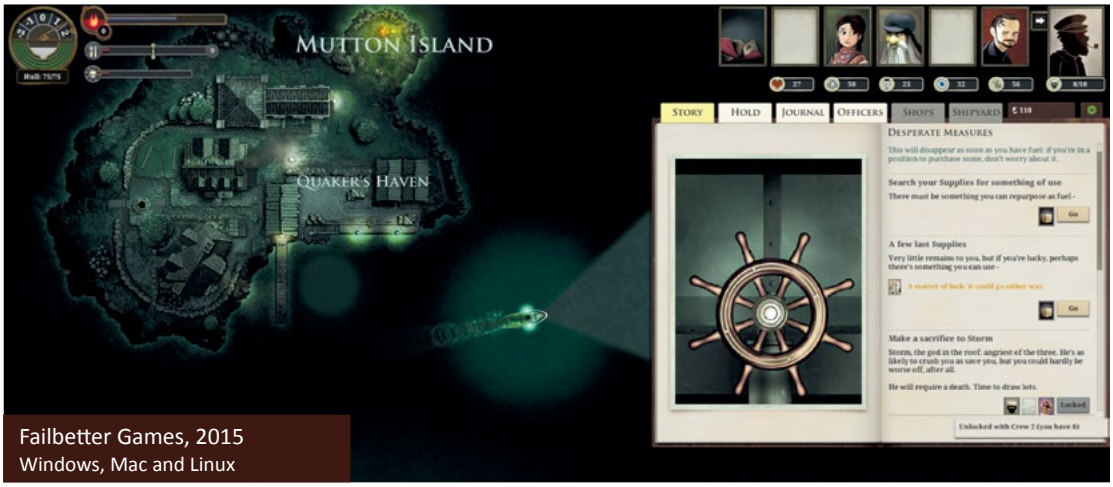


Weapons and armour now have multiple parts and can be customised using scrap and the new crafting system.



You can build settlements using scrap collected all over the wasteland. While initially engaging, it lacks in impact.

Sunless Sea



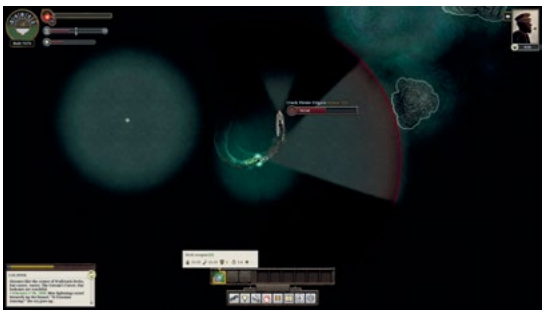
Failbetter Games, 2015
Windows, Mac and Linux

Sunless Sea is set in the same universe as Failbetter Games' _Fallen London_, a free-to-play CYOA browser game from 2009.

The dark and the ocean. *Sunless Sea*'s title contains the most potent metaphors for the unknown, and it very much hinges upon the two reactions that the unknown elicits: fear and curiosity.

As a captain in Failbetter Games' *Fallen London* universe, it's your task to explore the strange islands of the vast Unterzee. Every trip is accompanied by risks and costs. Traversing the waters consumes rations and fuel, while your crew's fear grows. Of course, there are creatures lurking in the dark that might weaken you further, damaging your hull and killing your crew.

Once your ship enters a port, *Sunless Sea* reveals its text-heavy nature: its strange places are described in vivid prose that oscillates rapidly between innocent whimsy and macabre terror.



Not every danger is unseen – you'll need to upgrade your ship to survive pirates and monsters in real-time, cooldown driven battles.



While exploring you'll have to manage food supplies, fuel reserves, cargo slots and an ever-increasing terror driving you mad.

Torn between fear and curiosity, the player will have to make choices – will you open the sealed coffin? Will you give the stranger a ride to the next island? Will you dare eat the sea monster's meat? The likelihood of success for some actions depends on the strengths of your attributes; many others will be available if you're willing to pay a price: gold, fuel, food, crew members, treasures, Fragments of Secrets (i.e. experience points), or even attribute points.

If you manage to return to London alive, you can collect the bounties for your accomplishments and hope that the sacrifices made allow you to come out ahead. On your next trip, you may be able to undertake actions that were previously locked to you. If, however, you perish among eldritch horrors and cannibals, the game will have to be played from the very beginning and the Unterzee's islands will be randomly redistributed. But you may play as your heir, cashing in on heirlooms you have left to yourself.

Sunless Sea is inarguably an RPG, but one that isn't tied to conventions. Most RPGs are structured around progression and exploration; *Sunless Sea* subverts both. Despite an ultimate goal to achieve, there isn't a linear sequence of main quests that leads you to it. Instead, you have countless small "storylets" that are only vaguely interdependent. Also, progression isn't fixed, and whatever rewards you gain can easily be lost. Exploration, a major part of the game, is never free, neither of care nor cost. *Sunless Sea* imbues the journey into the unknown with danger and mystery.

Sunless Sea is one of the few games that lives in the mind as much as on the screen; its secrets aren't just there to be ticked off, but to be savoured. Sometimes, imagining what lies in the Zee is the best way to enjoy the game. How fitting for a game about the dark and the ocean. **AI**

Hand of Fate



Defiant Development, 2015
Windows, Linux, OS X, PS4 and Xbox One

Hand of Fate is a rather peculiar roguelike. Not only because its places, objects and characters are drawn from a deck of cards. Nor is it because the dungeon takes the form of a tortuous path made of these face-down cards, where one moves card after card while keeping an eye on a quickly diminishing stock of food.

Hand of Fate is very special because it puts the player in front of a game master – literally. It is this odd, masked wizard surrounded by magical objects who gives the game its edge. With his melodramatic gestures, he turns into an epic narrative what would otherwise be nothing more than yet another medieval fantasy adventure. With his sizzling, masterfully voiced comments, he gives depth to each game. A *Hand of Fate* playthrough is not a series of random events and encounters – it is a duel of resilience, the clash of two wills that collide.

In this fight, the player's only weapons are the new cards he earns and adds to his deck when he solves a situation in an optimal way – for instance, saving an old man attacked by Lava Golems grants a new event card that will be advantageous to come across in the dungeon. As the stock of cards increases, the player can therefore build a deck to suit his needs, made of the most beneficial encounters possible. And threaten the game master's supremacy.

To beat the game, you also have to master what is perhaps its weakest mechanic: its combat system – either triggered by a bad choice or automatically by certain cards. This simplified imitation of the battles of the *Batman: Arkham Asylum* series is based on beating your opponents by clubbing the mouse button, and remains far inferior to the rest of the game. It would be a shame, however, to give *Hand of Fate* a miss because of its combat system.

Persevering leads to terrific moments: a narrative that gets closer and closer to perfection (thanks to quality music, meticulous writing and a darkening atmosphere), cards that turn out to be complex quests (completing the first card grants the second one, to be added to the deck), and a game master who is thrown into a foul mood at the prospect of defeat.

While the sequel, *Hands of Fate 2* (2017), doesn't improve the combat system, it expands the campaign considerably, adding longer and more diverse sub-intrigues. Unfortunately, the returning game master is a little more restrained. The almost total absence of his threatening figure turns the game into something that one simply wants to complete, rather than a duel of egos that one is desperate to win. **IZ**

***Hands of Fate* was crowd-funded on Kickstarter in November 2013, raising AU$ 54,095.**



Each card has multiple options, and solving it correctly provides rewards and possibly a new card that advances its quest.



Combat is the weakest part of the game, forcing you fight in a *Batman: Arkham Asylum*-like manner using the equipment cards you own.

Pillars of Eternity



Obsidian Entertainment, 2015
Windows, Mac and Linux

The *Pillars of Eternity* Kickstarter launched in September 2012 and raised over 4 million dollars. A documentary called *Road to Eternity* later revealed the crowd-funding saved Obsidian from closing.

The emergence of crowd-funding in the early 2010s created a new class of games between mainstream AAA titles and shoestring budget indies. Among these were Obsidian's "Project Eternity", which hit Kickstarter in 2012, promising to bring back the glory days of the Infinity Engine games, citing *Planescape: Torment*, *Baldur's Gate*, and *Icewind Dale.*

A public that had been disappointed time and again ate it up. The game reached its funding goal in under 24 hours, and its success took Obsidian by surprise. They scrambled to come up with stretch goals and backer rewards to keep the pledges rolling in. This exhilarating but chaotic campaign left its mark on the game: the world is peppered with out-of-place vanity NPCs with exotic looks and frankly stupid nameplates, tombs are full of backer memorials and the game has a tacked-on mega-dungeon and stronghold that would have worked better as a Durlag's Tower-style expansion.

Regardless, *Pillars of Eternity* delivers the big game promised in the campaign. There are two large cities and two smaller quest-hub villages; wilderness maps, dungeons, caves, ruins and castles aplenty; 11 character classes; dozens of monster types, spells, and talents, hundreds of items and enough quests for a single playthrough to soak up many weekends.



The inventory is very nostalgic, but offers modern conveniences like mouseovers and neat details like secondary weapons appearing on the character's model.

It took a while for all this complexity to settle down, as Obsidian spent two years iterating upon it via post-release patches, but this smoothed out the rough edges and allowed the system to come into its own.

An Infinity Engine game veteran jumping into *Pillars of Eternity* will feel immediately at home. The sounds and visuals, complemented by Justin Bell's beautiful musical score, are just like they ought to be; the moment-to-moment feeling of commanding units is just right, and quests and dialogues behave exactly like they used to – or even better, thanks to quality-of-life improvements like mouseovers, a Fast-Forward function and a "loot all" button. Only after a few hours playing do the differences start to become apparent.

While *Pillars of Eternity*'s combat is still of the RTwP variety, its original ruleset has more in common with 4th edition *D&D* than the old *AD&D* which powered the IE games. All character classes will acquire a broad selection of abilities selected on level-up, many of which will have per-rest or per-encounter uses.

Combat also features an engagement system, where melee combatants lock each other in position and can't move under the risk of taking an opportunistic attack. Unless you go out of your way to build a mobile party with mainly passive abilities, fights will be more static than in the Infinty Engine games, and you will pause more to fire off those per-encounter abilities. It's also much easier to hold a line or block enemy movement, and a good deal harder to run through enemy lines to get at their back-row casters.

Pillars is also markedly easier than *Baldur's Gate* or *Icewind Dale*. Players enjoying a challenge are well advised to go straight to Hard or Path of the Damned difficulties, and avoid going into the *White March* expansion until the very end or risk out-levelling and out-gearing the second half of the game.

"If you want to make a Muscle Wizard, who is mighty and powerful and a stupid idiot, you can do that. Mechanically what happens is that you'll do a lot of damage, but their durations and areas of effects will be very small. Then, in conversation they're total idiots. [laughs]"

– *Josh Sawyer*, *Pillars of Eternity's lead designer*



Combat looks similar to the IE games, but plays very differently due to additions like the engagement system and per encounter abilities.

The story starts you off with a magical catastrophe that sends you after a mysterious villain operating ancient machinery to nefarious ends, while you deal with local problems ranging from personal tragedies and village disputes to a magical plague affecting the entire realm. It unfolds through traditional RPG quests, punctuated by Choose Your Own Adventure-style interludes with beautiful ink illustrations.

The world of Eora features elves and dwarves, undead haunting ancient ruins, dragons lurking in remote corners of the world, and gods meddling with mortals. However, it has a Renaissance feel, rather than a dialogues one. Adventurers tote arquebuses and pistols; caravels ply the seas carrying explorers, merchants, and colonists to new frontiers, and societies struggle to come to grips with transformational discoveries.

Accompanying you are eight distinct companions (11 with the expansion) hailing from all corners of Eora, from Sagani the Boreal Dwarf huntress to Kana Rua, the jolly chanter from seafaring Rauatai. They are for the most part well-written and characterful, and their banter provides welcome levity in a story that would often take on perilously dark tones. You can also complement – or, if you wish, entirely replace – these companions with custom adventurers you can create from scratch at inns.

Overall, *Pillars of Eternity* fails to live up to the best of the originals in some respects, but surpasses them in others. While competent enough, the writing does not come close to *Planescape: Torment's;* Defiance Bay and Twin Elms feel empty and static compared to Athkatla or Baldur's Gate, and even the best encounters do not quite match the likes of Firkraag's Dungeon.

The character system, however, is a major step forward. *Pillars*' 11 classes and highly flexible talent, ability, and attribute system allow massive scope for variety, from relatively obvious variants like a ranged, alpha-striking back-row Paladin, to specialised builds making use of a particular item's unique properties. *Pillars of Eternity*'s lead designer Josh Sawyer's stated goal was to support as many character concepts as possible, from smart barbarians to Muscle Wizards, and the system accomplishes this well.

Pillars of Eternity carried heavy expectations. It was supposed to revive a beloved subgenre, and represented a new direction for Obsidian Entertainment, at the time struggling for survival.

Warts and all, it succeeds. It delivers a big, broad, beautiful, and deep game, with massive replayability, a lush, rich world, at the same time familiar and fresh, and gameplay that feels like a natural evolution of the originals it emulates. **PJ**

The *IE Mod* allows you to customise the game to be closer to the Infinity Engine games, changing its interface, disabling engagements and more. It also includes some tools to help modders.



Dialogue is extensive, often presenting multiple choices and skill/attribute/reputation checks, but the story is very linear.



While scarcely used, the CYOA-like segments provide interesting role-playing options and are a great addition.





Further Adventures

While this book is dedicated to single-player CRPGs officially released in English, it would be foolish to only talk about them and ignore the relevance and entertainment value of the thousands of games outside this definition.

As such, this section is devoted to a brief listing and commentary on various games that didn't fit in the main timeline, such as early Japanese RPGs, CRPGs unreleased in the West, unofficial fan-translations and even cancelled games we might never get to play.

Crono, Lucca and Frog battle against Magus in *Chrono Trigger.* Artwork and character design by Akira Toriyama, of *Dragon Ball* fame.

1982-1987: The birth of the Japanese RPGs

Where does one begin when talking about the first Japanese RPGs? Well, with some game from 1982/1983. The problem is, no one knows which.

Dragon and Princess / ドラゴンアンドプリンセス is often pointed to as the first RPG made in Japan, and it's particularly interesting for being a party-based game with top-down tactical turn-based combat (before *Ultima III* popularised such combat systems), but at its core it's a text-adventure game.

One cannot write about this subject without mentioning *Seduction of Condominium Wives* / 団地妻の誘惑, Koei's erotic RPG about a condom salesman visiting an apartment block, where he must knock on doors trying to "sell his products", while battling Yakuza and ghosts who roam the halls.

Several other early titles existed, such as *Mission: Impossible* / スパイ大作戦, a spy-themed adventure game; *Genma Taisen* / 幻魔大戦, based on a manga of the same name, *King Khufu's Secret* / クフ王の秘密 (which claimed to be a "Role-Playing Game"), *Arfgaldt* / アルフガルド, another text-adventure, etc.

It's interesting that many of these games already called themselves "Role-Playing Games", even though few have traditional features like stats, XP, level-ups, classes, etc. This quote by Tokihiro Naito (creator of *Hydlide*), found in *The Untold History of Japanese Game Developers Vol. 2*, best represents the spirit that dominated Japanese game development at the time:

> *"Back then, Japanese people didn't have a well-defined sense of the RPG as a game genre. I suspect that, because of this, the creators took the appearance and atmosphere of the RPG as a basic reference, and constructed new types of games according to their own individual sensibilities. In my case, I never had the opportunity to use an Apple II, so I was completely unaware of* Wizardry *and* Ultima."

Even those who knew Western games were making titles that were more experimental in nature. Nihon Falcom began in 1981 as Apple importers in Japan, so they had access to the Apple II and its games. Later becoming developers, they jumped into the genre with *Panorama Island* / ぱのらま島, an exotic title that uses a hex-based overworld full of traps, plus wire-frame first-person dungeons (with automapping!).

While it sold itself as a "Fantasy Role-Playing Game", it lacks core elements like stats, XP, level-ups. You only have to manage your food and money. Overall, it plays more like a mix of platform and adventure games.

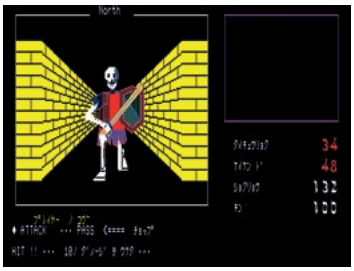
Still, there are some early games that are undeniably RPGs, such as L*egend of the Holy Sword* / 聖剣伝説, *Sword and Sorcery* / 剣と魔法, and *Poibos* / ポイボス, but they are very obscure, their release dates are uncertain. As such, the least controversial starting point might be Koei's *Dungeon*.

It's by no means the first CRPG made in Japan, but it's undeniably an RPG (heavily inspired by *Ultima)*, has a commonly agreed release date (December 1983) and was popular enough to actually impact players and other developers. This elevates it over early obscure pioneers that had no influence in the genre.

Thus, starting with it, the next pages will examine 15 games that shaped the early JRPGs.

Dungeon

ダンジョン (1983)



An *Ultima* clone where you pick a class (Warrior, Thief, Cleric, Wizard or Ninja) and explore a large island in search of El Dorado.

Developed by Koei, it's a simple RPG, but features great graphics (including solid walls!), a large overworld and a massive dungeon underneath it – which is over 250x250 squares in size!

Clearly made in the image of Western RPGs, it also has monsters taken directly from *D&D* books, like Mind-Flayers and Demogorgons.

The Black Onyx

ザ・ブラックオニキス (1984)



Henk Rogers was an RPG fan who moved to Japan and noticed a lack of games like *Wizardry*. So he decided to create his own.

While not "Japan's first RPG", as it's often claimed, it was their first popular CRPG, selling over 150,000 units, spreading the genre and influencing many developers.

It also pioneered allowing players to customise the character's appearance, displaying equipment the character's avatar and using coloured bars to indicate health.

Tower of Druaga

ドルアーガの塔 (1984)



Namco's "Fantasy *Pac-Man*", this deceptively simple arcade game asks you to climb 60 floors of a tower.

On each floor, you must grab a key and recover a hidden item, which requires a specific action – e.g. killing Slimes on Floor 2 wields a pickaxe, which can destroys walls.

Combat is done by "bumping" into foes, but some require special items or strategies to be beaten.

While it's not an RPG, *Druaga* is a cornerstone for Japanese Action RPGs, as well as their puzzle design.

Dragon Slayer

ドラゴンスレイヤー (1984)



And here's the first Action RPG ever. If *Tower of Druaga* was about uncovering secrets, Falcom's *Dragon Slayer* is about grinding.

You're tasked to slay a dragon and locked inside a huge dungeon, but you start too weak. Your only hope is to slowly explore, finding treasures and bringing them back to your home to increase your stats.

Combat uses the same "bump" system of *Druaga*, and there are many useful magical items as well.

Hydlide

ハイドライド (1984)



T&E Soft took *Tower of Druaga* and brought in colourful graphics, a fluid pace and a (tiny) open world for players to explore, "bumping" into foes in search of magic items required to rescue the princess.

A massive hit in Japan, it's one of the most influential JRPGs of the 80s, often credited for introducing quick saves and regenerating health.

However, it's also often bashed for its heavy mandatory grinding and frustrating difficulty.

The Screamer

ザ・スクリーマー (1985)



Set in a dark, cyberpunk world, *The Screamer* sends the player alone into an abandoned military lab full of mutants, robots and horrors.

A hardcore dungeon crawler, it plays much like *Wizardry*, except for its combat: you fight monsters in real-time – shooting, jumping, ducking and blocking their attacks in very simplistic 2D battles.

It also features eight unique NPCs, who roam the dungeon and each has their own agenda.

***The Screamer*'s characters were designed by manga artist Shohei Harumoto, who also made a short manga that came with the game, showing the hero's origin.**

Xanadu

ザナドゥ (1985)



To this day, *Xanadu* is Nihon Falcom's greatest success; a PC-exclusive that sold over 400,000 copies in a time when PCs were rare and expensive.

While a sequel to *Dragon Slayer*, *Xanadu* changes almost everything, and influenced almost everyone.

It adds a town where you can train individual stats, buy items and talk to NPCs. Beneath the town lies a large cave, which you explore in a platform-like side-scrolling view.

When you touch an enemy or enter a dungeon, the game goes into a top-down "arena-like" view. Combat is still "bump-based", but now there are spells, several items and even giant boss battles.

Heart of Fantasy 2

夢幻の心臓II (1985)



The original *Heart of Fantasy*, released in 1984, was one of Japan's many early *Ultima* clones.

The sequel plays like a blend of *Ultima III's* exploration and *Wizardry*'s combat, but stands on its own achievments, featuring three large interconnected worlds, colourful artwork, tough battles and a great UI entirely based on menus.

It's a title that could've easily rivalled most Western CRPGs from 1985, but sadly was only released for Japanese computers.

The Legend of Zelda

ゼルダの伝説 (1986)



Shigeru Miyamoto and his team at Nintendo mixed *Hydlide* with *Xanadu,* removed all the RPG elements and focused on the most important – the call for adventure.

They added an attack button, created a huge world full of secrets, designed clever dungeons, puzzles and boss battles, made magic items altered gameplay and got rid of all the time-wasting grinding.

In doing so, *Zelda* created a new genre: the Action-Adventure, where the series rules unrivalled.

Dragon Quest

ドラゴンクエスト (1986)



In 1990, Enix published a manga retelling *Dragon Quest*'s development, titled ドラゴンクエストへの道. It's a fun read, and details the developer's admiration for *Wizardry* and *Ultima*.

Enix's *Dragon Quest* was the perfect game at the perfect time.

Created by Yuji Horii, a CRPG fan who wished to reach wider audiences, it blended *Wizardry*'s first-person battles with *Ultima*'s NPCs and open world, wrapped in a friendly menu-based interface that allowed anyone to play RPGs.

Amplified by Akira Toriyama's unique art style, it sold over two million copies in Japan and defined the entire JRPG genre.

Ys

イース (1987)



A team at Falcom thought RPGs were getting too demanding, so they created an Action RPG focused on fun and adventure.

The result is a light-hearted RPG that's memorable, accessible (thanks to its "bump combat"), and packs an amazing soundtrack.

While overlooked in the West, in Japan it stands tall as one of the landmarks of the genre.

You can read a more detailed review of the *Ys* series on page 88.

Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei

デジタル・デビル物語 ストーリー 女神転生 (1987)



Based on a novel of the same name, *Megami Tensei* stars Akemi Nakajima, a teenage hacker who uses his PC to summon demons.

When the demons run out of control, it's up to Akemi and his girlfriend to stop them. Besides fighting, players can also try to recruit the demons, and then fuse them into more powerful demons.

A cult classic by Atlus, it would receive great sequels and spin-offs, including the *Persona* series.

Final Fantasy

ファイナルファンタジー (1987)



A young employee at Square, Hironobu Sakaguchi was frustrated with his job and decided to bet everything on a final adventure, that would either sink or swim.

Building upon the *Dragon Quest*'s formula, *Final Fantasy* is a massive game, where four custom "heroes of light" had to travel the world – by feet, boat and airship – to purify the four elemental orbs.

While not selling as much as *Dragon Quest*, it still became the world's best-known JRPG series.

Sorcerian

ソーサリアン (1987)



The fifth title in Falcom's huge *Dragon Slayer* series, it focused on the side-scrolling gameplay.

Greatly expanding its RPG elements, it included a very odd profession system, added complex magic, impressive battles against large bosses, and a party of up to four custom characters.

The game was module-based, and in the following years many "Scenario Packs" were released, some including content made by fans in official design contests.

Phantasy Star

ファンタシースター (1987)



As the game starts, a cutscene shows Ali's brother being killed by soldiers of Lord Lassic. And so she swears to begin a revolution. Along the way, she'll gather three companions: Odin, a brutish warrior; Lutz, a presumptuous sorcerer; and Myau, a magical cat-like creature.

Developed by SEGA for the Master System, *Phantasy Star* was a title ahead of its time, that pointed towards the future of JRPGs with its amazing graphics, memorable cast of heroes and evolving story.

The End of an Era

Nintendo's Famicom arrived in 1983 in Japan, followed by the SEGA Master System in 1985. After massive hits like *Dragon Quest*, *Final Fantasy* and *Phantasy Star,* the consoles became the definitive platform for JRPGs, – and for Japanese games overall – a complete reversal of the situation in the US and Europe.

Even with the popularisation of 16-bit computers later on, the PC was left for niche titles which made use of their amazing capabilities to render high-res still images – mainly Strategy games, Visual Novels and Eroges – including erotic JRPGs like *Rance* and *Dragon Knight*. Falcom would be one of the few remaining companies focused on producing PC JRPGs, which helps explain why they are barely known in the West.

As such, Western CRPGs lost all relevance to the Japanese players and developers – *Dungeon Master, Wasteland*, SSI's Gold Box series, *Diablo, Daggerfall, Baldur's Gate, Fallout, System Shock 2, Deus Ex, Morrowind* and other classics either never made it to Japan or failed to leave an impact. Even *Ultima Underworld* (1992), so influential in the West, was barely noticed in Japan – with Software's *King's Field* series being the closest thing it ever got to an Eastern descendant (although *Ultima Online* would have quite an impact years later).

Wizardry, on the other hand, would gain new life in Japan. While Sir-Tech crumbled away in the 90s, Japanese companies would acquire the series' licence and produce over 30 *Wizardry* games, remakes and spin-offs, plus novels, manga series, anime, toys, mobile games, tabletop RPGs and even an MMORPG.

Note, however, that these games and their clones all follow the classic formula, up to *Wizardry V* (1988). The changes made in *Wizardry 6-8*, such as having an open world or going fully 3D were never embraced.

For those interested in this subject, there's unfortunately few good sources of information on the early days of JRPGs – your best options are Hardcore Gaming 101 or asking around at the RPG Codex or NeoGAF. However, if you can read Japanese, then the *OLD GAMERS HISTORY Vol. 3 & 4* books, published in 2013 by メディア・パル, are essential reading, covering over 200 RPGs from 1983 to 2000.

An expanded version of this article can be read at *1982-1987 - The Birth of Japanese RPGs re-told in 15 Games.*

Fan-Translations

This section will cover games that were never officially translated into English, but had translation patches made by dedicated fans. More than just releases from big publishers that never got translated, there's an entire market of indie (or doujinshi) PC games that most Westerners aren't even aware of – such as the *Touhou* games.

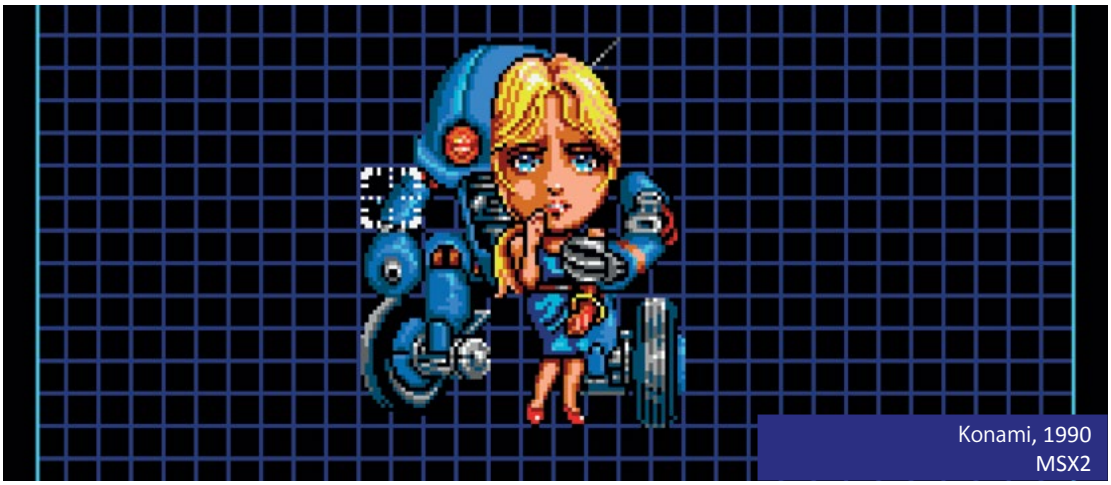
Twice a year, a massive event called Comiket (Comic Market) is held in Tokyo, with over half a million attendees over three days. Besides comics and movies, a huge amount of indie games are also presented. Just in Comiket 83, held in December 2013, there were over 300 games being presented to the public.

While Japan is the first country that comes into mind when talking about foreign RPGs, there are plenty of interesting games from other countries, such as *Chinese Paladin* (China), *The Fall: Last Days of Gaia* (Germany) and *Brány Skeldalu* (Czech Republic). Sadly, the steep language barrier means most of those are nigh unplayable for the average gamer. Luckily for us, there are groups of kind souls that pour much effort into creating fan-translations for some of these games.

One of the most famous fan-translations is *Mother 3*, a Game Boy Advance sequel to the famous *Earthbound*. The game was released in 2006 in Japan, but never reached Western audiences. In 2007, a professional translator named Clyde Mandelin organised a team to fan-translate the game into English. After 16 months of work, they release the patch and quickly got more than 100,000 downloads, showing just how much interest in the game there was. However, even after the group offered the entire translated script for free to Nintendo, there's still no announcement of an official English release of the game.

It's truly a shame that anyone trying to legally play games must go through such a hassle. Some of these games are real gems that are sadly kept away from people that would love to buy and play them. On the next pages we shall list some of the most interesting fan-translated games a curious CRPG player can find, and hope that someday they receive a proper English release.

SD Snatcher



Konami, 1990
MSX2

Back in the 80s, right after creating the very first *Metal Gear* game, Hideo Kojima developed *Snatcher* (1988), a *Blade Runner*-like adventure game/visual novel. Set in a cyberpunk future, you play as Gillian Seed, an agent sent to investigate the rise of "snatchers" – biological machines that are disguising themselves are humans.

Filled with memorable characters, gripping plot twists and Kojima's exotic style, *Snatcher* was a huge critical and commercial hit. In its wake, instead of a sequel, came *SD Snatcher* – a remake of *Snatcher*, now as an RPG with cute "super deformed" art.

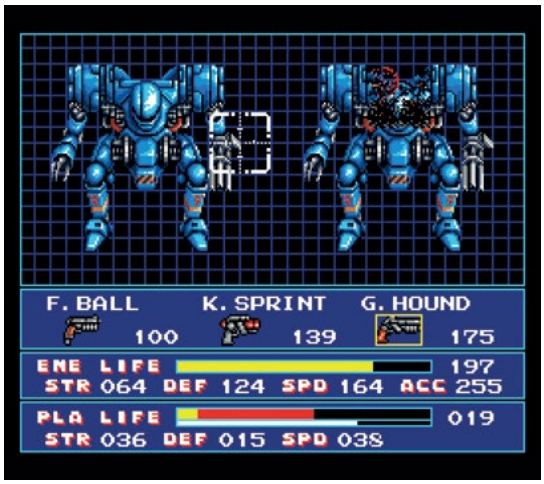
Sporting a slightly different story, the game now plays as a typical JRPG. You walk around town, looking for clues, talking to NPCs, then delve into dungeons and fight foes in turn-based FPS combat.

Yes, turn-based FPS combat! Each turn, you choose a weapon and use the reticule to aim at a point on the screen – you can fire at the enemy's body to deal damage, or at specific points to decrease its stats and eventually cripple it. For example, attacking its eyes/sensors will reduce its accuracy, while attacking its weapons will decrease its attack.

The twist is that, before you fire the enemy will likely move, meaning aiming for small areas is tricky – you'll have to anticipate its move or stop it from moving by destroying its legs. Different guns also have different speeds and damage area, so choosing your equipment is important.

It's an extremely original system that suits the game perfectly. It even throws some curveballs, such as enemies using shields or hostages. Unfortunately, the system isn't well-employed and ends up being slow and repetitive – battles happen too often and take a long time to beat, requiring you to first weaken the enemy and then slowly damage it.

Overall, *SD Snatcher* is more of a curiosity for die-hard Kojima fans. Still, its novel combat system and the fact it was one of the first Japanese games to be fan-translated more than earns its reputation. **FE**



The combat has a novel presentation, as you aim and shoot in turn-based battles, but it's simplistic under the hood.



You'll go to the cinema to watch *Godzilla*, visit a bar named Outer Heaven and own a Metal Gear. Yup, this is a Kojima game.

Chinese Paladin



Softstar, 1995
MS-DOS, Windows and SEGA Saturn

The Windows version of *Chinese Paladin* is now freeware. Those interested in playing it should also download SDLPal, a mod which adds a few very useful features.

No matter how globalised and connected the world might be, there are still some local products that never seem to reach other lands, no matter how popular they are in their native region. *Chinese Paladin* is one of such hidden gems.

Developed in Taiwan, it's a game known by several names – 仙劍奇俠傳, *XianJian QiXia Zhuan*, *The Legend of Sword and Fairy*, *Chinese Paladin* or simply "*PAL*" (the name of its .exe file).



Combat is turn-based, with up to three party members. During battles, powerful attacks can leave permanent marks on the ground.



While translating from Chinese required some compromises (especially in poems), the excellent story remains perfectly enjoyable.

You play as Li Xiaoyao, a young man that visits an island of fairies in search of a cure for his sick aunt. There he falls in love with a girl named Zhao Ling'er, who gives him the medicine. He leaves, promising to return and marry her once his aunt is well.

On his way, he loses his memory, and from there unfolds a fantastic journey, full of romance, comedy, tragedy, mystical creatures, powerful martial artists, gods and demons. It's a gripping tale, that feels like a Chinese epic poem in video game form.

The game plays much like a typical 90s JRPG: you follow the story in a linear fashion, travelling from town to town, talking to characters, exploring dungeons and facing enemies in turn-based combat. Unfortunately, while the story is excellent and flows smoothly in the first hours, it's later broken by massive dungeons and endless repetitive battles.

This is made worse by how easy and uninspired combat is. Your character's skills are very limited and they regenerate HP and mana outside combat, so you'll likely just keep casting your most powerful skill. Even boss battles don't amount to much, mostly requiring you to heal every other turn, outlasting the enemy rather than outsmarting it.

The game was remade in 2001, changing the pixelated art for pre-rendered graphics and adding two new endings. However, it reduced the dungeons to linear areas filled with monsters – not really an improvement, as they are still needlessly long.

A massive hit, *Chinese Paladin* is considered the most important RPG ever made in China. Its immense popularity led to several sequels, spin-offs, and even a 2005 live-action TV series. After decades as a Chinese-only treasure, the English fan-translation finally broke the language barrier, allowing anyone to experience this hidden classic. **FE**

E.V.O.: The Theory of Evolution



Enix, 1990
PC-98

One of the hidden gems of the Super Nintendo was *E.V.O.: Search for Eden* (1992), an unusual side-scrolling Action RPG based on evolution. You began as a primitive fish over 300 million years ago and slowly evolved across the ages – first into more advanced fish, then into amphibians, dinosaurs and mammals, ending at the Ice Age and the first humans.

What few people know is that *E.V.O.* was actually a remake of an earlier game released only for PC-98: *46億年物語 -THE 進化論* – or "*4.6 Billion Year Story: The Theory of Evolution*". Now fully fan-translated as *E.V.O.: The Theory of Evolution*, it's worth a look.

Like its SNES counterpart, you begin playing in the ocean, millions of years ago. But the first difference quickly appears: combat is turn-based and very simple.

As you defeat enemies you earn EVO points, which can upgrade your stats: Vitality (hit points), Endurance (defence), Wisdom (special abilities) and Attack (damage). Each has a threshold, so, once you invest enough points in a stat, your creature evolves.

The stat screen shows a graph with all possible evolution forms in each era, but it's a very confusing system, since stats are presented as cardinal directions but don't work as such, e.g. Wisdom points north, but sometimes it leads to an evolution that's south or east of your current one, making it hard to plan ahead.

As you evolve and complete quests – which usually require talking to a certain NPC or visiting a certain area – you'll jump millions of years into the next chapter, where new evolutions and perils await.

The game is divided into six chapters, and here we see another big difference from the SNES remake: the story is much larger in scope, going all the way into the far future. And it involves not only the goddess Gaia acting as your guide, but also aliens controlling Earth's evolution under orders from Lucifer!

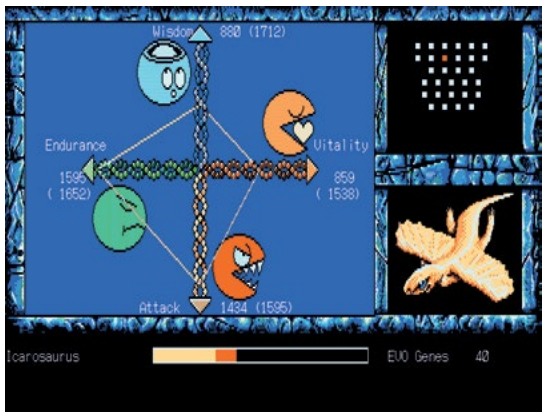
In the end, *Theory of Evolution* is an amazing concept stuck inside a simple and heavily dated RPG. There's no doubt that the SNES remake is the superior game, but the original still manages to stand out by offering a much weirder and far-reaching story.

If evolving all the way from Cambrian creatures to future humanoids sounds like a cool idea, then give *Theory of Evolution* a try – it's always good to see that RPGs can deliver much more than medieval fantasy. **FE**

You can get the fan-patch to *E.V.O.* at the 46 Oku Men website, which also contains a great guide on how to emulate the PC-98.



Combat is turn-based and very simple. There are few possible actions and stats are very important, making high-level enemies unkillable unless you grind.



Each chapter offers several playable creatures, some of them historically accurate, others not. If you reach an evolutionary dead end, you'll get one of many humorous bad endings.

The Legend of Cao Cao



Koei, 1998
Windows

I've been a sucker for *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* ever since playing it on the Nintendo back in the early 1990s, later reading the story in its huge entirety back in 2000. I'm not the only fan of this historical epic, since there is quite a long list of movies and games based upon this Chinese classic.

The Legend of Cao Cao is one of these many games, a turn-based Strategy RPG similar to the *Fire Emblem* series, published by Japanese developer Koei.

Dozens of mods have been created for *Legend of Cao Cao*, from more campaigns around Three Kingdoms' characters to entire new games. The *Legend of Lu Bu* mod is highly recommended, and also available in English.



The game retells Cao Cao's role in the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* novel quite faithfully, despite adding some bits of humour.



The massive roster of heroes in the novel makes for interesting battles, as enemies have their own personality and fighting style.

You play as the legendary general Cao Cao, from his rise as a young officer helping to control a peasant rebellion to his gradual climb to power. The game requires you to make important moral choices, and if you follow the power-hungry path the story follows events from the novel. However, if you choose to neglect power in pursuit of what is morality correct, then the game goes on a completely different path in a quite awesome way.

No matter what way you choose, you will find yourself having to defeat enemy armies with troops of varying capabilities. Your primary units are infantry, cavalry and archers, but adding to the fun are also other units, such as barehanded brawlers, chariot riders, and spellcasters that can boost abilities, heal injured allies, or cast status effects on enemies.

Equipment can be purchased and characters also increase in levels and combat skills through fighting. Special events can also occur in battle, usually when two opposing officers meet in a battle where they historically fought each other.

There are also different ability scores, based roughly on who appeared stronger or more tactically brilliant than peers in the novels.

The graphics are simple, with well-designed pixelated animations to denote units on static terrain. Some of the animated scenes are beautiful, like when rival warriors face off against one another or during conversations that Cao Cao will have while speaking to members of his court or war council.

Legend of Cao Cao is actually the third game of Koei's *Legends* series (英傑伝). The previous two titles focused on Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang, Cao Cao's rivals during the Warring States period. However, the *Legend of Cao Cao* is widely considered the best and it's the one I recommend playing. **DT**

Labyrinth of Touhou



偽英国紳士団, 2009
Windows

People play CRPGs for various reasons. Some do it for the story, others for atmosphere or immersion. These, however, aren't valid reasons to play *Labyrinth of Touhou*. Try it, rather, if you enjoy party-building or the idea of playing a dungeon crawler with the most flexible and challenging first-person turn-based combat to date.

Like Touhou itself – originally the setting of cult classic shoot 'em ups full of anime girls with magic powers (complete with an obsessed fandom) – *Labyrinth of Touhou* is nonsensical. Thankfully, you do not need to care about Suwako's affinity for frogs or Reimu's duties at the Hakurei Shrine to enjoy it.

What you need to care about is combat and character development, and what you need to know is that this game and its sequel are two brutal dungeon crawlers that have you navigate a massive dungeon, presented as an abstract network of passages, and fight in random and scripted encounters, during which the game switches to *Wizardry*-like combat.

I said "*Wizardry*-like combat", but that's a simplification. *Labyrinth of Touhou* lets you manage a cast of 20+ characters that you recruit as you explore the dungeon, with an active party of 12 (four of them in the front row). You need to swap active characters in and out during combat, taking everyone's Speed stat and combat role into account. This becomes crucial, as enemy attacks are varied and deadly, necessitating you to keep track of every character every turn to survive. The open-endedness and the tactical diversity a large party offers lies at the heart of the game's appeal.

Each character comes with her own stats, abilities, and weaknesses (all represented by numbers you can tinker with), while leaving enough room to experiment with alternative builds, given the plethora of stats, skills and equipment to choose from.

Labyrinth of Touhou takes first-person party combat and brings it to new mechanical heights. The importance it places on a large party roster is unrivalled, and no other RPG of this type has been able to achieve this level of synergy between stats, skills, and combat mechanics.

Newcomers might want to start with the slightly more accessible sequel, *Labyrinth of Touhou 2* (2013). Just be ready to die. A lot. **CB**



You fight with four characters at once, but can bring eight more and swap them during battle.



If you find this map exciting, then *Labyrinth of Touhou* is the game for you. Otherwise, stay far away.

Sword of Moonlight: King's Field Making Tool



From Software, 2000
Windows

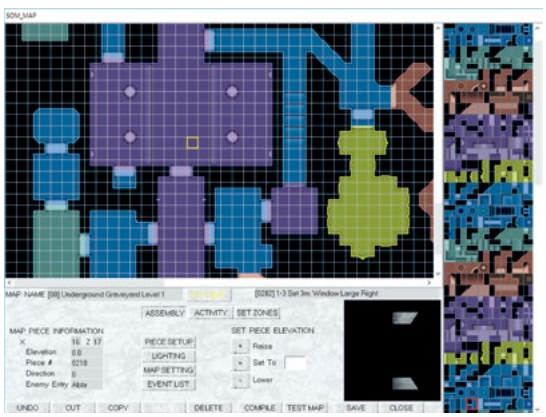
Dark Souls took the world by storm in 2011, awing gamers with its gothic atmosphere, high difficulty, rewarding exploration and cryptic lore. While it was the game that made From Software go mainstream, many fans will be quick to point out that *Demon's Souls* (2009) already had these elements.

However, very few will recall that From Software had been following a similar design philosophy since their very first game, *King's Field*, released in 1994.

Visit www.swordofmoonlight.com, where you can find the game's fan-translation and a small community creating their own games.



Moratheia, by Ben Connolly, is a great game created using the *Sword of Moonlight*. A bit more fast-paced, it plays like a cross between *King's Field* and *Demon's Souls*.



The editor allows you to create your own games or fully modify the included *King's Field 1* remake, but it's too outdated and limited to be of any real use today.

It's impressive: *Ultima Underworld* had just come out two years earlier in the US, yet From Software was already taking the revolutionary concept of a fully 3D first-person RPG and adding its own, dark twists.

But a word of caution: don't expect the fast-paced combat of *Dark Souls* or *Bloodborne*. *King's Field 1* was a launch title for the original PlayStation. Its graphics have aged terribly and the gameplay is slow and clunky – something that From Software cleverly subverted to turn the game into a zen-like, introspective experience.

The *King's Field* series fully embraces its slow speed. Combat is challenging, but it takes a backseat to the atmosphere and exploration. Above all, these games are about carefully delving into a desolate world, collecting items, solving puzzles and piecing together the story.

The series had four main games – all for consoles. But in 2000, From Software released *Sword of Moonlight*, a toolset for making *King's Field*-like games on the PC. It even came with a remake of the first game that you could play or open in the editor and modify freely.

It was released only in Japan, but fans eventually translated it and began to create games in English. Today there are a few fan-made guides and tools to help people make their own games but, honestly, the heavily dated editor and engine stands as little more than a curiosity, and the remake of *King's Field 1* isn't a good introduction to the series.

If you want to experience the lineage that led to *Dark Souls*, it's better to start with the fourth title in the series, *King's Field: The Ancient City* (2001), or with *Shadow Tower Abyss* (2003), a horror spin-off game.

However, if you played those and still want more, there's enjoyment to be found in the *Sword of Moonlight* fan-made games, such as the short tales of *Dark Destiny* and *Return to Melanat*, the puzzle-based challenge of *Trismegistus*, or the epic adventure of *Moratheia*. **FE**

Sengoku Rance



AliceSoft, 2006
Windows

The *Rance* series of erotic RPGs began back in 1989, following the adventures of a man named Rance in search of money and sex. The series is over a dozen titles long, each different from the previous, but *Sengoku Rance* is the best of the bunch.

It's a tricky game. The plot starts off simple enough: Rance is given control of the Oda clan during Japan's "Warring States" era and must unite the land into one nation. The goofy opening hints at a casual Eroge RPG and the first battles are simplistic.

However, a few turns in and the others begin to see your rising power as a threat. Inevitably, you'll find yourself fighting on several fronts, having to make hard decisions on where to send your few officers. Defeat becomes inevitable and you restart the game, wondering how such a game became so complicated.

That's because *Sengoku Rance* is actually a very complex turn-based Strategy/RPG, centred around a massive cast of officers. Each of them has a skill set that fits them into a role, such as being a tough melee attacker with decent defence or an archer that targets from a back row. The more troops the officers have, the more damage they inflict. If they lose their troops, they are either killed off, captured, or flee. Rance can try to hire, release, or execute officers he captures, adding a great diversity to your potential roster.

Besides attacking and defending territories, you can also purchase troops and materials, interact with officers, engage in events and explore the provinces or dungeons for treasures. There's a lot to do, and you'll have to consider each officer's stats to succeed.

The storyline also tricks you. Rance is meant as a parody of the RPG hero, who travels with scantily clad females, uses violence as a solution to everything and always sees himself as a hero – even as he rapes women or slays monsters while they beg for mercy.

But what starts as a comedic parody seamlessly transitions into a game about responsibility to friends and allies as Rance slowly shows compassion, and closes out in grim horror, with the tolls of war taking him into a cycle of depression that affects gameplay

Packing a surprising story, challenging battles, great artwork and multiple endings, *Sengoku Rance* is quite the work. I highly recommend everyone giving it a try, even if Eroge is not your thing. **DT**

MangaGamer has been working on official translations of several *Rance* titles. And if you enjoy *Sengoku Rance*'s strategic combat you can try *Daibanchou -Big Bang Age*, which uses a similar battle system.



You'll fight in battlefields, but can also take your officers into dungeons, though that might leave your provinces vulnerable.



The huge amount of provinces, officers, treasures, dungeons, items and events makes every playthrough different.

Kamidori Alchemy Meister



Eushully, 2011
Windows

***Kamidori* is a spiritual sequel to another of Eushully's games, called *Himegari Dungeon Meister,* which was also fan-translated.**

Kamidori Alchemy Meister / 神採りアルケミーマイスター is a Japanese Eroge CRPG where you play an apprentice alchemist setting up shop and moving up through his guild's ranks.

During this journey, you'll meet a large cast of characters asking for alchemical services, while old conflicts with foreign factions slowly come to fore. Since this is a CRPG, your quest to promote peace, love and understanding is mostly done via battles.

You explore areas on a 2D turn-based overhead map, similar to games like *Fire Emblem*, but areas here have a more dungeon-like design, with many tight corridors, hidden paths and treasures, locked doors, traps, areas only flying/swimming/digging characters can reach, tough optional enemies, etc.



When characters clash on the battlefield, they get to hit each a other a number of times based on their speed, traits and attack range.



Your store is where you perform alchemy, crafting items to sell, complete requests or strengthen your party members.

Combat occurs when friendly and enemy units collide, with their stats, traits and skills determining how many attacks each side will perform, in which order and how much damage they'll deal. Ranged and magical attacks work in a similar way, though then can be entirely one-sided if an opponent has no retaliatory ranged attack of his or her own.

By exploring dungeons and defeating monsters, you gain alchemical ingredients, and this is where the real core of the gameplay lies. With these raw materials you can create equipment for your ever-increasing party of adventurers, as well as saleable items to help fund your store and crafting rooms.

The more you craft, the better your crafting rating becomes, allowing you to design truly valuable items and equipment, as well as furniture, workbenches, and other tools that further improve your skills and how much you can charge for items.

It's quite the gratifying cycle, and the game's dungeons all have optional objectives that award rare items, encouraging you to return for more ingredients.

The game's supporting cast is also diverse, with a large assortment of monsters and heroes that will join your fight as you progress (with even more heroes only available in New Game+). This being an Eroge game, many of these heroes will be generously proportioned young women.

Yes, while the first chapters of the game are merely "romantic", there's sex and nudity in the later portions, leaning into a "harem" kind of story. The game also has three different routes, depending on which of the three main heroines you romance.

While this aspect might turn some players away, *Kamidori Alchemy Meister* is an addictive game with a lot of replay value. Try it, especially if you enjoyed the old *Shining Force* series. **DT**

Gates of Skeldal



Napoleon Games, 1998
DOS, Windows, Android and iOS

Brány Skeldalu (translated as *Gates of Skeldal*) is a hidden gem from the Czech Republic. Originally an MS-DOS game, it was later released as freeware and ported to Android and iOS thanks to a successful 2013 fundraiser by one of the game's original developers. The game also got an English translation but, sadly, it's mostly a crude, poorly made machine translation.

Regardless, the game is still worth a closer look. Your three starting characters wake up almost naked and with no memory. A parchment nearby explains that you were summoned from another world as a last attempt to stop a great evil from taking over the land. From there, the game follows in the spirit of old-school dungeons crawlers: exploration, puzzles and combat.

Gates of Skeldal has three defining features. First, its hand-drawn art style, which looks good even today. Second, it came with a map editor, allowing players to easily mod it. Third, it has a unique combat system.

Exploration is done in real time, but once you reach an enemy it becomes turn-based. Your party will grow up to six characters, and each can move separately. For example, you can move to attack the enemy from sides, or shoot over your front-line warriors. At your turn's start, you plan what each character will do – attack, cast spell, use items or move to a different tile. After planning the turn, you click on "execute" and watch the actions play out.

The game uses a classless system where the player distributes points between four attributes, with weapon skills adding additional bonuses. Weapons, armour and spells all have different requirements, but hybrid characters are still possible. Spell-casting is based on 35 magic runes, each with three levels of casting power. However, you need to find or buy the runes first. Some interesting spell combinations can be used in combat, and you must also keep an eye on your character's exhaustion, food and water supplies.

The game was followed by two sequels. *Brány Skeldalu 2* (2002), also known as *The Fifth Disciple*, surprised fans by being more of an Adventure game with light RPG elements. In 2016, Napoleon Games released the third game in the series: *7 Mages*. Inspired by Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* movie, the game returned to the series' roots of dungeon-crawling with a party of seven characters. A good game on its own, it was also the first in the series to be officially translated into English. **PE**

You can get the English translation and many tools and fan-made adventures at www.skeldal.vyletnici.net



Despite being a first-person blobber, *Gates of Skeldal* allows the party to be split during combat and for puzzles. The warrior behind the ghost is actually one of my characters.



The game's English translation was done via Google Translator and is very uneven, leaving some menus and texts still in Czech.

Games we'll (likely) never play

Talking about cancelled games is a difficult and frustrating task. There's little concrete information, a lot of rumours and, sadly, enough cancelled games to fill an entire book.

Restricting ourselves to CRPGs, there are numerous infamous titles such as *Deus Ex: Insurrection* and *Deus Ex 3*, *Alpha Protocol 2*, *Betrayal at Krondor*'s original sequel *Thief of Dreams*, Arcanum 2, *Ascendant*, *Armalion, Stonekeep 2, Tannhauser Gate, Witchwood, Lord of the Rings: The White Council*, etc…

There are also cancelled MMORPGs, such as *Ultima Online 2*, *Shenmue Online*, Blizzard's *Titan*, the *World of Darkness MMO* and F*allout Online*/*Project V13*. Plus all the countless Kickstarter projects that never made it, including Guido Henkel's *Deathfire*. Even fan projects, such as the recently cancelled *Project Vaulderie* – a remake of *VtM: Bloodlines*. The list goes on and on and on, and those are the ones we know about. Most of them go silently into the night, with developers spending years of their lives without the audience ever seeing their work or even being aware it existed.

Those which we hear about lead to a special kind of fascination and desire, as usually all we get to see are teasing screenshots, exciting features and ambitious statements. Cancelled games have no bugs, no rushed parts, no balance issues, no boring battles – they live as enduring, perfect promises, made of both announced features and of those perfect details that fans dreamed the game could have.

Thus, this isn't an absolute, extensive list, nor a best-of rank, but rather a collection of some of the most interesting ones that we know about. And a small tribute to those that worked so hard on games that never saw the light of day.

Meantime



A mock-up screenshot of how *Meantime* might have looked like (courtesy of *8 bitweapon*).

Wasteland was a big hit back in 1988, so a sequel was the next logical step. Unfortunately, EA held the trademark and went on to make the horrible *Fountain of Dreams* (1990), but Brian Fargo and Interplay had a plan of their own – titled *Meantime*.

The game would involve time travel and feature historical characters such as Albert Einstein, Wernher von Braun and Amelia Earhart, as well as fictional ones. Fargo and his team worked a year and a half into the game, but the game was never released.

However, a recent trademark of "Meantime" by a company linked to Brian Fargo's inXile has brought back hope to frustrated wannabe time travellers.

Champions

Why there are so few superhero RPGs? Hero Games tried to answer that in 1992, but and never made it. They attempted to adapt their tabletop ruleset, *Champions: The Super Role-Playing Game*, into a fully fledged CRPG that allowed you to customise your powers, one-liners, spandex and everything.

It even made it to the cover of April 92's Computer Gaming World magazine, with a preview praising the conversation system – but that's the last we heard of it. All that remains are these screenshots.



While *Freedom Force* delivers on many of *Champions'* concepts, these screenshots are just too charming.

The Black Hound

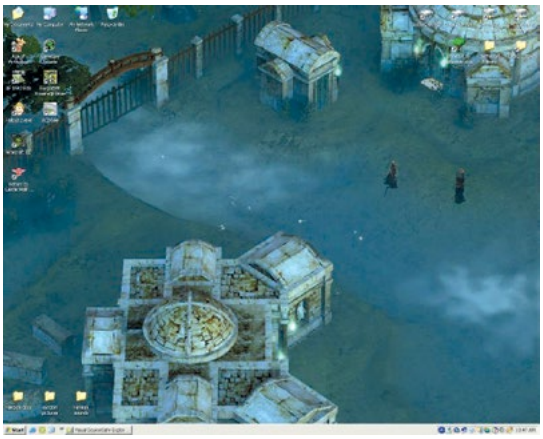
First announced in 2001 and commonly known as *Baldur's Gate III: The Black Hound*, it actually bears no relation to the plot or characters of the previous *Baldur's Gate* games. It wouldn't even be developed by BioWare or use the famous Infinity Engine.

Instead, it was a Black Isle project, designed as a fully 3D RPG, powered by the newly developed Jefferson engine and using *D&D 3rd Edition* rules.

Led by Josh Sawyer, the game would have players being haunted by the eponymous black hound – a physical manifestation of guilt. This would allow the player to see and interact with the guilt of others, but would also place them in the crosshairs of a cleric named May Farrow, from whom the hound originated.

While there were plans for a full trilogy of games, *The Black Hound* was cancelled in 2003, reportedly being about 80% complete at the time.

The project was having issues with the *D&D* licence but, regardless, the financial crisis of Interplay would close the Black Isle Studios shortly after.



The only known screenshot of *The Black Hound* came from Josh Sawyer's desktop background.

Fallout 3 / Van Buren

The only other game to use the infamous Jefferson engine, Black Isle's original *Fallout 3* was code-name *Van Buren*, and was far into development when Interplay closed the studio down in 2003. It would tell the story of a fugitive prisoner in the American Southwest, featuring both turn-based and real-time combat modes.

The project was canned, but some elements came back in *Fallout: New Vegas*, such as Caesar's Legion and the Burned Man. A tech demo was leaked and can still be downloaded online.

It's a title that still carries the dreams of those frustrated by Bethesda's *Fallout*. As such, a fan-made remake using is currently in the works.



It may look dated today, but this screenshot was the dream of many RPG fans in the early 2000s.

Ultima VIII: The Lost Vale



One of the few surviving images of *Lost Vale*, showing the three imprisoned gods.

An expansion for *Ultima VIII: Pagan* (1994), *The Lost Vale* would allow take the Avatar to a fortress in the clouds, where he would have to release three ancient gods that might help him return to Britannia.

Unlike the other games listed here, it was 100% finished, ready to be copied and shipped. But then someone at EA changed their mind (probably due to *Ultima VIII*'s poor sales) and the game was shelved.

Or rather, it wasn't – *Lost Vale* wasn't archived in any way, and all its data was eventually lost. The only thing that survived was the game's box art, some screenshots and scarce details about the plot.

Guardians: Agents of Justice



The previews promised players would be able to pick up enemies and throw then into fully destructable buildings, thanks to the *X-COM: Apocalypse* engine.

Guardians is another entry into the apparently cursed realm of superhero RPGs.

Developed by Simtex, the company responsible for strategy classics like *Master of Orion* (1993) and *Master of Magic* (1994), and published by MicroProse, it would use the powerful *X-COM: Apocalypse* engine to allow players to control their very own team of superheroes and save the day from evil-doers.

Other features include multiplayer, destructible environments and custom hero creation, with 46 superpowers, 17 skills and eight attributes to tinker with.

Sadly, the company closed down in 1997, and the game was never finished.

Stormbringer: Elric of Melniboné

The White Wolf. Last Emperor of Melniboné, white as a bleached skull, fated to wield the runeblade Stormbringer. Created in 1961 by Michael Moorcock, Elric of Melniboné is one of the most influential characters in fantasy literature.



A screenshot from Snowball Interactive's *Stormbringer*, an ambitious blend of genres starring the last Emperor of Melniboné.

Elric has been featured in several books, songs (*Hawkwind*, *Blue Öyster Cult, Diamond Head, Blind Guardian,* etc), comics and tabletop RPGs, but oddly his video games seem cursed to be cancelled.

The first attempt was simply title *Elric*, and it was an Action RPG for the PlayStation made by Psygnosis. Mixing *Diablo* and *Legacy of Kain* influences, it was scheduled for a 1998 release, but never made it.

The second was *Stormbringer: Elric of Melniboné*, by Snowball Interactive. An ambitious title, it would mix several genres, allowing you to explore the world in real time, talk to NPCs, make story choices and fight individual foes with Elric, but also command a legion into large-scale RTS battles.

Unfortunately, the game was cancelled in 2000, as the developers couldn't secure a publishing contract. Thus, the only White Wolf in CRPGs is Geralt of Rivia – who Michael Moorcock claims is a rip-off of Elric.

Aliens: Crucible

SEGA announced this *Alien*-based RPG back in 2006, to be developed by Obsidian Entertainment.

It had a clear *Mass Effect* influence and would focus heavily on survival, with real-time squad combat, lots of dialogues and even some base-building.

According to a post by developer Anthony Davis, it was a game of limited resources and permadeath, to create a sense of tension, of fearing the environment, instead of relying on the horror of the alien monster.

For example, if a companion was attacked by a face-hugger, players had to decide whether to mercy-kill them, put them on stasis or just keep playing, knowing he/she will eventually burst and die.



Crucible played as a third-person shooter/RPG hybrid, with a party of three other characters you could give orders to.

The game was quietly cancelled in 2009, but a gameplay video preview showing various features surfaced in 2013 and can be seen on YouTube.

Torn

Torn is one of those games that shows just how important Black Isle Studios was back then.

Made by the team behind *Planescape: Torment*, it was a real-time RPG set in an original setting, using a modified version of *Fallout*'s SPECIAL ruleset. It would also be the company's first 3D game.

However, the team was unfamiliar with the new technologies and struggled with the Lithtech engine, while Interplay's financial issues got worse and worse.

In the end, *Torn* was announced in March 2001, shown at E3, and then quickly cancelled in June 2001. Yet, to this day, it's still remembered.



Players would control a single character, cursed to bring misfortune to those around him/her, and would be aided by up to five companions.

Newcomer

This one is listed here, but it's actually released. Kind of. In 1990, a group of Commodore 64 fans decided to develop their own RPG. For the C64, naturally. After four years of work, they released *Newcomer*, a mix of *Wasteland* with *Neuromancer* and *Dragon Wars*, released only in Hungary.

In 2001, an English version was finally released, again only for the C64, and in such limited scale it's impossible to find anyone who actually played it. Furthermore, this version contained a game-breaking bug, which led to the development of a new version, titled *Ultimate Newcomer* – this time aiming for a Windows release as well.

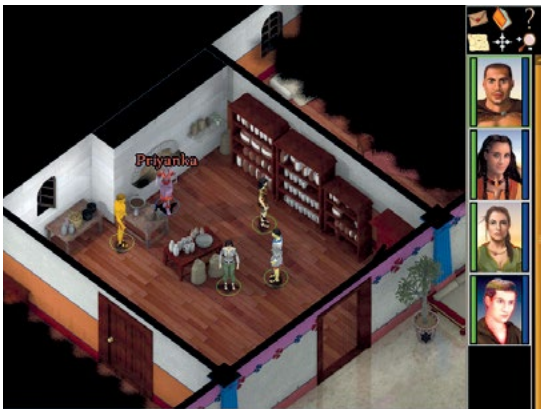
Work on this version started in 2003 and still isn't finished. A 2012 release date was announced, but only silence followed once it passed.

While there isn't a playable version of the game out yet, *Newcomer* sums up to almost 30 years of total development time, probably the longest in history.



Newcomer is quite pretty, considering it's made for a computer system released in 1982.

The Broken Hourglass



While *The Broken Hourglass* used it own engine, it was clearly inspired by *Baldur's Gate*.

Created by a group of long-time *Baldur's Gate* modders, *The Broken Hourglass* was supposed to be an indie successor to the Infinity Engine games.

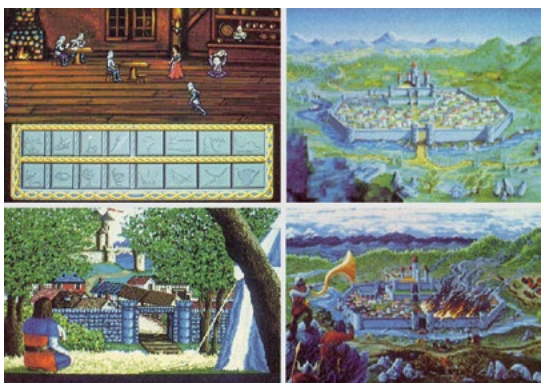
Set in a Byzantine-inspired fantasy setting, the whole game occurred inside a city under siege. Like *Baldur's Gate*, it used an RTwP combat system and had various recruitable (and romanceable) NPCs.

Introducing its own original ruleset, it had a very interesting magic system, where characters had a limited energy pool and had to allocate it among offensive, defensive and curative spells, as well as power their equipped magic items.

The game was under development from 2005, but got cancelled in 2011, with developers claiming that it was "infeasible to deliver the game promised".

The Bard's Tale IV

This one had many, many incarnations. 1989's *Dragon Wars* was originally intended to be *Bard's Tale IV,* but due to licence issues with EA, Interplay couldn't use the name anymore and had to change the whole game just a few months before release.



Scanned images from the September 1992 issue of PowerPlay, showing EA's *Bard's Tale IV.*



By the end of the 90s, EA's *Bard's Tale IV* project had become a 3D Action RPG with multiplayer.

In 1992, German magazine PowerPlay featured a preview of EA's own *Bard's Tale IV*. According to project manager Rick Lucas, the game was already two years into production and it was huge – the biggest RPG ever. So big that they were considering releasing it in two parts. Dungeon-crawling would still be in first-person, but the rest of the world would be explored through a 2D bird's-eye view camera.

Yet, for all this excitement, the game mysteriously vanished, and was never spoken of again.

Over the years, other attempts followed. A leaked internal presentation video shows footage of a 3D *Bard's Tale IV*, planned for a 1999 release. It features multiplayer, random environments and arguably the most ridiculous "boob armour" design ever.

Former Interplay programmer Rebecca "Burger" Heineman revealed in an interview that she tried to pitch a *BTIV* project to EA and never got greenlit.

Another case was *Devil Whiskey*, a 2003 blobber that began as "Bard's Tale IV project", changed names to *Bard's Legacy: Devil Whiskey* after a while and then competently dropped the "Bard" part in the end.

By then, Brian Fargo managed to get the licence back and released *The Bard's Tale* (2004), a parody Action RPG with barely any resemblance to the classic dungeon-crawling series.

It was only in June 2015, through a Kickstarter campaign (which raised $1.5M), that Brian Fargo and inXile finally began making the "true" *Bard's Tale IV* – a first-person dungeon crawler with part- and turn-based combat.

Citadel of the Black Sun

There's not much information on this story, but it is quite a fascinating one. According to developer Teut Weidemann, in 1988 SSI asked German studio Rainbow Arts (famous for *Turrican*), to create a new game for the IBM PC, targeting the US market.

They came up with *Citadel of the Black Sun*, an RPG that looked way ahead of its time. It was fully mouse-driven, with a command bar on the side of the screen, and its inventory had a "paper doll" of the characters, displaying the actual weapon and armour they were wearing (something new at the time).

Furthermore, it used an isometric point of view, complemented by a line-of-sight system – indoor areas were dark unless you were near a door or window.

Teut tells that SSI loved the prototype and wanted it to use their *AD&D* licence, going as far as saying that there were plans to make all future SSI RPGs be based on *Citadel of the Black Sun*'s engine.

However, a love triangle among the developers resulted in Teut departing the company and the project being cancelled soon after. Today, all that remains is an alpha build on his computer and conjectures about the impact such game could have had in the genre.



Despite the 16-colour limitation of EGA video cards, *Citadel* had striking visuals. The isometric view was rarely used at the time, except for ZX Spectrum games like *Knight Lore* (1984).

Wizardry VIII: Stones of Arnhem

The history of the *Wizardry* series is shrouded in mystery, lawsuits and Japan, but this one takes the biscuit. In 1992, D.W. Bradley had delivered *Wizardry VII* almost by himself and left Sir-Tech. For some (likely legal) reason, the company then hired a team in Australia to develop a sequel: *Stones of Arnhem*.

Supposedly, this Australian team included people such as actor Max Phipps and film-maker Phil Moore. According to an interview with Robert Sirotek, after some years of development the project was going nowhere. Sir-Tech threatened to close the project, but a "crackerjack" programmer named Cleve Mark Blakemore stepped in with a plan to save the project. In the end, it still failed and the game was canned. An entirely different *Wizardry 8* was later released by another team in 2001, and so *Stones of Arnhem* was all but forgotten.

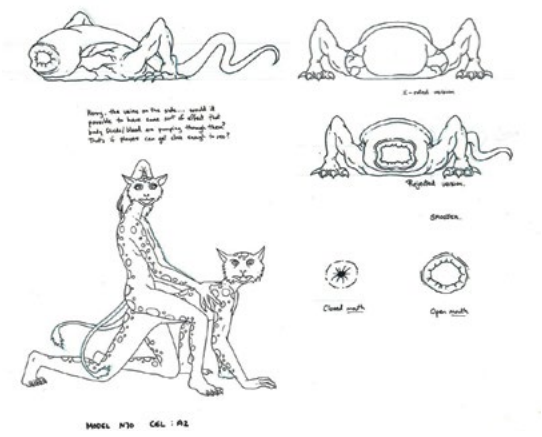
More than 15 years later, an innocent user at the RPG Codex opens a thread asking a simple question: "Why did Sir-Tech go bankrupt?". To answer his question, one Cleve Mark Blakemore emerges and starts wild rants about his work on *Stones of Arnhem*, Sir-Tech's bad management, the mental state of the team and on how the artists were designing oddly sexual creatures – including a "Penissaurus".

His claims were ignored, often ridiculed, some doubting that *Arnhem* had even existed.

But, years later, an eBay seller named "hotalibl" appeared on that same thread with a bundle of design documents and floppy disks from *Stones of Arnhem*. And they indeed featured Cleve. And they indeed featured art of "dubious taste".

The auctions were in progress, some items being bid on for more than $1,000, when suddenly everything vanished. It turns out that former Sir-Tech employee Brenda Romero and The Strong Museum contacted the seller, directly acquiring all the documents.

Thus, *Stones of Arnhem* continues to be a mystery. Or, perhaps, it's more of a mystery than ever.



Some of the concept art featured in the *Stone of Arnhem* eBay auctions.





Lists & Further Reading

Everyone loves lists. So we selected some of the most interesting "Best RPG" lists out there, as well as preparing some of our own. We didn't only list RPGs, but also other sources you can consult when looking for information on CRPGs.

There's much more gaming knowledge out there than this book can possibly ever hope to contain, so we listed other books, websites, YouTube channels and resources. There's also a handy glossary, for those new to the genre and, finally, an index to help you quickly find what you're looking for.

A gypsy from *Ravenloft: Strahd's Possession* reads the future of the player's characters.

Lists

RPG Codex's Top 72 CRPGs

From May 10, 2014

A voting conducted with 234 members of the RPG Codex. Each could freely distribute 25 points among what they believed are the best CRPGs ever. The top 72 games are listed bellow, with a few ties. Available here - www.rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=9453

1. Planescape: Torment
2. Fallout
3. Fallout 2
4. Baldur's Gate 2: Shadows of Amn
5. Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura
6. Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines
7. The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind
8. Fallout: New Vegas
9. Gothic 2
10. Wizardry 8
11. Deus Ex
12. Neverwinter Nights 2 - Mask of the Betrayer
13. Jagged Alliance 2
14. Dark Souls: Prepare To Die Edition
15. Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant
16. Betrayal at Krondor
17. Baldur's Gate
18. Darklands
19. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II-The Sith Lords
20. Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss
21. The Temple of Elemental Evil
22. Icewind Dale
22. System Shock 2
24. The Witcher
25. Might and Magic VI: Mandate of Heaven
26. Gothic
27. Knights of the Chalice
28. Might and Magic: World of Xeen
29. Alpha Protocol
30. Realms of Arkania II: Star Trail
31. Dark Sun: Shattered Lands
32. Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge
33. Dragon Age: Origins
33. Ultima VII: The Black Gate
35. The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall
36. Pool of Radiance
37. Might and Magic VII: For Blood and Honor
37. Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar
39. Ultima VII Part Two: Serpent Isle
40. Icewind Dale II
40. The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings
42. Wasteland
43. Quest For Glory IV: Shadows of Darkness
43. Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny
45. Might and Magic III: Isles of Terra
45. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
47. Anachronox
47. Arx Fatalis
47. Geneforge
47. Pools of Darkness
51. Albion
52. Drakensang: River of Time
52. Risen
54. King of Dragon Pass
54. Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds
56. Deus Ex: Human Revolution
56. Divine Divinity
56. Mount & Blade: Warband
59. Dungeon Master
59. Mass Effect
61. ADOM - Ancient Domains of Mystery
61. Neverwinter Nights 2
61. System Shock
64. Wizardry I: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord
64. Wizardry IV: The Return of Werdna
66. Champions of Krynn
66. Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos
68. Star Control II
69. Dark Heart of Uukrul
69. Heroine's Quest: The Herald of Ragnarok
71. Divinity 2: The Dragon Knight Saga
71. Wizards & Warriors

Rock Paper Shotgun's The 50 best RPGs on PC

From July 10, 2015

An excellent and broad listing of PC RPGs, as voted for and organised by RPS's staff.
Available here - www.rockpapershotgun.com/2015/07/10/best-rpg

1. Dark Souls: Prepare To Die Edition
2. Planescape: Torment
3. Baldur's Gate 2: Shadows of Amn
4. The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind
5. Ultima VII: The Black Gate
6. Deus Ex
7. The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
8. System Shock 2
9. FTL
10. Fallout
11. Dragon Age: Origins
12. Divinity: Original Sin
13. Legend of Grimrock II
14. Ultima Underworld II
15. Dwarf Fortress
16. Mass Effect 2
17. Pillars of Eternity
18. Zanbgand
19. Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines
20. NEO Scavenger
21. Deus Ex: Human Revolution
22. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
23. Anachranox
24. Fallout: New Vegas
25. Avernum: Escape From The Pit
26. UnReal World
27. Din's Curse
28. ADOM - Ancient Domains of Mystery
29. Sunless Sea
30. The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall
31. Banner Saga
32. Titan Quest
33. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
34. Darkest Dungeon
35. Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer
36. Shadowrun: Dragonfall - Director's Cut
37. Wasteland 2
38. Wizardry 8
39. Betrayal at Krondor
40. Darklands
41. Eye of the Beholder
42. Brogue
43. Torchlight 2
44. Pool of Radiance
45. Space Rangers 2
46. Recettear: An Item's Shop Tale
47. Diablo II
48. Risen
49. Dungeon Master
50. Hand of Fate

PC Gamer's The best RPGs of all time

From October 12, 2017

PC Gamer's list values fun over historical relevance, focusing on games that are still fun to play.
Available here - www.pcgamer.com/the-best-rpgs-of-all-time-1

1. Planescape: Torment
2. Baldur's Gate 2: Shadows of Amn
3. Fallout 2
4. The Witcher 3
5. Dark Souls: Prepare To Die Edition
6. Mass Effect 2
7. The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind
8. Deus Ex
9. Ultima VII: The Black Gate
10. System Shock 2
11. Dragon Age: Origins
12. The Witcher 2
13. Dark Souls III
14. Fallout: New Vegas
15. Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura
16. Diablo III: Reaper of Souls
17. Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines
18. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II
19. Divinity: Original Sin
20. Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss
21. Pillars of Eternity
22. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
23. Gothic 2
24. Neverwinter Nights 2
25. Mount & Blade: Warband
26. Darkest Dungeon
27. Path of Exile
28. Tyranny
29. Undertale
30. Arx Fatalis
31. Legend of Grimrock 2
32. Grim Dawn
33. Anachronox
34. South Park: The Stick of Truth
35. Divinity: Original Sin 2

XP4T's Best RPGs of the 1980s

From February 5, 2015

In this poll, over 1,000 visitors voted on five games from a list of great RPGs from the 1980s. Available here - www.xp4t.com/the-best-rpgs-of-the-80s-the-results

1. Pool of Radiance
2. Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar
3. Wasteland
4. The Bard's Tale (Tales of the Unknown: Volume I)
5. Curse of the Azure Bonds
6. Dungeon Master
7. Ultima V: Warriors of Destiny
8. BattleTech - The Crescent Hawks Inception
9. Might and Magic II: Gates to Another World
10. Star Command
11. Might and Magic I: The Secret of the Inner Sanctum
12. Ultima III: Exodus
13. Wizardry I: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord
14. Phantasie III: The Wrath of Nikademus
15. The Bard's Tale III: Thief of Fate
16. Magic Candle
17. Rogue: The Adventure Game
18. The Bard's Tale II: The Destiny Knight
19. Wizardry V: Heart of the Maelstrom
20. Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness

XP4T's Best RPGs of the 1990s

From March 2, 2015

Once again over 1,000 visitors voted on five games from a list, this time composed of RPGs from the 90s. Available here - www.xp4t.com/poll-best-pc-rpgs-of-the-1990s

1. Baldur's Gate
2. Planescape: Torment
3. Fallout 2
4. Fallout: A Post-Nuclear Role-Playing Game
5. Diablo
6. System Shock 2
7. The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall
8. Ultima VII: The Black Gate
9. Betrayal at Krondor
10. Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss
11. Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven
12. Final Fantasy VII
13. Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant
14. Neverwinter Nights (AOL)
15. Might and Magic: World of Xeen
16. Dark Sun: Shattered Lands
17. Eye of the Beholder
18. Darklands
19. Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds
20. System Shock

RPG Codex's "Age of Incline" – The best RPGs from 2012-2016

From Februrary 8, 2017

A vote with 800 fans on the best releases of the past few years. A very different list from mainstream websites. Available here: www.rpgcodex.net/content.php?id=10535

1. The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
2. Age of Decadence
3. Divinity: Original Sin
4. Underrail
5. Dark Souls
6. Shadowrun: Dragonfall - Director's Cut
7. Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen
8. NEO Scavenger
9. Legend of Grimrock II
10. FTL
11. Fallout 1.5: Resurrection
12. Dark Souls III
13. Shadowrun: Hong Kong
14. Valkyria Chronicles
15. Expedition: Conquistador
16. Dark Souls II
17. Dungeon Rats
18. Xenonauts
19. Heroine's Quest: The Herald of Ragnarok
20. Legend of Grimrock
21. Tales of Maj'Eyal
22. Invisible, Inc.
23. Pillars of Eternity
24. Wasteland 2
25. Lords of Xulima

Editor's Picks

CRPG History Abridged: The genre's evolution in 35 iconic games

Highly influential titles that best showcase the advances, trends and changes in the genre over 40 years. Original, revolutionary games were favoured over their often improved sequels.

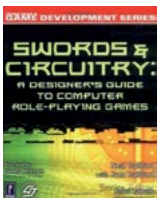
D&D (1975)
Rogue (1980)
Wizardry I: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord (1981)
Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar (1985)
Dragon Quest (1986)
Starflight (1986)
Dungeon Master (1987)
Pool of Radiance (1988)
Wasteland (1988)
Quest for Glory: So You Want to Be a Hero? (1989)
Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss (1992)
Ultima VII: The Black Gate (1992)
Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos (1993)
The Elder Scrolls I: Arena (1994)
Diablo (1996)
Final Fantasy VII (1997)
Fallout (1997)
Baldur's Gate (1998)
Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven (1998)
Jagged Alliance 2 (1999)
Planescape: Torment (1999)
System Shock 2 (1999)
Deus Ex (2000)
Gothic (2001)
The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind (2001)
Neverwinter Nights (2002)
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (2003)
Fable (2004)
Mass Effect (2007)
Fallout 3 (2008)
Dragon Age: Origins (2009)
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011)
Dark Souls (2011)
Divinity: Original Sin (2014)
The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015)

Deep Cuts: 35 hidden gems you should play

7.62 High Calibre
A Dance with Rogues (Neverwinter Nights mod)
Age of Decadence
Albion
Anachronox
Anvil of Dawn
Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden
Blackguards
Chinese Paladin
D&D: The Rise of Warduke (OpenBOR fan game)
Dark Heart of Uukrul
Dungeons of Daggorath
Drakensang: The River of Time
E.Y.E.: Divine Cybermancy
Freedom Force
Geneforge
Knights of the Chalice
Median XL: Ultimative (Diablo II mod)
Mordor: The Depths of Dejenol
NEO Scavenger
Nehrim: At Fate's Edge (TES IV: Oblivion mod)
Princess Maker 2
Prophecy of Pendor (Mount & Blade: Warband mod)
Realmz
Return of Heracles
Sengoku Rance
Star Control II
Tale of Wuxia
Tales of Maj'Eyal
The Maimed God Saga (Nevewinter Nights 2 mod)
Underrail
Way of the Samurai 4
Wizards & Warriors
ZanZarah: The Hidden Portal
v1.13 (Jagged Alliance 2 mod)

Further Reading

The goal of this book is to be a complete CRPG guide, that touches on as many related subjects as possible. This doesn't mean trying to be a definite source, but rather knowing when something is outside our scope, page count, knowledge or qualification – and pointing to those who can better provide that content. Thus, here are some of the best sources of information on our beloved genre:



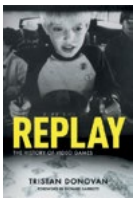
Neal Hallford (2001) Swords & Circuitry: A Designer's Guide to Computer Role-Playing Games

If I could only recommend one book, it would be this one. Neal Hallford is the legend behind *Betrayal at Krondor*, *Planet's Edge* and *M&M III*, so when he talks about RPGs, you should listen. The book is full of great insights and is a pleasure to read for designers and fans alike. Plus it offers interviews with key game developers and even some design documents from CRPG classics.



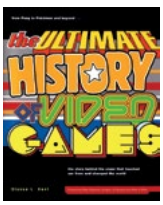
Matt Barton (2008) Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games

The inspiration for the book you're currently reading, but with a different focus. Here, Barton goes for a more academic approach, dividing and examining CRPG history into seven eras, then personally describing hundreds of titles. The reviews are a bit short, and its few images are all black-and-white, but there's interesting content to be found here, especially on 80s titles.



Tristan Donovan (2010) Replay: The History of Video Games

If you're interested in gaming history as a whole, this is the best book around. Donovan covers everything: arcades, the Apple II, Nintendo, Richard Garriott and Akalabeth, MUDs, MMORPGs, indies, local scenes and much more. Almost 50 pages of references and an elaborate "Gameography" makes this a wonderful book for any video game fan.



Steven L. Kent (2001) The Ultimate History of Video Games

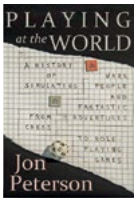
If you want to learn about the early gaming history, from *Pong* to the late 90s, get this book. The focus is clearly on consoles and arcades, with computers barely being mentioned, but the content is still extremely rich and interesting. There are thousands of quotes from key people in the industry, providing a backstage look at the history of how gaming came to be.



Rusel DeMaria and Johnny L. Wilson (2003) High Score!: The Illustrated History of Electronic Games

Do not judge a book by its (poor) cover. This is an extremely well-researched and well-written book on gaming, focusing heavily on 80s and early 90s PC titles. There are great sections on Cinemaware, SSI, *Ultima* and *Might and Magic,* and the entire book is filled with rare photos, concept art, box covers and screenshots that will bring a tear to the eyes of nostalgic gamers.

Jon Peterson (2012) Playing at the World: A history of simulating wars, people and fantastic adventures



The most in-depth title in this list, Jon Peterson wrote a 700-page book on everything you could ever want to know about the early history of role-playing. From wargames in the 18th century to Tolkien's influence on fantasy to detailed rules analysis and even fanzine letters about the first CRPGs on the PLATO mainframes. It's an incredibly dense, but rewarding read.

Shannon Appelcline (2014) Designers & Dragons



Originally released as a 300-page book in 2011, *Designers & Dragons* has since been expanded into a large 4-volume set, each dedicated to one decade of tabletop RPGs. While *Playing at the World* focuses heavily on *Dungeons &Dragons* and the historical origins of role-playing, this one is packed with information on modern releases and non-*D&D* games, serving as a great companion piece.

David L. Craddock (2015) Dungeon Hacks: How NetHack, Angband, and Other Roguelikes Changed the Course of Video Games



This book comes to fill an important gap, focusing exclusivly on the first roguelikes and the history behind them. It covers *Rogue, Hack, ADOM, Moria, Angband* and other early entries, providing context to their origins and valuable interviews with their creators.

Brad King (2008) Dungeons & Dreamers: A story of how computer games created a global community



Written like a script for a documentary, the book tells the history of selected games, together with the lives of their developers. It focuses heavily on Richard Garriott and the *Ultima* series, but you'll also read amusing stories behind *Colossal Cave*, MUDs, *Doom*, *Counter-Strike* and others.

Kurt Kalata (2011) HardcoreGaming101.net presents:The Guide to Classic Graphic Adventures



The definitive guide for adventure games, this book by the folks at HardcoreGaming101 is an impressive 780-page monolith, with long and detailed reviews of over 300 games, including CRPG hybrids such as *Quest for Glory*, *Neuromancer*, *Circuit's Edge*, *BloodNet* and others.

Jason Schreier (2017) Blood, Sweat, and Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories behind How Video Games are Made



A veteran Kotaku reporter, Jason explores the stories behind the development of 13 recent games, including *Pillars of Eternity, Diablo III, Dragon Age: Inquisition* and *The Witcher 3*. It's the best book on the market to show the challenges and complexity of game development.

CRPG manuals

If you want to understand classic CRPGs better, take a look at the manuals of games such as *Eye of the Beholder, Darklands*, *Fallout*, *Arcanum* and *Baldur's Gate*; they went far beyond simply explaining the game mechanics. *Dusk of the Gods* gave lessons on mythology, the *Ultima* guides felt like they came from Britannia itself and *Redguard* had the amazing "Pocket Guide to the Empire", a description of the entire world of *The Elder Scrolls* games. You were in an adventure even before turning on your computer.

For a modern example, *Ni no Kuni* (2010) has easily one of the best and most immersive game manuals ever made.

Abandonia - www.abandonia.com

A massive database of over one thousand abandonware MS-DOS games. Each game is accompanied by a review and a few high-quality screenshots, plus a link to where you can buy or download it. Also hosts a collection of gamebooks, music from various games and a selection of recommended software for the retro gamer.

Computer Gaming World Museum - www.cgwmuseum.org

The legendary CGW magazine ran from 1981 to 2006, and all the issues are available freely for download on the website. Reading them is like travelling back in time, and it's fun to see all the ads and reviews games had at release.

Gamasutra - www.gamasutra.com

A website oriented towards game developers, it hosts articles written by upcoming indies and industry veterans alike. But its highlights are the dozens of post-mortem articles, offering a great behind-the-scenes look at classic games.

GOG.com - www.gog.com

Part of CD Projekt and formerly known as Good Old Games, it's an online store dedicated to DRM-free games, with hundreds of classic games available – all in handy installation packs that configure them to work on modern PCs.

Hardcore Gaming 101 - www.hardcoregaming101.net

Live since 2004, the website offers thousands of in-depth articles on less mainstream games and series, while also publishing quality books on gaming. Be sure to check out their *Wizardy*, *Might and Magic* and *Ultima* articles.

Internet Archive - www.archive.org

One of the most important websites on the Internet, not only does it allow access to literally billions of now-unaccessible web pages, but also provides free access to countless texts, videos, images, music and software. Since 2015, it even allows for in-browser emulation of thousands of MS-DOS games.

Matt Chat - www.youtube.com/user/blacklily8

If you're a fan of classic games, Matt Chat is one of the best things on YouTube. With over 200 weekly episodes, it interviews designers such as Chris Avellone, Richard Garriott, John Romero, Brian Fargo and many others.

MobyGames - www.mobygames.com

Founded in 1999, MobyGames is an extremely useful database containing reviews, ratings, high-quality screenshots, box pictures, release dates, trivia and credits of over 100,000 games from about every platform in existence.

Mod DB - www.moddb.com

A huge modding website that dates back to 2002 hosting *Half-Life* mods, it still has a very active community, with regular contests and awards. Offers thousands of new mods, as well as classic mods from the 2000s.

Nexus Mods - www.nexusmods.com

A popular website featuring thousands of mods for modern games, such as *The Witcher, Dark Souls, Dragon Age, Fallout* and *Mass Effect*. It also offers an open-source mod manager to help you install and organise your mods.

PC Gaming Wiki - www.pcgamingwiki.com

A wiki devoted to helping people run PC games and fine-tune them. You'll find detailed information on system requirements, retail versions, save-game locations and graphical, input and audio settings for several PC games. There are also guides on which patches to use, useful config tweaks, helpful mods and how to solve common issues.

Replacement Docs - www.replacementdocs.com

Offers scanned versions of manuals, quick-reference sheets, maps and copy-protection codices of pretty much every game out there. Because remember kids, winners always read the manual.

RogueBasin - www.roguebasin.com

An extensive wiki/database entirely dedicated to roguelikes. There you'll find detailed entries on virtually every roguelike out there, plus articles on the genre, guides for aspiring developers and community-hosted events.

RPG Codex - www.rpgcodex.net

"The site that makes developers shiver," as Brian Fargo said. The Codex was founded in 2002 by CRPG fans that were tired of seeing their posts deleted from official forums. So, expect a blunt tone and harsh, but honest opinions from some of the most passionate CRPG fans you'll ever see. The lengthy reviews and interviews here are top-notch.

RPG Watch - www.rpgwatch.net

The Watch is a smaller and more "civil" CRPG forum. Founded in 2006 by editors from the now-extinct RPGDot, its posters have been playing games for decades, and it shows. They are a tight group of veterans that will warmly welcome new posters, debating newer games and impressing you with their knowledge of the old ones.

The CRPG Addict - www.crpgaddict.blogspot.com

In 2010, Chester Bolingbroke began a blog to records his ambitious project: to play every single CRPG released. He's still going strong, writing detailed posts about each game, with screenshots and trivia, rating the games in various categories and occasionally even attracting comments and discussions with the games' developers.

The Digital Antiquarian - www.filfre.net

Jimmy Maher is the author of *The Future Was Here: The Commodore Amiga*, a 2012 book on the history of the Amiga. After finishing the book, he began this blog, where he regularly posts well-researched and in-depth articles about classic games, such as *Oregon Trail, Dungeon Master, Ultima, Wizardry, Zork* and many others.

Vogons - www.vogons.org

An extremely useful forum dedicated to helping people get their games running correctly, be they old MS-DOS titles, early 3D games or even modern AAA productions. Its users are very experienced and helpful, but be sure to search the forums before spamming simple questions.

Glossary

AD&D: *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, a more complex version of *Dungeons & Dragons*. It was first published in 1977, had a second edition in 1989 and ended in 2000, when the 3rd Edition *D&D* combined *AD&D* and *D&D*.

Action RPG (ARPG): CRPGs where player reflexes and skills can be just as important as the character's stats, e.g. *Diablo* and *Dark Souls*.

Alignment: A categorisation of the ethics and morals of characters. The most well-known one is the *Dungeons & Dragons* alignment system, which is divided into two axes: Good, Neutral or Evil; and Lawful, Neutral or Chaotic.

Alpha: An early development stage where content and features are still being implemented.

AoE: Area of Effect, a term used to describe attacks and skills that affect multiple targets inside an area.

Beta: A development stage where all content and features are present, but they still contain several bugs and issues.

Blobber: A slang term for party-based games with first-person view, such as *Wizardry, Dungeon Master* and *Legend of Grimrock*, where the entire party moves as one, as if it was an amorphous blob.

CGA: Colour Graphics Adapter, a display standard created by IBM in 1981. It could display up to four colours.

CGW: *Computer Gaming World*, one of the world's most popular and influential video game magazines. It was published in the US from 1981 to 2006.

CRPG: Computer Role-Playing Game. Term used to differentiate computer RPGs from tabletop RPGs.

CYOA: *Choose Your Own Adventure*, a series of books where readers make choices that will determine the outcome of the story. The first book, *The Cave of Time*, was written by R.A. Montgomery and published in 1979. The series is still ongoing, with over 180 published books, and became synonymous of the entire gamebook genre.

D&D: *Dungeons & Dragons*, the popular tabletop RPG by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, first released in 1974.

DPS: Damage Per Second.

Dungeon Crawler: An RPG where you spend most (or all) of your time fighting inside dungeons. Combat is usually the main focus, e.g. *Wizardry* and *Darkest Dungeon*.

EGA: Enhanced Graphics Adapter, a display standard created by IBM in 1984. It could display up to 16 colours.

Emulator: A software that simulates a specific hardware, e.g. *DOSBox* will mimic a computer running MS-DOS, allowing users to play games that only run on MS-DOS.

FMV: Full Motion Video, a style of storytelling based on short clips of pre-recorded video, usually with real actors. Enabled by CD-ROMs, it was very popular in the mid-90s, thanks to games like *The 7th Guest* and *Phantasmagoria*.

Freeware: Software which is 100% free, without any licence or purchase being required.

Game Master (GM): A person who prepares and executes an adventure for a group of players, presenting challenges, acting as referee and directing the overall experience.

Gold Box: A series of CRPGs developed by SSI, based on *AD&D*. The nickname comes from the golden boxes they were usually packaged in. From 1988 to 1993, the Gold Box engine was used to create 14 titles.

Grind: Derogatory term for the act of repeatedly fighting the same enemies in order to gain experience or gold.

Infinity Engine: A game engine developed by BioWare in 1998. It was used on the *Baldur's Gate* games and licensed to Interplay's Black Isle, who used it to created *Planescape: Torment* and the *Icewind Dale* series.

LARP: Short for Live-Action Role-Playing, a type of RPG played by a group of people physically enacting their roles, usually involving costumes and props.

McGuffin: Derogatory term for generic, poorly explained plot devices that the protagonist must pursue – saving a princess, recovering an artefact, etc. The term was popularised in film-making by Alfred Hitchcock.

MIDI: Musical Instrument Digital Interface, an audio standard. While MP3 carries audio recordings, MIDI files are actually a series of notes and instructions that will be played by the computer's virtual instruments. This was used to save space, as MIDI files are much smaller.

MMORPG: Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, online RPGs where thousands of players share the same world. The term was coined by Richard Garriott to differentiate *Ultima Online* (1997) from previous online RPGs, which only supported a few dozen players at once.

MUD: Multi-User Dungeon, online virtual worlds where multiple people play together. They are usually text-based, and range from RPGs to adventure games to educational titles. The first MUD was created by Roy Trubshaw in 1978.

ROM: Read-Only Memory, a type of computer memory meant only to be read, such as the one on game cartridges. In the context of emulation, it means a copy of a game's ROM, created in order to be played on an emulator.

NPC: Non-Player Character, refers to all in-game characters not controlled by a player, such as enemies or shopkeepers.

Open-World: Term used to define games that allow players to freely roam a large world, instead of progression through linear levels.

Permadeath: If a character dies, he/she is deleted – you can't reload. A core feature of roguelikes, often presented in other games as "Hardcore Mode".

Phase-Based: Also know as "We-Go", it's a turn-based combat system where both players give orders to all their characters at once, then the results are calculated.

Player Character (PC): The character(s) which are controlled by the player, as opposed to NPCs.

Power Gaming: Playing a game just to win in the most effective way possible, ignoring the characters and story. Also known as "min-maxing" or "munchkin".

Point-Buy: Often used to refer to RPG systems which give players a set number of points in order to "purchase" their stats, skills, talents, etc. – such as *Drakensang* – as opposed to games where these are determined by dice-rolls.

Prestige Class: A specialisation that is available once the character meets certain requirements, e.g. in order to become a Blood Mage in *Dragon Age: Origins*, a mage must first make a pact with a demon.

Procedural Generation: Content that's created based on an algorithm. While often confused with randomly generated content, it's not necessarily random; games like *Telengard* and *No Man's Sky* use it to create massive, fixed worlds.

QA: Quality Assurance, the team responsible for testing a software to ensure it's working as intended and free of bugs.

QTE: Quick Time Event, an in-game event where players must press the correct buttons at the correct time, usually during a cutscene or cinematic sequence.

RNG: Random Number Generator, the algorithm used to simulate dice-rolls and other random in-game events.

RTFM: Short for "Read The Fucking Manual".

Real Time with Pause (RTwP): A combat system first introduced in *Darklands* (1992), where battles flow in real-time, but can be paused at any time for the player to issue commands. It was popularised by *Baldur's Gate* (1998).

Roguelike: A sub-genre of RPGs that share many core features with *Rogue* (1980), such as permadeath, random maps, turn-based combat, grid-based movement, etc.

Roguelite: A definition created to separate "full" roguelikes from games that only share a few features with *Rogue,* such as permadeath or random maps, e.g. *The Binding of Isaac, Rogue Legacy* and *FTL: Faster Than Light* are roguelites.

Save-Scumming: A slang term for frequently saving and reloading in order to win a battle or get a rare item.

Shareware: Software which is distributed freely, but comes with some restrictions that are only unlocked by buying the full version, i.e. the shareware version of the original *Doom* (1993) only had the first of its nine chapters – players had to purchase it to play the rest.

Shovelware: Derogatory term for flawed, low-budget games.

THAC0: To Hit Armour Class Zero, a system from the 1st and 2nd editions of *D&D*, used to calculate if an attack will hit. To score a hit, one must roll a value equal or greater than their THAC0, minus the target's Armour Class (AC).

Example: If a character has a THAC0 of 8 and his target has an AC of 2, then 8-2 = 6. He must roll 6 or more to hit.

Text Parser: An input system where the player types actions or keywords to interact with the game. It was very common in early Adventure games and RPGs, before the popularisation of the mouse and graphical UIs.

UI: User Interface, the means through which the player and the game interact – menus, information displays, controls, etc.

Vancian Magic: A system where magic-users must read grimoires to memorise spells, which are forgotten once cast (e.g. *D&D* and *Baldur's Gate*). It was inspired by the *Dying Earth* book series, written by Jack Vance in the 1950s.

VGA: Video Graphics Array, a display standard created by IBM in 1987. It could display up to 256 colours.

XP: Short for Experience Points.

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